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Los Angeles

Attention Matters:

Political Choreographies of Noticing in U.S. American Experimental Dance

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Culture and Performance

by

Zena Rhodes Bibler

2023

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Attention Matters: Political Choreographies of Noticing

by

Zena Rhodes Bibler

Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Janet M. O’Shea, Chair

This dissertation theorizes attention as a choreopolitical practice. Complicating standard Western definitions that describe attention as a neutral cognitive capacity, I reframe attention as a set of culturally and historically specific bodily techniques that reinforce dominant worldviews and social relations. My archival review of military field guides, education manuals, labor handbooks, and medical papers illustrates how dominant techniques of attention require the attending subject to inhibit their responsiveness to phenomena classified as “irrelevant.” In dialogue with critical race, feminist, decolonial, and critical disability theory, I argue that this technique undergirds the unequal apportionment of care among subjects along socially mediated lines of difference.

After providing this context, I shift focus to choreographic projects that intervene within dominant regimes of attention: mayfield brooks’ Improvising While Black workshops, Andrew Suseno’s Parcon Resilience/Moving Rasa practice, and Jennifer Monson’s Interdisciplinary Laboratory for Art Nature and Dance (iLAND). Each of these artists articulate models for choreographing and teaching movement, not by prescribing specific actions, but instead by



directing how dancers attend to phenomena. Analyzing over 500 hours of ethnographic participant-observation data and interviews conducted with artists and fellow participants, I show how these artists restructure attention in ways that unmask dominant attention as merely one option among many other possible ways of relating to the perceivable world. From Brooks' use of disorientation to disrupt anti-Black regimes of attention; to Suseno's decolonial sensitization to multiple simultaneous realities; to Monson's cultivation of ecological kinship via inter-species attunement, these counter-attentions reshape how participants "care about" and "care for" aspects of their perceivable world and how they collaborate physically across difference.

The dissertation of Zena Rhodes Bibler is approved.

Anurima Banerji

Alessandro Duranti

Susan Leigh Foster

Lionel Arthur Popkin

Janet M. O'Shea, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2023

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Margaret Bisceglie, who has indelibly shaped my ways of moving and living.

Margaret “Peg” Bisceglie (born in 1930 in Frenchpark, Ireland) founded and ran Young People’s Creative Dance Theatre out of her home in Weston, Connecticut, for six decades. According to her philosophy, grace is not a particular quality of moving, but “a consideration of others” and a way of “moving in life in harmony with other beings.” She was and still is a radical mover—committed to calling out social prejudices and refusing elitist conventions in both dance and everyday life.

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## VITA

### EDUCATION

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- 2009 M.A. Performance Studies, New York University  
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- 2022 “Disorientation as Critical Practice: Confronting Choreographies of Anti-Blackness and Activating the Otherwise in mayfield brooks’ Improvising While Black Pedagogy,” *Dance Research Journal* 54 (1): 30–49.
- 2020 “What Can Disorientation Do? – Disorientation and the Rehearsal of Care in mayfield brooks’ Improvising While Black,” *Contact Quarterly: Unbound*.
- 2018 “The Flâneuse in the Virtual City: Exploring ‘Lost Angeles,’” *PARtake: The Journal of Performance as Research*, (2)1.
- 2017 “Score for Minimizing Impact,” “Noticing Economic Transactions,” “Score for Experiencing Yourself Experiencing the Terrain,” “Collaborative Observation of a Site” in Jennifer Monson (ed.) *A Field Guide to iLANDing, Brooklyn: 53<sup>rd</sup> Street Press: 25, 84, 99, 112.*

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- 2021 *“And What Have You Done with My Body, God.” Artist panel curated by Ajani Brannum, Pieter Performance Space, Los Angeles, CA (online).*
- 2020 *“What Can Disorientation Do?” Selma Jeanne Cohen Prize Lecture at Dance Studies Association, Digital DSA (online).*
- 2019 *“Choreographic Algorithms: Perception as Data for Motion,” Performative Computation Symposium, NAVEL Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.*
- 2015 *“Moving to Design: Movement Models for Design Practice,” School of Constructed Environments, The New School/Parsons, New York, NY.*
- 2015 *“Intentional Wandering and Design Thinking,” VergeNYC Transdisciplinary Design Conference, The New School/Parsons, New York, NY.*

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- 2022 *“The ‘Tending’ in Attending: Complicating Models of Ecological Stewardship and Environmental Dance in iLANDing Laboratories” Dance Studies Association Conference, Vancouver, Canada.*
- 2021 *“Disorientation as a Somatic Strategy for Unmaking the World: mayfield brooks’ Experiential Unsettling of the Human,” presented in the “Repetition and the Human” working group, American Society for Theatre Research, San Diego, CA.*
- 2021 *“Engaging Complexity: Training Polyattentiveness in Parcon Resilience,” presented in the “Thriving in Proximities” Hub, Dance Studies Association Conference, Rutgers, NJ.*
- 2021 *“Attention as Movement Technique in Parcon Resilience,” UCLA Theatre and Performance Studies Graduate Conference, Los Angeles, CA.*
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- 2019 Graduate Summer Research Mentorship, UCLA
- 2018-19 Simone Forti Family Scholarship, UCLA
- 2017-18 Gerald and Merle Measer Dance Scholarship, UCLA

## Introduction

*I wandered into this project somewhat by accident, finding myself inside a choreography of attention without realizing what it was or how it was choreographing me. It was 2013 and I was in Buffalo, New York, assisting my friend and collaborator, Brandin Steffensen, at a dance improvisation intensive. Brandin was training a group of dancers in a series of improvisation practices in order to generate a structure for a performance at the end of the weekend. One of the cornerstones of our collective practice was Nancy Stark Smith's "Underscore," which was originally designed to expand dancers' sense of possibilities for interacting with others in the context of a contact improvisation (CI) jam. In the Underscore, dancers are introduced to an exhaustive catalog of 40+ "glyphs"—pictograms that describe a range of activities a dancer might observe or practice during the score. The practice is called the Underscore because the glyphs describe activities that operate in the background of regular CI practice and resituate these actions as formal elements of composition. The Underscore reframes accidental collisions, feelings of repulsion and disorientation, departures to the bathroom, and decisions to sit out and watch as relevant contributions to a collective composition.*

*During the intensive, we—a group of 17 dancers from the Northeast U.S.—spent long days dancing together, often in the container of the Underscore. As our individual and collective experiences accumulated, we marveled at the emergence of seemingly impossible coincidences, moments of logic-defying "magic," and déjà vu<sup>1</sup> inside of our compositions. Towards the end of the intensive, I noted a palpable feeling of friction between participants; we had spent ten hours*

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<sup>1</sup> For example, a dancer's nosebleed quickly convened a tableau of onlookers attracted by both concern and visceral imagery (we stayed like this for a long time watching the blood drip). Trips to the bathroom were like knee-plays and soliloquies relative to the larger composition, and one of the windows in the studio became charged with significance as a portal to another spatio-temporal dimension.

*per day in the studio and we were in disagreement about how to structure the final performance. The Underscore might have been encouraging us to see contrast as a form of connection, but as the time came to make decisions about the culminating performance, it was harder to maintain this outlook.*

*During an afternoon practice, two dancers made independent attempts to escape the Underscore—seeking reprieve from the pressurized social environment as well as from the panoptic eye of a score that claims ownership over all actions as part of its composition whether or not the performer intends them as such.<sup>2</sup> To their surprise, two dancers ran into each other outside. One muttered, “We’re not supposed to be here.” The other looked down only to find a piece of paper with a glyph on it that someone had jettisoned (perhaps in an anarchic gesture) from the studio window ten stories above.*

*Back in the studio, most of us were oblivious to the departures. I was responding to a glyph called “telescoping awareness,” which asked me to move my attention between very close and very distant aspects. Gazing out the window, my eyes settled on a person with a messenger bag walking through the parking lot. Other dancers grouped behind me, watching me as I watched the man. Suddenly, the person stopped and looked right up at me. They threw down their bag and began leaping and spinning across the parking lot in a frenzied dance. My back stiffened in surprise causing the others to flock to the window to see what I was seeing. We realized it was Li, one of the fugitive dancers. What’s more, the structure of this accidental performance—in which one dancer dramatically reveals themselves, dancing at a distance while others watch through a window—was an exact replica of a site-specific performance Li had*

---

<sup>2</sup> The Underscore coaches participants to include everything as composition. Sometimes this distributed witnessing can make it seem like the Underscore has a mind of its own, because there is no central authority to determine the direction and tone of the ensuing dance.

*made in a different location two days prior. None of us had intended to recreate this motif, but we all recognized its return.*

*Experiences like these multiplied. For months afterward, I continued to reflect on the intensive in attempts to understand what caused our state of collective enchantment. I realized that we had quickly created a temporary sub-culture, united by our shared frames of reference and extended time together. This was enhanced by our already-overlapping social circles and our similar racial, cultural, and economic backgrounds.<sup>3</sup> With so much time spent in the studio—cloistered from the rest of the world, the news, our families, and our more quotidian concerns—the intensive was like a retreat. Our experiences became more homogenized, allowing us to serve as amplifiers of certain aspects of our experience. We created our own coincidences by repeating actions and motifs from previous dances, which was made possible by a shared way of paying attention to movement through a compositional lens.*

*Back at my day job as an arts administrator in New York City, I registered the lingering effects of the intensive experience in the way that I noticed elements in my surroundings. Things seemed to jump out at me that I hadn't seen before: the poetry of a gnarled branch reaching through a neighbor's wooden fence ("intersection"); two men sitting next to each other on the subway missing the same tooth ("confluence"); a multitude of people moving hurriedly and upright, punctuated by the presence of a single figure lying down on the sidewalk ("contrast"). Perceiving through the lens of composition made my commute more engaging, increasing my sense of awe at the arrangements of small details. But ethically, it promoted a detached view of the world around me. It obscured the underlying power differentials that organized my neighborhood and city. Gentrification and houselessness were simply aspects of a composition. I*

---

<sup>3</sup> The majority of the group were white, middle-class dancers with some familiarity with CI, all hailing from the Northeast United States.

*had the equally disturbing realization that synchronizing attentive priorities with a group treaded dangerously close to brainwashing and authoritarian coercion.<sup>4</sup> Practices like the Underscore are potent tools for convening people quickly as an ensemble, but at what cost? Does taking on a compositional lens preclude other ways of interacting with one's environment and the others that share it? Furthermore, even if the Underscore proposes an attentive framework that purports to include "everything" as composition, it runs the risk of imposing a culturally specific, white, middle-class, and postmodern compositional aesthetic as universal.*

*The Underscore came back to find me five years later in Nia Love's "Advanced Improvisation" class at UCLA. Midway through the quarter, Love began a class by distributing pieces of paper around the dance studio. Each one had several pictograms, which I soon recognized as the Underscore glyphs. We would not be doing the Underscore, she said, but using it as a "partner" to our own warmup. Instead of describing each glyph to the class, she encouraged us to make our own relationships to the picture. The Underscore, she said, can help us to think about "container-ness." What is included in the container? What lies beyond its boundaries? Do the elements inside the container want to be there? Love urged the class to think about choreographic scores more critically: "What do these things help us to do? Do they help us?" We activated the Underscore by incorporating it into our group improvisation, using the glyphs as both symbols and physical objects. By the end of the dance, the papers were in pieces. We collected them, redistributed them, tore them up, and wore them as badges. I think one may have gotten eaten. The glyphs still exerted influence on our attention, but we had more autonomy*

---

<sup>4</sup> Yvonne Rainer has made a similar critique of what she calls an "abdication of principles for assigning importance of significance" (1981, 68) in the work of John Cage. She argues that Cage's use of indeterminacy to get "our minds and desires out of the way" (67) becomes problematic by denying and suppressing meaning and relationship. That is, they are antisocial and asocial gestures.

*in terms of how we chose to relate to the score as a provocation...or as a piece of paper. We resisted its containment—inverting it, recontextualizing it, and finding new uses. It still offered us ways to connect with each other and the space around us, but those modes of connection exceeded the score's intended purpose and palette.*

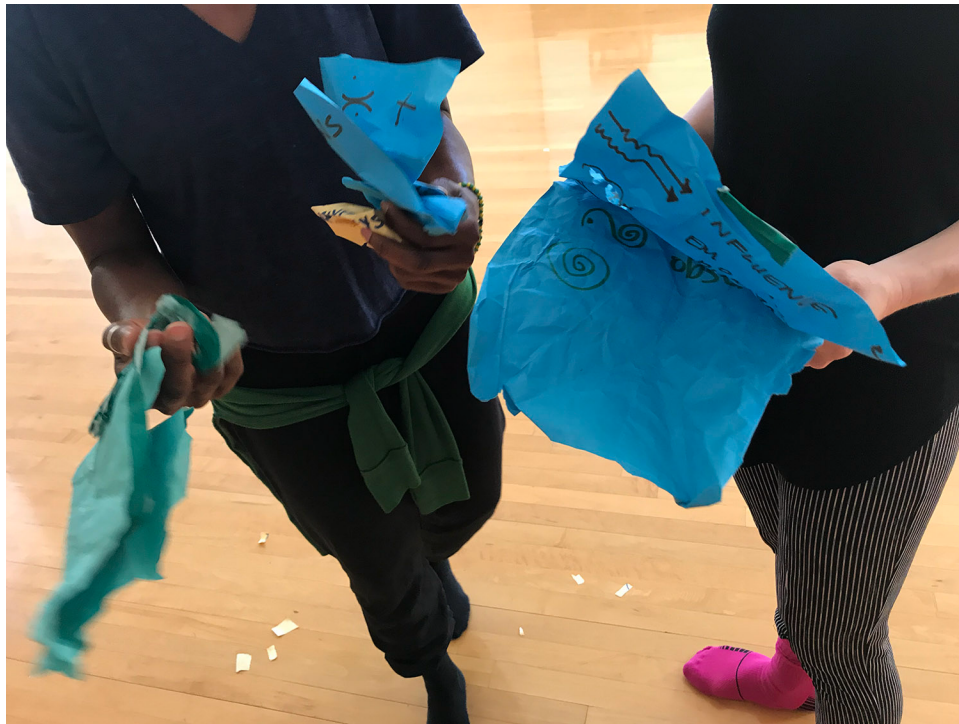


Figure 1 - Nia Love teaches Advanced Improvisation at UCLA.  
Image: Zena Bibler, 2018.

These encounters with the Underscore foreshadow many of the questions I engage in this project, which asks: How are attention and action connected? How does the quality of our attention shape our physical relations with objects, ideas, and others? Conversely, how might our physical posture, position, and trajectory inform what we notice and the meanings we draw from those observations? Both experiences demonstrate how shared practices of attention can produce social collectives and ways of making meaning in common. Love's teaching highlights how attention can also be political. If mainstream definitions of attention emphasize one's capacity to *ignore* most phenomena in order to concentrate on a particular object or task, the question begs



to be answered: What (or who) is included as “relevant”? What (or who) is left outside of the frame? As I will argue, analyzing attention through the lens of choreography brings to the fore its material, social, and political dimensions, which are often obscured when attention is conceptualized in biological and cognitive terms. The latter definitions tend to portray mind and body as separate and render attention as an ahistorical and culturally neutral biological phenomenon.<sup>5</sup>

This dissertation analyzes attention as a set of body practices, complicating definitions used within humanistic and scientific scholarship that over-emphasize the cognitive. I do this by examining how dance artists in the United States have leveraged the interconnectedness of attention and action. While many dance practices require dancers to develop specific ways of hearing, seeing, feeling, and touching while dancing, I focus on a subset of artists who “choreograph” or create parameters for paying attention as an organizing principle for movement. I use the term “choreographies of attention” to refer to sets of directives for taking in and responding to sensory information. These may compel dancers to prioritize their non-dominant senses (e.g., touching rather than seeing) or propose alternative ways of using dominant senses (e.g., looking peripherally rather than centrally). They might augment the rhythm or temporality of a dancer’s attention, asking them to spend an extended amount of time perceiving a single element in minute detail, or conversely, to continually move their focus without ever concentrating directly on any one thing. Choreographic uses of attention often serve a practical purpose: they give structure to improvised compositions and help groups of dancers to

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<sup>5</sup> There is body of literature that studies how the biological and the cognitive are also socially impacted, and inextricably connected to bodies, their movements, and their circumstances. In psychology and neuroscience, “neuroplasticity” is an emerging area of research that investigates how experience modifies the brain and brain activity (Fine 2011; Schwartz and Begley 2003). Dance and sports ethnography has also taken up these questions (Gregory Downey 2010; O’Shea 2017).

coordinate across abilities and forms of training. While attention has emerged relatively recently as a choreographic concern within U.S. American experimental dance, attention and choreography have been intertwined for centuries. As I will demonstrate in this dissertation, choreographic treatments of attention within dance practices heighten our awareness of the ways in which our attention and action are being shaped by a number of forces in everyday life. These broader “regimes of attention” contextualize how artists observe, comment upon, or restructure habituated hierarchies of value that determine what is considered by dancers to be “relevant,” and, crucially, what is deserving of response.

By focusing on choreographies of attention in U.S. American experimental dance, I highlight a trend that is pervasive among artists, and yet, has not received significant engagement by scholars. Since the 1920s, choreographers and dance educators have explored the intertwinement of attention, sensation, and movement, tinkering with the practices by which the performer uses their sensory abilities as a means of shaping movement outcomes. Within Euro/American concert dance canons, this conceptualization of dance as a process of sensory exploration dates back to Margaret H'Doubler who coached students to use felt sensation to discover their own limitations and possibilities, and to create movement from their knowledge of their own structure, rather than through imitation (“Margaret H'Doubler and the Wisconsin Dance Idea” n.d.). Anna Halprin, a student of H'Doubler's, used attunement as a practice of negotiating relationships to objects, other dancers, and environmental features (Ross 2009, 135). Her influence reverberated in the practices of Merce Cunningham and Simone Forti, each of whom spent time on Halprin's “dance deck” in Marin County. In a 1957 lecture at Halprin's home, Cunningham characterized dancing as “an act of concentration taking visible form in a way that cannot be done otherwise” (107). Deborah Hay would further elaborate this concept by

adopting attention as a formal choreographic tool, proposing, “If I turn from movement as primary component in making dances, replacing it with how I perceive space and time, will this suffice as the two primary components in my choreography?” (Hay 2015, 15). Steve Paxton integrated the same idea in the development of contact improvisation technique, which he described as a set of “interior techniques” that govern how the dancer directs their noticing rather than how they direct their moving (Paxton 2003).<sup>6</sup>

The shift in emphasis from the visual effect of choreography to the state of awareness of the dancer coincides with the rise of somatics, an approach to movement that foregrounds the mover’s experience rather than how they appear to others. Emphasizing the experiencing self contrasts with ways of viewing bodies as objects, which are prevalent in both medical and aesthetic traditions. However, as Doran George has argued, somatics and other related dance practices have tended to treat bodily experience as culturally unmarked, while expressing aspects of white, normatively abled embodiment as a neutral/universal ideal (2020). Attention has been present as a topic of choreographic concern within Euro/American dance canons for at least a century. However, until recently, many of these articulations of attention have succumbed to the same ahistorical and culturally neutral assumptions that are present within mainstream discourses around attention.

Choreographic interest in attention continues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Dances titled “Attentionography” (Nelson 2016) and “The Geometry of Attention” (Little 2012) and performance philosophies that highlight the “movement of attention” (Lepkoff and Forti 2005) gesture to this interest. In the past five years of programming at New York City dance

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<sup>6</sup> Both Hay and Paxton studied and performed with Cunningham and Cage in the 1960s. Forti worked with Halprin during the same period.

organization Movement Research, dance workshops have described emphases on “body’s ways of organizing sensation and attention” (Nelson 2023), dancing as listening (brooks 2022), the “development of poetic sensibilities through perceptual tuning” (Aiken 2017), and an investigation of “how difference—of physicality or lived experience—can shape, and is shaped by, the way we ‘perform’ our perceptions” (Curtis and Cunningham 2018).

While some of these artists are engaging attention as neutral and universal, there is a discourse emerging that concerns the politics of attention, and, more specifically, how different aspects of identity and lived experience impact how one performs, receives, and exchanges attention. As I demonstrate in Chapter 1, attention has always been inflected by power and politics. However, in today’s “attention economy,” we are living in a period in which concerns about the political and economic use of attention are prevalent within public discourse. As will become apparent, choreographers and dancers are key players in this discourse, and can contribute unique insights by virtue of their approach to attention as a set of practices with many possible forms and applications.

One of my key research findings is that dominant choreographies of attention has been constructed as part of the required comportment of the ideal subject across different historical epistemes in Europe and North America. The artists featured in this study, mayfield brooks, Andrew Suseno, and Jennifer Monson, all work from perspectives that have been marginalized in some way by both dominant society and concert dance.<sup>7</sup> In addition to developing specific attentive techniques for the performer, these artists also emphasize a negotiation of the ways in

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<sup>7</sup> bell hooks points to the ways in which the margin allows for “the possibility of a radical perspective from which to see, create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds” (1989, 20) in her article, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” hooks writes specifically about racial marginalization, but her insights have informed my analysis of how experiences of being left out of Eurocentric notions of “humanism” are a condition of possibility for imagining alternative worlds and ways of being.

which the performer is perceived or “read” by others according to a complex social matrix. This necessitates an expanded genealogy of attentive training that includes experiences outside the dance studio. Mobilizing attentive techniques honed through lived experience at different degrees of removal from the normative liberal subject reveals sensations, insights, and modes of physical coordination that are not available through dominant attentive frames.

Nia Love’s pedagogy is illustrative of this expanded genealogy. In 2018, Love greeted students in her advanced improvisation class with the following, written on the whiteboard:

[I]mprovisation is a practice of attention (focused noticing) rather than moving. Instead of hoping the body will absorb {me} in its flow, or that I will be able to ‘think up’ innovative things for it to do, {I} improvise by noticing and dancing with my body—ACTIVATE MY ATTENTION. This is sustained by constantly renewing these acts of attention. (Author notes, UCLA, April 16, 2018)

She explained how this way of thinking about improvisation decentralizes the performer as the focal point of the composition and asks them to observe their surroundings as preparation for making choreographic decisions that relate to what is already happening, rather than inventing abstract material. While Love referenced canonical choreographers such as Alwin Nikolais, Deborah Hay, and Nancy Stark Smith, she situated them within a wider array of attentive practices. Zen Buddhism, hip hop cyphering, Haitian Rara, jazz improvisation, and experiences of mental illness and houselessness were introduced as necessitating different modes of attending to self, space, and others. Love wove connections between the Zen practice of witnessing internally and externally simultaneously, and the Black feminist concept of multiple oppressions as theorized by Hazel Carby.<sup>8</sup> She asked the class to see ourselves as we imagine we are, as well as how others might perceive us as marked by categories of race, class, and ability. Love also

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<sup>8</sup> Hazel Carby’s 1982 article, “White Woman, Listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood” was one of the few assigned readings for the course (Carby 1982).

described her experience of having to navigate institutional spaces like UCLA as a Black woman as its own training in attention. “You have to observe what’s going on around you like a cat. Where can you get in, and where can you get out?” Her curation situated these practices as training different ways of being in the world. How do we orient to the tangible and intangible entities that organize a given space? How does our capacity to notice sensory and extra-sensory information help us ascertain what is possible in a given space? How can we notice structures in order to selectively disrupt those that oppress and constrain? How can we identify a place and time in which something new can happen? Unlike the neutral/universal approach prevalent within somatics and Eurocentric concert dance canons, the attentive techniques we were training in Love’s class were always directly linked with our histories of lived experience and our strategies for navigating complex social structures.

### **Attention and/as Choreography**

Despite attention’s importance among choreographers, there has been little written on the topic in critical dance and performance studies scholarship. Theater and performance studies scholars, including Richard Schechner (1976), George Home-Cook (2015), and Clare Bishop (2018), have theorized attention as it relates to spectatorship, studying how performance organizes audience attention. Among the few dance studies publications that exist on the topic are by Nita Little (2014) and Ann Cooper Albright (2017; 2018), who theorize “attentive training” in contact improvisation. My research builds upon these existing projects by taking a different approach. Like Little and Albright, I address the attention of dance practitioners, but, in line with Love’s interventions, I broaden the scope of “attentive training” beyond contact improvisation. Instead, I explore how an awareness of attention and/as choreography brings into relief the myriad ways attention is also cultivated by institutions, environments, and social

relations. Second, through this expanded understanding of attentive training, I invert the dynamic by which attention and politics interact in Little's and Albright's scholarship. In both of their analyses, the authors explore how contact improvisation skills like the capacity to "see" via touch or withstand experiences of disorientation might serve political projects outside of—and unrelated to—dance practice. By contrast, I explore how "real world" power dynamics not only intercede on the dance practice but foster unique attentive techniques and modes of sensing. My theorization of attention is informed by the artists and platforms I engage with in this project, as well as critical analyses advanced by Susan Foster (2011) and Royona Mitra (2021), who have argued against the universality of senses such as kinesthesia and touch (respectively) by bringing to light how they are historically and culturally mediated. I take up Love's and Mitra's calls to consider the power asymmetries that inform how dancing bodies relate to each other as foundational to choreographic practices (7). In doing so, I trouble the distinction between performer and audience that is present in the existing literature. In Brooks', Suseno's, and Monson's attentive choreographies, participants both attend to and are being attended-to by fellow participants and audience members in ways that are informed by both the techniques cultivated in dance practice and the power asymmetries that, in Love's words, "live in and around the space without you and before you."<sup>9</sup>

How can attention be understood as choreographic? Before diving in, it is necessary to clarify how I am using these terms. Acknowledging that choreography, like attention, refers to a range of practices, rather than a stable object (Foster 2009), I use "choreography" to refer to systems for organizing the movement of both human and more-than-human bodies in relationship to space, time, and each other. In André Lepecki's framing, choreography is a form

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<sup>9</sup> This is from my personal class notes from April 9, 2018.

of control that dictates “*who* is able or allowed to move—and under what circumstances, and on what grounds.” It has the power “to decide *where* one is allowed to move to; to define who are the bodies that can *choose* full mobility and who are the bodies forced into displacement” (Allsopp and Lepecki 2008, 1). When I use the term “choreography,” I actively invoke the term’s history as a Western European construction, produced in part through state-sponsored dance notation projects in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Foster 2011). Choreography has also been entangled, since the origins of the term, with racism (Foster 2009), colonialism (Bench 2008), and capitalist structures of value (Kraut 2014).<sup>10</sup>

While choreography can command, capture, and appropriate, its means of production can also be seized and put to other uses. As Randy Martin has argued, choreography is a tool for designing how entities come together—how they relate to and coordinate with each other (1998), Choreography offers a means of “rehearsing social order in the realm of the aesthetic” (Hewitt 2005, 12). It is an inherently social process, affording platforms for bodies to gather and mobilize toward different projects. Eschewing the now well-critiqued binary between choreography and improvisation,<sup>11</sup> I furnish examples of choreographies that lack a single author and are played out through decentralized interactions between persons, objects, environments, and ideas. These structures are not imposed from the top-down, but instead, negotiated according to multiple

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<sup>10</sup> Foster has shown how choreography, via the written notation of dances, which are owned by the “choreographer” who translates them into writing, has served as a vehicle for exporting Western conceptions of who the ideal subject is and how they should move (2009, 2011). Critical dance studies scholars have demonstrated how choreography—at least as it has been interpreted within Eurocentric paradigms—extends colonial projects predicated on the flattening of land into abstract space (Bench 2008). Choreography has also been a site for constructing, regulating, and managing cultural difference by marking off some kinds of dancing as artistic innovation and others as tradition or entertainment (S. Manning 2004; Gottschild 1996; 2003).

<sup>11</sup> In his analysis of African American vernacular dancing, Jonathan David Jackson holds that “improvisation *is* choreography,” problematizing definitions that pit them as opposites (2001). He furthermore cautions that this division runs the risk of being ethnocentric, as the parameters that constitute dance as “set” or “improvised” are often dependent on “culturally specific distinctions that reflect the values of a given society” (Puri and Hart-Johnson 1995, 158). See also Foster 2002, Goldman 2010, Kraut 2014, 2016.



intersecting power dynamics, and sometimes, forging lines of lateral solidarity. What I hope to bring forward is the idea that attention is a source of choreographic structure within improvised movement practices both in dance studios and other spaces. I show how choreographies of attention are central to the creation of ideal subjects (as “good,” “civilized,” “efficient,” “normal,” “productive,” or “high functioning,” depending on the historical era). Choreographies of attention are also potent tools for rehearsing other ways of being and *being together* across difference.

“Attention,” like “choreography,” is a term with many meanings. The words “attention” and “attending” connote a range of different activities and have passed through frequent revisions over time. Across various academic fields, scholars have put forward historical, cultural, and economic frameworks for describing what attention is and does in the world. In Jonathan Crary’s historical analysis of attention in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, he reveals how attention, rather than being a stable object, is rather a “massive accumulation of statements and concrete social practices during a specific historical period that presumed the existence and importance of such a capacity” (2001, 23). Crary suggests that we should think of “attention” instead as a “field of attentive practices” rather than a singular entity (7). In this way, attention can also be conceived of as an array of “techniques of the body”—learned bodily actions that both reflect and embed the culture in which they are practiced (de Certeau 1973). In this vein, anthropologists have made a case for attention as a “technology that organizes how humans perceive the world” (Pedersen, Albris, and Seaver 2021, 312). Attention is organized both by the person performing attention, as well as the environment in which that attention is performed, and is subject to influence by others with whom one is performing attention according to socially mediated codes and conventions concerning what is expected and what is important (Throop and

Duranti 2015). Throughout my analysis, I use both “technique” and “choreography” as helpful terms to highlight attention’s bodily implications. In many examples both terms apply; however, technique refers to the aspects of attention that the individual subject is expected to be able to perform. Choreography, on the other hand, enables a more capacious view of how subjects and their attention are always being pulled in different directions by multiple environmental factors, which sometimes work against disciplinary techniques that aim to train focus in particular ways.

Regarding attention as a field of practices rather than an object contrasts with theories of attention that dominate medical and economic discourses. Instead of looking at *cultures of attention*, the latter articulates an *economics of attention*, in which attention takes on the qualities of a commodity, valuable in relationship to the increasing demands placed upon it in an information-rich age (Herbert A. Simon 1971; Goldhaber 1997; Zuboff 2019). This logic is evident in the idea that one “pays” attention and, in medical diagnoses, might run an attention “deficit.” Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has estimated that attentive capacity remains at a relatively stable rate of 120 bits per second (2014, xvi). Public discourse, informed by this vision of attention as a zero-sum game, is fraught with anxiety about the ways in which attention, already in limited supply, is being eroded by persuasive design in digital technologies. Within these discourses, attention is imagined as being paid, but also “stolen” (Wu 2017), exploited (Lerman 2019) and used to control people through “attentional serfdom” (Williams 2018). However, as Morton Axel Pedersen and others have argued, attention’s scarcity is partially derived from the capitalist logics of value within which it is being imagined (2021). As I will show through my examples, choreographic activations of attention as a set of plural practices allow us to see how attention is, in reality, much more plastic. Furthermore, by activating

attentions that deviate from standard techniques, these artists demonstrate how attention can create value in ways that exceed the capitalist logics.

When they organize attention according to alternative value systems, the artists in my study point to attention's political implications. I explore the *politics of attention* by drawing on theorizations of the senses and sensation from critical race theory (Moten 2003; Smith 2008; Fleetwood 2011; Sharpe 2016; Crawley 2017; Yapp 2018; Eidsheim 2019; Sekimoto and Brown 2020), sensory studies (Classen 1997; Howes 2003; 2009; Panagia 2009), feminist philosophy (Grosz 1994; Ahmed 2006; 2007; E. Manning 2006), critical disability studies (Davis 1995; Mintz 2016; Watts Belser 2016), and decolonial theory (Wynter 1995a; 1995b; 2003; Glissant 1997; Mignolo and Vazquez 2013; María Regina Firmino-Castillo 2018; Maria Regina Firmino-Castillo et al. 2019). This scholarship challenges the assumption that the senses are natural and instead shows how they are historically and culturally mediated (Classen 1997; Howes 2003). Davide Panagia has described how the senses are influenced by a dominant "regime of perception" that "parses what is and what is not sensible" (Panagia 2009, 14). For Sachi Sekimoto and Christopher Brown, the senses are sites where politicized beliefs become solidified such that the political valences are difficult to identify. Their application of Panagia's "regimes of perception" to the racial politics of sensation help to uncover how ways of perceiving and being perceived reflect social hierarchies (Sekimoto and Brown 2020, 7).

Distinctions between attention and other similar terms such as "sensation," "perception," or "awareness," are often porous. For the purposes of this study, when I invoke attention, I refer to particular directions in which the senses are extended and the physical practices that generate those extensions. Sensation can "pull" attention in one direction or another (e.g., noticing a bug bite through itching), or it can be the intentional target of one's attention (e.g., feeling along a

wall for a light switch). In addition to this spatiality of “toward,” attention has a temporality of “until.” This distinguishes attention from awareness and perception, which are temporally undefined. Attention also requires tonality; extending one’s ears, eyes, skin, or thought requires muscular effort. Attention, whether directed intentionally, or pulled by environmental aspects, is always informed by the same political regimes that organize the senses and sensations according to numerous hierarchies. Attention—understood in the West as the selective extension of the senses and consciousness toward some things and not others—is shaped by logics that apportion unequal value to different kinds of matter and subjects and thus determine their attentional prominence. Finally, attention can include, but is not limited to, sensory information. Especially in creative processes, attention might also incorporate extra-sensory elements, including imagination and intuition. One of my aims with this project is to disaggregate a dominant technique of attention cultivated within institutional settings from other possible ways of extending the self toward others and objects. This means that I sometimes stretch attention beyond its conventional limits in order to make the case for alternative states of concentration (e.g., distraction or disorientation) as counter-choreographies of attention, rather than the absence of attention.

By emphasizing attention’s spatiality, temporality, and tone, I am proposing that attention and choreography” are already in relationship. James J. Gibson and Alva Noë, working in the fields of psychology and cognitive science, have outlined theories of perception in terms that are implicitly choreographic. Gibson’s ecological theory of perception (1979) and Alva Noë’s conceptualization of perception as a skillful bodily activity (2006) establish that perception is

only possible through movement.<sup>12</sup> It is precisely the movements of a particular perceiving organism through specific terrain that enables that organism to obtain stimuli and integrate it within a schema of previous experiences. Additionally, perception is never objective, but always overlaid with meanings associated with the object's "affordances" or "action possibilities." That is, we project possible future actions onto that which we perceive (Gibson 1979). These affordances are part of what creates an environment in which objects produce different degrees of "attentional pull," exerting influence on the actions of the attending organism (Throop and Duranti 2015).

Like the canonical dance and somatics practitioners I referenced earlier, theories of enactive perception in psychology often render the attending subject as a culturally neutral "organism." However, they do allow us to think about attention as site-specific and always constituted through complex interactions between space, time, material objects, and the sensing body. In my analysis, I carry this model forward, but integrate perspectives from cultural studies that attune me to the social nature of attention. I adapt Ashon Crawley's notion of the "aversive choreography" of the Enlightenment, which entails a mode of attention that creates both rational thought and the normative subject through a material turning away from bodiliness, non-visual sensation, and non-white others (2017, 112–13). In harmony with Crawley, Sara Ahmed asks us to consider how attention participates in the formation of social "perspectives" by interweaving the material and the ideological. She explains, "It may be that the very act of attention—of attending to or facing this or that direction, or toward this or that object—produces 'a sense' of a collective or social group" (2006, 119–20). Thus, if Crawley's aversive choreography

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<sup>12</sup> Alva Noë has worked directly with choreographers, including Lisa Nelson and William Forsythe. He regularly uses their work as examples of his theories (Noë 2012).

demonstrates how some subjects and sensations are rendered invisible or unimportant within dominant regimes of attention, Ahmed's analysis points out how choreographies of attention—aversive or otherwise—contribute to the formation social identities and groups out of shared ways of orienting towards the world.

I use the lens of choreography to bring together all of these ways of thinking about attention—cultural, economic, and political. First, I look at the specific bodily repertoires that are associated with attention. Then I shift focus to the ways in which choreographers disrupt dominant techniques and choreographies of attention and articulate new protocols. Both of these threads of inquiry reveal that attention's capacity to shape action is precisely the source of its value. This allows us to appreciate how different practices of attention produce different kinds of value, both within and in contrast with capitalist logics. Some of alternative sources of value artists uncover include changing the terrain of potential action; weaving alternative social and ecological relations; and transforming the ways we create meaning with others and with the world. Choreographic projects that reorganize dominant regimes and practices of attention wield attention as a form of political critique, as well as a way to foster coordinations and collectivities that are impossible within dominant regimes.

## **Methods**

Prioritizing direct physical engagement with the practices I study has been an organizing principle of this research. It has continually reminded me that there are insights that reveal themselves exclusively through the *doing*. The data I analyze includes 500 hours of participation in workshops with Brooks, Suseno, Monson, and other iLAND collaborators, as well as over 60 hours of interviews with artists and participants. While this study is not about me, I rely on my own experience as both a practitioner and researcher. Because I am studying how attention

organizes experience and action, I make use of the only experience to which I have direct access—my own. My methods are, in part, autoethnographic because they stem from my observations as a cultural insider in the practices I study (Hayano 1979). I reckon with the fact that my presence and actions impact what transpires in the events I observe (Poulos 2021). Autoethnography enables me to embrace imagination, sensation, and emotion as data and to foreground the subjective nature of knowledge. Taking the lead from Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe (Boylorn et al. 2021), I strive for a critical autoethnography that engages reflexively with experience and how it is informed by culture and power, including my positionality and relationship to institutions.

I complement this autoethnographic reflection with archival research on historical practices of attention, consulting with military field guides, teacher manuals, factory and corporate workplace policies, and advertisements. To sustain the thread of practice-centered inquiry, I emulate Lena Hammergren’s perspective of the “*flâneuse*” (1994) when I work with archival materials. Hammergren proposes the *flâneuse* as a complementary figure to Charles Baudelaire’s masculine *flâneur*, who observes public spaces from an embedded, yet anonymous perspective and primarily relies on the visual sense. Hammergren’s *flâneuse* describes a person who may not have direct physical access to the spaces she studies. As a *flâneuse*, Hammergren demonstrates a way of reading archival materials by using the historian’s kinesthetic experience to imagine what it might have been like to occupy other spaces and times. I use the *flâneuse*’s strategies to imagine how the practices of attention described in archival sources would have played out kinesthetically, and how they would have organized the self in relation to objects, ideas, and others.

My methodological approach employs concepts from phenomenology in combination with practical methods from anthropology and critical dance studies. To do this, I build on work by Iris Marion Young (1980), Greg Downey (2005), Vivian Sobchack (2017), and Janet O’Shea (2018), who have laid groundwork for investigating how selves and communities are created through movement practices. I refer to this approach as “situated phenomenology,” because it examines the factors that structure experience while maintaining focus on the involvement of social, cultural, and environmental contexts. In doing so, it builds upon phenomenological interventions from queer, critical race, critical disability, and decolonial studies to articulate how “experience” and understandings of the “self” are always site-specific and embedded within intersubjective relations and power dynamics.<sup>13</sup>

I mobilize phenomenology not as a set of discrete literature, but as a way of looking at something. Unlike traditional phenomenology, I am less interested in defining attention’s essential qualities than I am in asking what it *does*, and highlighting the diverse practices through which attentions are cultivated and performed. Bruno Latour’s differentiation between a “matter of fact” and “matter of concern” (2004) is useful here, because it enables an investigation of attention as plural and plastic, and yet the topic of significant contention and anxiety in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Phenomenological concepts and methods inform my analysis of specific choreographies of attention and help me discuss how they organize experience in a particular context. Concepts like “foreground” stimulate questions about what is perceptually accessible and relevant to a

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<sup>13</sup> For queer interpretations of phenomenology, see Ahmed (2006), Butler (1988), José Esteban Muñoz, Ochieng’ Nyongó, and Chambers-Letson (2020), and José Esteban Muñoz (2006; 2009). Critical race theory applications of phenomenology that have been influential to this study are Fanon (1952), 5/28/23 12:31:00 PM Ahmed (2006; 2007), Lee (2015), Ngo (2017), Al-Saji (2014), Sarukkai (2009), Crawley (2017), and Sekimoto and Brown (2020). Critical disability studies adaptations of phenomenology appear in Paterson (2001), Diedrich (2001), Martiny (2015). Decolonial discourses around experience, while not necessarily claiming affiliation with phenomenology, are found in Wynter (1995a; 1995b), Vazquez and Mignolo (2013), and Firmino-Castillo (2018).



dancer, while the “background” points to how environmental and social contexts render some phenomena prominent (Husserl 1913). I also hone in on the strategies by which artists bracket or “parenthesize” (Husserl 1913) what they understand to be their “natural” or “cultural attitude” (Duranti 2009) and seek to circumvent habituated ways of perceiving through diverse modifications.

Situated phenomenology draws from adaptations of phenomenology that challenge universalizing conceptions of “the attending body” and instead attempt to account for the non-neutrality of plural and specific bodies and their contexts (Young 1980; Grosz 1994; Weiss 1998; Csordas 1993; Sobchack 2017; Ahmed 2006; Sekimoto and Brown 2020). For Thomas Csordas, this “somatic mode of attention,” entails attending to specific embodied subjects’ unique “situation in the world” (1993, 138). In order to maintain a phenomenological lens while accounting for the embodied specificity of experience, I adopt interventions from scholars who have expanded phenomenology’s way of attuning and have challenged it to be more specific and situated by applying queer, critical race, critical disability, and decolonial frames. Sekimoto and Brown have described a similar approach in their call for a “critical sensory awareness” as a mode of engaging with sensory information that reflects intercultural competency and prioritizes ethical relation (2020, 145).

Scholars have already provided roadmaps for applying phenomenological methods to dance analysis (Fraleigh 1991; 1996; 2000; Rothfield 2004; 2020). These authors have focused on the factors that influence how audience members make meaning out of dances based on their own subjective positions. The improvisational dance practices I analyze are not viewable from a fixed perspective, but are instead decentralized, emergent events that are created and witnessed from mobile perspectives. To complicate matters further, practitioners often occupy the role of

performer and witness simultaneously. That is, they both create movement and observe the movement of other participants, rather than adhering to the binary roles of performer/audience. I contribute to existing phenomenologies of dance by investigating how experience is constructed intersubjectively, through the activity of dancing, by tracking my own and others' experiences through participant observation, interviews, and auto-ethnography.

If phenomenology helps me to engage with the different forces that inform subjective experience, choreographic analysis provides complementary information by tracking what transpires physically in the room. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that attention has material implications. It shapes and is shaped by physical actions. To this end, choreographic analysis observes tangible details at the level of space and relations between dancing bodies in ways that dialogue with subjective experience. In this vein, I practice Rosemary Candelario's sensitivity to a choreographic strategy she calls "dancing with," which illuminates how dancing can transform space through the relationships dancers enact with their surroundings (2016). I further posit that "dancing with" begins with the practice of noticing, which makes elements available for relationship to the dancer.

Whenever possible, I use the movement practices I study as methodologies in their own right. As I argue in more detail in Chapter 4, choreographic scores are like other research methods in that they establish a set of procedures to be followed, delimited by a set of assumptions and parameters. For example, if, as I argue in Chapter 2, mayfield brooks is calling for witnessing as a mode of attention that intervenes within the anti-Blackness of dominant regimes of attention, how can I, with my scholarly attention, mobilize witnessing as a critical lens that informs my analysis? Inverting prevailing dynamics between theory and practice, I use choreographies of attention as prisms through which we might reinterpret theory.

## Scope of Research

One of the parameters of this investigation is to focus on dance practices rather than performances. Of course, as performance studies scholarship has shown, this distinction is somewhat fluid. What I mean by “practice” is that there is no final iteration that is displayed for an audience; nor are there distinctions between “doers” and “observers.” Participants often play both roles as they navigate the conditions and events of practice. Another element of practice is that it implies the development and acquisition of particular skills. Accordingly, I am interested in how facilitators stage attention as a practice and how they coach participants to hear, see, feel, taste, smell as key elements of movement training and choreographic structure. I am indebted to models in dance and sports ethnography (Browning 1995; Greg Downey 2005; Wacquant 2006; O’Shea 2018), which have investigated movement practices from the inside through auto-ethnography and participant observation. While these works often detail the learning curve of a single participant (the researcher) within a movement practice, my project explores practice from a polycentric perspective, integrating interviews with co-participants with my own observations. This is important because it helps to bring forward the intricacies of how participants practice and how they practice differently.

Throughout this research process, I have become more aware of the ways in which any skillful movement activity requires an equally skillful practice of attention. This study delves into the work of three artists who recognize attention’s importance within the development of physical skill, but also recognize its political and ethical potential. By following their practices closely, I show how mayfield brooks, Andrew Suseno, and Jennifer Monson use dance to critique and reimagine the politics of attention. In order to bring forward what is novel about their practices, I compare and contrast their approaches with other ways of working with

attention in Euro/American concert dance and somatics—which the artists implicitly and explicitly refer to as part of their lineage. Like Love, they all mobilize a critical perspective that points out what other attentive techniques leave out of view (and sometimes even repress). Specifically, they work to undo the abstraction of attention and its portrayal in neutral/universal terms. In their teaching and facilitation, they advocate for an expanded genealogy of practice that includes their lived experience. For example, brooks’ Improvising While Black workshops draw upon evangelical church practices of witnessing as a specialized mode of attention. In his practice, Parcon Resilience/Moving Rasa, Suseno cites Javanese animist practices and disabled mobilities as instructive for learning how to attend to and collaborate with others and objects. Monson and iLAND collaborators develop ways of attuning to others adapted from queer club-going and observations of migratory animal species.

Cumulatively, all these artists propose that positionality, personal and ancestral history, and environmental situatedness impact how a person attends and is attended to by others. In doing so, they create opportunities to think about how choreographies in both specialized dance spaces and in everyday life are impacted by our habits and practices of attention, which can be trained intentionally, or shaped by our particular situation in the world. Following the work of brooks, Suseno, and Monson illuminates how attention might play a role in social transformation. These artists wield attention as a tool for resisting colonialism, racism, ableism, speciesism, and other forms of oppression. Their practices reveal not only that attention has been used as a tool to enforce stratification among entities, but to experiment with other ways of being outside of this framework.

## Chapter Order and Rationale

In Chapter 1, “Genealogy of Attention as a Physical Practice,” I excavate historical descriptions of attention at different junctures in order to argue that Western conceptualizations of attention have long referred to specific bodily practices. Consulting with archival sources including military field guides, etiquette manuals, industrial engineering plans, and educational handbooks, I uncover how disciplinary institutions have entrained subjects in a dominant corporeal technique of attention that has fluctuated over time, while retaining several key characteristics. Despite the breadth of different activities that have been associated with attention, there are four choreographic elements that are present across historical iterations of dominant attention in the U.S. and Western Europe: 1) stretched extension, 2) a muscular quality of “tautness,” 3) a spatial relationship of “towardness,” and 4) a temporality of waiting (until).

Through a choreographic analysis of dominant Western conceptions of attention over the past seven centuries, I highlight attention’s role as a set of techniques and a genre of social choreographies rather than a stable biological fact. This maneuver complicates prevailing definitions that portray attention as a universally given biological and cognitive function. My dance studies analysis attunes the viewer to the ways in which techniques of attention are akin to forms of “choreography”—each taking place with their own space, time, duration, and level of bodily tone. Additionally, attention sometimes plays the role of “choreographer” inasmuch as it structures social relationships, informs the trajectory of one’s actions, and influences how one engages with space, time, ideas, objects, and others. As I will show, choreographies of attention in have shifted from more spontaneous practices to an increasingly standardized mode of focus that evolved in dialogue with dominant political and economic regimes.

This chapter provides historical and theoretical context for the specific “counter-choreographies” (scores or practices that *counter* or disrupt normative choreographies of attention) I analyze in subsequent chapters. A genealogical approach unveils how hegemonic choreographies of attention have been encoded with gendered, classed, racialized, and ableist ideas, which are carried forward into present day attentions, such as “executive function.” These practices have been used to narrow the parameters that constitute “knowledge,” while apportioning care and concern unequally among subjects. At the same time, the use of attention as an instrument of social control imbues it with potency as a tool for disrupting the status quo.

The remaining chapters explore how contemporary dance artists are intervening within dominant regimes of attention in order to create alternative ways of relating to self, others, and environment. In each of my three case studies, I pair an artist with a theme and a strategy. Chapter 2, “Disorienting Attention: Confronting Choreographies of Anti-Blackness and Activating the Otherwise in mayfield brooks’ Improvising While Black Pedagogy” examines disorientation as a strategy for resisting anti-Black regimes of perception in mayfield brooks’ choreographic and pedagogical project, Improvising While Black (IWB). While disorientation is prominent within all aspects of IWB, I focus specifically on how brooks teaches disorientation as a Black somatic technique within their public workshops, under the same name. Within IWB workshops, brooks reclaims disorientation not as a lack of perception, but as a means of unsettling dominant choreographies of attention that enact conceptions of humanity in opposition to Blackness. Drawing on interviews with brooks and IWB workshop participants, and from my own participation in IWB intensives and workshops, I study how brooks elaborates techniques of disorientation and re-orientation as a way of creating alternatives to dominant choreographies of attention in both dance institutions and U.S. American society at large. Through kinetic,

vestibular, and discursive strategies, brooks scrambles normative orientations, which include ocularcentrism, sensory divisions, verticality, individualism, and adherence to linear time. Instead, they lead participants into practices of multisensoriality, synesthesia, falling, spiraling, traveling backward, dancing off-center, and dreaming. These practices and the counter-attentions they require remake the grounds for relating to self and others, explicitly challenging the individualism of the white liberal subject and the assumed cultural neutrality of somatics.

I argue that brooks' disorientations, often practiced within a racially heterogeneous group of dancers, proffer "experiential critiques" of anti-Black orientations, both unmasking them and giving participants an experience of alternatives. They furthermore complicate discourses concerning the kinds of redress required to repair the physical, spiritual, and social ruptures caused by racial capitalism. I consider how disorientation aligns with brooks' Afropessimist philosophy, which holds that the world that equates Blackness with social death must end. I ask: How can disorientation dismantle the version of reality that denies Black being? I also study how brooks' disorientations, operating in tandem with re-orientation and re-sensitization, have a worldmaking capacity. They attune participants to what Ashon Crawley could call "otherwise possibilities"—alternative ways of attuning and attending to each other. Following the arc of brooks' IWB practices, I conclude by examining how disorientation prepares participants to perform "witnessing," a counter-choreography of attention that assembles and distributes communal care as a culminating improvisation. I explore potential connections between the attentional resources that witnessing convenes and broader discourses around reparations to suggest, along with brooks, that witnessing might offer a complementary form of redress.

Chapter 3, "Pluralizing Attention: Practicing Polyattentiveness in Parcon Resilience/Moving Rasa," explores Andrew Suseno's system of creating multi-person, weight-

sharing dances with urban terrain and objects. I consider how the practical demands of Parcon Resilience/Moving Rasa necessitate a special type of attention I call “polyattentiveness.” This is a term I use to describe a way of being receptive and responsive to several types of multisensory phenomena simultaneously. While polyattentiveness might emerge organically in response to the form’s physical proposals, I foreground how facilitators teach polyattentiveness as one of the technical foundations of the practice by encouraging participants to gradually accrue attentional layers. I argue that, in addition to expanding movement possibilities, polyattentiveness gives rise to novel relational possibilities that move against the grain of colonial epistemologies predicated on the separation of phenomena into discrete categories.

Instead, Parcon Resilience/Moving Rasa hypothesizes that practitioners might learn to be receptive and responsive to a wider array of phenomena that includes an awareness of how social, cultural, and ideological forces shape one’s agency in a given space. By rejecting the principal of exclusion that characterizes dominant attentive techniques, Parcon instantiates radical inclusion not only at the level of demographics, but in terms of what is considered “relevant” within dancers’ awareness. This premise—that dancers might entrain a simultaneous sensitivity to weight, momentum, surface, objects, and impacts, while also tracking needs, histories, and desires—supports collaborations across various intersections of difference. In doing so, it highlights the entanglement of contexts rather than seeking to find a common ground or shared perspective as the basis for relationship.

Drawing on decolonial theory and critical disability theory, I explore how Parcon expands definitions of access, ability, and agency beyond the narrow parameters of the Western individual subject. In doing so, it generates novel possibilities for supporting others across imposed separations of race, ability, gender, culture, and age. Polyattention—the capacity to



track and respond to phenomena that have been defined as unrelated within dominant regimes of attention—is central to these efforts.

Chapter 4, “More-Than-Humanizing Attention: Collaborative Subversions of Anthropocentrism in iLANDing Laboratories,” explores how the sensory and corporeal habits of dominant attention bolster an anthropocentric mode of relating to one’s environment and argues that the practice of choreographic scoring might enable a departure from anthropocentric perspectives. I begin by mapping out how core practices of dominant attention reproduce anthropocentric ideologies and actions. Expanding upon my analysis of attention as a bodily technique, I describe how normative attention entails physical and perceptual practices that assist in constructing “the human” (as formulated by Western liberal philosophy) as the key arbiter of value within multispecies ecosystems. These attentive practices have negative material consequences for the multispecies ecologies in which humans participate.

Next, I detail how the “iLANDing” method uses the dancing body as a “particularly calibrated tool” for researching urban ecologies. Choreographic scoring, a cornerstone of the iLANDing method, presents generative ways to restructure what and how phenomena become valuable to human collaborators in the perceivable environment. Scores enable iLANDing collaborators to engage their surroundings from alternative prepositions, approaching the more-than-human from the perspective of being “in,” “among,” and “with,” rather than in a dominating position of being “on.” This encourages them to become more sensitive to phenomena and modes of sensing that are often deemed unimportant within anthropocentric frameworks. In other scores, collaborators use biomimicry, the practice of copying the sensory and navigational practices of more-than-human beings, as a method of ethical “perspective taking” that affords a glimpse into what other species need to thrive. Over the past two decades,

iLANDing projects have proliferated scores as models for valuing aspects of local ecologies. In their aggregate, these scores advocate for what I call “reflexive anthropocentrism,” a mode of awareness that accounts for the impact that humans have on more-than-human others in a shared environment.

Ultimately, I advocate for an understanding of perspective as an ongoing practice rather than a stable vantage. I investigate some of the physical repertoires by which perspectives become increasingly fixed, making it difficult to identify the assumptions they embed and the politics they express. Engaging perspective as a practice calls into question inherited biases and facilitates more skillful collaboration across numerous kinds of differences—both material and socially constructed. This is not metaphorical; as I have attempted to make explicit, working with attention as a practice supports the sharing of conversations, weight, space, power, and care. According to Paloma McGregor, one of the artists who contributed to this study, performance gives us occasions to practice the skills necessary for building communal relations when the stakes are not so high (McGregor 2022). While none of the projects in this study attempt to enact policy change, they bring about important political interventions by reconfiguring the sensory regimes and guiding logics by which we “matter” to each other. That is, they ask us to use different senses and modes of extending towards each other. They compel us into alternative postures. They ask us to lose those ways of wayfinding that turn us away from each other. They heighten our sensitivity to sensations, angles, and entities that we may have previously ignored.

Throughout this process, perception, movement, and value are in dialogue in ways that prove that they are fundamentally intertwined. Through the examples I discuss, it becomes clear that attention, which is understood in mainstream definitions as “the act or state of applying the mind to something” or a “selective narrowing of consciousness and receptivity” (Merriam-

Webster 2023), is not an abstract capacity to focus the mind. Instead, attention is environmentally responsive, socially constructed, intersubjective, and historically specific. In what follows, I will lay out a genealogy of attention that highlights attention's material and choreographic implications through the ways it engenders relations to self, space, and others.

# Chapter 1 | Choreographing Attention: Genealogy of Attention as a Physical Practice

## Introduction

In contemporary English-language usage, “attention” conjures a range of active associations: we pay and owe it; we give and get it; we draw, seek, divert, divide, and grab it. Attention also refers to a specific military posture that precedes a number of different commands to act. Attention conjures associations with specialized knowledge, such as “medical attention.” It can take different forms: wanted and unwanted; focused and diffuse. Contemporary public discourses reflect anxieties about the impact of digital media on attention, arguing that the “theft” of our attention is eroding our autonomy. Since the 1970s, economists have referred to this period as the “attention economy.” Within this paradigm, attention—defined as the selective cognitive processing of information—becomes a scarce commodity in an information-rich environment.<sup>1</sup> This increase in the amount of information that subjects are expected to make sense of, accompanied by methods of “persuasive design” in modern advertising, pose challenges to our attentive sovereignty—our ability to control the direction and temporality of our own focus. Former Google advertising strategist James Williams has gone as far as to say that the tech industry is imprisoning contemporary subjects in “attentional serfdom,” distracting us from pursuing our own goals (2018). Similarly, The Silicon Valley based Center for Humane Technology has suggested that we are in the midst of a “digital attention crisis” that is changing the ways we think, act, and relate to others, engineering the “cultural equivalent of climate change” (Harris and Raskin 2019).

The relationship between attention and behavior has emerged as a matter of intense concern in the past several decades. However, in this chapter, I will demonstrate how attention and action have been mutually intertwined for many centuries, dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century

emergence of the verb “to attend” in the English language. Weaving together choreographic analysis with Foucauldian genealogy, I track how understandings of attention and the practices associated with them have varied over time. This approach is informed with other studies of concepts such as civilization, spontaneity, happiness, and kinesthesia, undertaken by Norbert Elias (1939), Daniel Belgrad (1998), Sara Ahmed (2010), and Susan Leigh Foster (2011), respectively. My interest is not in creating an authoritative definition of attention, as a “matter of fact,” but instead in tracking how attention has surfaced as a “matter of concern” across various historical eras (Latour 2004). A genealogical approach uses archival data to uncover the written and unwritten rules that determine what can be thought in a given location and historical period. I apply this to my study of attention by considering the parameters that shape what can be noticed in each era or “attentional episteme.” To carry out a choreographic genealogy, I use etiquette manuals, dance handbooks, scientific studies, pedagogical materials, advertisements, and military field guides to uncover associations between shifting conceptualizations of attention and the specific bodily positions, postures, spatial arrangements, and rhythms that they require. Throughout my analysis, I look for what I call dominant techniques and choreographies of attention, often compelled by institutions, economies, or other governing bodies. I reconstruct the practices alluded to within these texts and compare and contrast them with previous and future iterations, linking them to broader social and cultural shifts taking place.

Notably, genealogies do not attempt to provide an exhaustive or objective account of history, but rather concentrate on differences between epistemes. Using Susan Leigh Foster’s genealogy of kinesthesia as a model, I look for what she terms “a density or concentration of usage” (2011, 33-34) that indicate that attention is being redefined or repurposed. I trace how normative choreographies of attention take shape alongside broader political, social,

technological, economic, and cultural transformations, often enforced with greater zeal during periods in which these contexts are in flux. Some of my guiding questions include: What types of physical skills make a given technique of attention possible? Conversely, how does a technique of attention interact with broader choreographies of attention that inform how subjects notice and respond to each other? Who benefits from a given attentive paradigm and how? What are the stakes of flouting the prevailing directives, and how does one's position in a matrix of power raise or lower those stakes? This approach lends itself to denaturalizing concepts like attention, which are often referred to in natural or universal terms. A genealogy reveals the contingency of things that are often taken for granted. In doing so, genealogies uncouple knowledge from objectivity and instead look at the conditions of possibility that allow a particular mode of understanding to take hold. The physical actions that accompany attention, that is, the precise ways of using one's body and senses to engage with the world, are a frequently unconsidered condition of possibility that undergird each episteme. These physical actions are key to understanding how attention has been developed as a form of labor, an abstract concept, a corporeal technique, and an economic commodity.

Foucault's genealogical examples demonstrate an interest in "histories of the body," or rather, histories of the ways in which bodies are constructed discursively and through disciplinary techniques (1995). I complicate Foucault's approach in several ways: First, engaging attention as my object of analysis targets a phenomenon that is neither wholly of the mind or the body but occupies an in-between space that renders the binary unstable. Second, regarding attention through the lens of choreography recognizes that social inscription is not a one-way process, nor is it always a process of docilization. As I will show, the dominant attentive techniques often require considerable effort on the part of the performer. Furthermore, attention

is often performed incompletely due to the fact that attention is shaped by both internal and external forces in ways that are often unstable and unpredictable. By mobilizing one of the main analytical tools from critical dance studies, I investigate links between attention and action in more granular detail. This enables an appreciation of how each historical iteration of attention instantiates its own choreographic structure. Each references different relationships to space, time, and others; requires unique postures and coordinations; and proposes configurations of presence, impulse, and control.

By reconstructing different choreographies of attention based on archival sources, I hope to break apart monolithic attention and reframe it as a platform upon which struggles over value are being waged. This contextualizes attention's ascendance as a commodity within the "attention economy" while demonstrating how attention has long been treated as a valuable resource due to its capacity to shape, direct, and extend bodily forces. For centuries, attention has been wielded as a means to enforce political, social, and economic hegemonies. Taking a longer historical view makes evident the gendered, classed, ableist, and racialized dimensions of hegemonic choreographies of attention, and their role in fixing some individuals at the social and economic margins while opening up pathways to mobility and enrichment to others. Meanwhile, as efforts to impose dominant techniques of attention have increased, attention has also accrued importance as a means of resisting those hegemonies while insisting on alternative ways of being, knowing, and acting in the world. I offer this genealogy to set the stage for brooks, Suseno, and iLAND's experimental attentions, which also employ choreographic methods to uncover the false universality of what is merely a dominant technique of attention. By activating alternative attentions, they cultivate ways of being, knowing, and doing that are repressed within

dominant paradigms. In doing so, they gesture to the numerous forms of value attention might produce in excess of dominant regimes.

The etymology of “attention” contains clues as to its choreographic character. By studying the meanings of attention’s root words, we can observe that attention is an action that transpires in relationship to space, time, and others, and recruits varying amounts of muscular tone. Attention builds upon the Old French *attencioun*, emerging in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century as “a giving heed, active direction of the mind upon some object or topic.” However, underneath that turning of the mind are the Latin components of *ad-* (to, near, at) and *tendere* (to stretch). Hypothetically, *tendere* also has Proto-Indo-European roots in the component of *ten-*, which associates it with tension, duration, and possession. “Attention” was rare in English before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when it took on the meaning of “consideration and observant care,” but also “civility” and “courtesy.” In 1792, attention also signified a highly codified military posture that preceded commands for changes in bodily position and action. It retained associations with whole-bodied actions until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it took on a cognitive slant as “the power of mental concentration” (Harper n.d.).

From this etymology, we can observe that attention has spatiality. It implies an action of extending toward something or someone. In a state of attention, ears “perk” or stretch toward the direction of a sound. Other verbs like “glue” or “cast” or “train” imply similar actions of sending one’s senses in the direction of an object of interest. The towardness implied by attention is physical, perceptual, and cognitive all at once. Attention also has temporality. Unlike noticing, which happens instantaneously and often incidentally, to practice attention is to stay “stretching toward” that which is being attended for a period of time. Attention implies waiting, whether waiting-for or waiting-on. One must maintain the posture of “stretching toward” until one



receives an answer, a command, or a response. The third choreographic aspect of attention is its configuration of tension and tonality. Attention is characterized by tautness, related to its roots in extension. In the example of listening, the idiom “bending one’s ear” (talking too long) implies that the tautness of attending has lasted so long that it warps the listening apparatus. There are many other English-language activities that refer to stretched bodily actions that are performed in order to pay (or feign) attention: craning one’s neck, straining one’s eyes, and even stretching one’s skin (goose bumps). This choreographic analysis of attention exposes one of the most important aspects of attention that is left out of scientific and economic discourses. Through its stretched extensions toward people, ideas, and objects, attention is a powerfully relational activity. An extension always entails at least two points that produce the stretching sensation in between. Moving towards some phenomena also produces movements away from others. This will be important in my analysis because it indicates that attention, unlike perception or sensation, creates relationships between two or more entities.

While extension, tautness, towardness, and duration are apparent in most iterations of attention, the ways in which these qualities are organized varies significantly over time. In order to better apprehend these transformations, I propose the following metrics as aspects of attention we might look for in each historical construction:

1. **Meaning:** How is “attention” being defined and used?
2. **Presence:** Does the attending subject have to share physical space with the object?
3. **Actions:** What classes of activity are associated with attention? How are impulse and response coordinated?
4. **Control:** What kinds of authorities or forces command attention, and how?
5. **Senses:** Which senses are linked with attention?

6. **Posture:** What is the assumed posture of the attending body?
7. **Time:** How long do states of attention last? What rhythms inform them?
8. **Space:** How is the attending body moving (or not moving) in space?
9. **Direction:** Toward what does attention extend? What does it leave behind?

Through these metrics, I narrate attention's progression: from a feudal practice of "attending," to a form of labor in medieval court society; to a discipline required of the rational subject in the colonial era; to a technique integrated within industrial labor; and finally, to a currency and commodity in consumer capitalism. Throughout this evolutionary process, attention has, for the most part, become progressively more codified as a corporeal discipline, even as definitions increasingly ignore the centrality of bodies and their movements. While feudal attentions tended to be improvisational and environmentally situated, later iterations become progressively narrower, using physical techniques as a means of delimiting parameters for the attending subject's field of possible thoughts, sensations, and actions. Specifically, they compel the attending subject to exercise corporeal restraint, prioritize the visual sense, maintain an upright posture and an "objective" distance from the object, and to block out an increasingly wide array of phenomena classified as "irrelevant."

As I hope will become clear, a choreographic genealogy of attention reveals how the practices associated with attention overlap significantly with historical constructions of the ideal subject within dominant society in the West. This entails a consideration of how attention has played a role in bolstering Eurocentric, patriarchal, ableist, and capitalist value systems. Attention is a behavioral requirement of the subject who participates civilly (medieval), knows rationally (colonial), behaves normally, works efficiently (industrial), and generates the greatest return on their investments (consumer). Conversely, attention, which is associated with courtesy,

care, agency, and knowledge, is also used to designate some behaviors and kinds of people and beings as less civilized, less trustworthy, less able, and less deserving of care.

<b>Transformations in the Practice of Attention</b>					
	<b>Feudal</b>	<b>Courtly</b>	<b>Colonial</b>	<b>Industrial</b>	<b>Consumer</b>
<b>Physical presence</b>	X	X-	O	O	O
<b>Readiness to act</b>	X	X	X <sup>t</sup>	X <sup>t</sup>	X <sup>t</sup>
<b>Corporeal restraint</b>	O	X	X	X	X <sup>t</sup>
<b>Visual dominance</b>	O	O	X	X	X <sup>t</sup>
<b>Upright posture</b>	O	O	X	X	O
<b>Distance from object</b>	O	O	X	X <sup>t</sup>	X <sup>t</sup>
<b>Blocking out</b>	O	X	X	X	X <sup>t</sup>
<p>KEY:</p> <p>X = the aspect is prominent</p> <p>X<sup>t</sup> = the aspect is still prominent, but has transformed</p> <p>O = the aspect is not prominent.</p>					

Figure 2 - Table. Transformations in the Practice of Attention

## Civilizing Attention

The noun “attention” entered the English language in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, although it was rarely used as such (Harper, n.d.). Instead, people “attended” as a verb. In this section, I explore how the feudal system and, later, the centralized court cultivated particular modes of attending as a precursor to what would later be termed “attention.” That is, each sociopolitical configuration asked for particular ways of extending the senses, directing bodily energies, dealing with how one was perceived by others. Contrasting with biological and economic descriptions of attention culturally neutral and primarily cognitive terms, I want to highlight how attention is historically and culturally constituted and was bound up with questions of power and labor in medieval Europe.

Prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, attending was something to be done—an action that entailed a durational stretching of one’s senses, mind, or energies toward something or someone. It also required a readiness to respond to the object of attention. In its early uses, “attending” aligned closely with “attempting” or “applying oneself.” Thus, attending always connoted synchronous physical presence to the person or entity being attended to. In this way, attending combined actions of both perception and action—an attending person was not a still-bodied spectator, but a person physically invested in and able to respond to the entity to which they attended. It implied a durational quality of extended attunement to something or someone. This durable consideration often implied a sense of watchful care, such as from a herder to livestock, from God to humans, or from servant to master.<sup>14</sup> In addition to physical presence and inclination towards others, attention required the availability to wait. In Shakespeare’s *Edward III*, King Edward plays on

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<sup>14</sup> For example: (A) “Gode **atende** to my socour” (Shoreham 1320); (B) “It wol thyne oxen mende...yf thai the fyre **attende**” (Henley [1420] 1890); and (C) “And at the threshold of her chaumber dore, The Carthage Lords did on the Quene **attend**” (Virgil, 1557).

these multiple meanings of the verb “attend”: “Countess, albeit my business urgeth me / It shall *attend* while I *attend* on thee” (1595, E3.I.ii.164). King Edward’s urgent business attends (waits), while he attends (waits on, cares for) the countess. Unlike later iterations of attention, medieval attention consisted of a type of expectant listening that did not subscribe to sensory divisions, but instead drafted the attender’s holistic perceptual, cognitive, and kinetic engagement.

In the feudal estate, attention was organized according to the same simplified hierarchies that governed the apportionment of land and power. Lords, acting in service to a monarch, oversaw the protection and cultivation (“tending”) of lands. This was made possible by the labor of servants from the peasant class. Female domestic servants might be tending fires, emptying chamber pots, and nursing and raising children. Male servants might be tending to wardrobe and horses or guarding the castle perimeter.<sup>15</sup> We can imagine them casting focus outward, gazing at the horizon from turrets and arrow slits, guarding antechambers and other protected spaces, and generally keeping vigilance over the manor and surrounding lands. Higher ranked administrative workers such as seneschals and marshals tended to the administrative and economic functioning of the estate (Henley [1420] 1890). Peasants living outside the manor had their own tending to do, caring for livestock and crops that would be taxed in exchange for the use of the Lord’s land.

Actions of attending during this period would have been whole-bodied, multisensory, responsive, and externally oriented. In order to “attend,” one would be using multiple senses—smelling and tasting food while preparing it, reaching into soil to feel its temperature and dampness, gazing outward along the horizon, pouring over ledgers, listening for summoning bells and instructions. Attending would have been inseparable from action, prioritizing the

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<sup>15</sup> For more information on the structure of medieval households and the roles of servants, see *The Medieval Household in Christian Europe c.850-c.1550* (Beattie et al. 2004), and “We are all servants”: the diversity of service in premodern Europe (1000-1700)” (Cochelin and Wolfthal 2022).

maintenance and defense of various resources. The attender's focus would have been largely external, directed towards crops, livestock, changes in weather, orders, and impending threats. This external focus is evident in the architectural features of feudal castles. Curtain walls, moats, and ditches, the architecture of feudal castles. Details such as arrow slits, parapets, and crennets (wall gaps) enabled conscripted soldiers and sentries to survey the surrounding land from elevated, yet occluded perspectives. These aspects suggest the importance of being able to look outward without being seen, while also preparing defensive actions. Working in an era in which social status was conceived of as divinely ordered and social mobility was relatively rare, estate dwellers would have been less concerned with how they appeared to others. While the attentive priorities of subjects would have differed according to their rank and role in feudal society, the whole-bodied, multisensory, responsive, and externally directed actions of attending would have been necessary across a range of roles.

During late Middle Ages, the attentive requirements for the upper classes underwent significant transformation in tandem with the consolidation of feudal states into monarchies. As sociologist Norbert Elias has discussed in his influential book, *The Civilizing Process* ([1939] 2000), the absolutist court consolidated feudal estates into a centralized monarchy, resulting in a larger and more culturally heterogeneous population of court dwellers. Through his analysis of codes of etiquette in both the feudal and absolutist eras, Elias explains how conventions of courtly etiquette became more complex, departing from the simple and regionally defined protocols of the feudal manor. Codes of *civilité*, or “civilized behavior” reflect a new emphasis on self-regulation through specific behavioral protocols.

While manuals of the era often linked dignified behavior to moral virtue, it served several pragmatic purposes. Codes of *civilité* were designed to aid courtiers in the project of social

mobility in an increasingly stratified social hierarchy. These stratifications introduced the possibility (or at least the perceived possibility) of moving between ranks.<sup>16</sup> Whereas, in the feudal era, power was justified through bloodline and divine ordinance, in the absolutist era, social status became more malleable and attributable to “grace” (Mitchell 2007, iv). Codes of conduct reflected the idea that nobility was a way of acting that might be cultivated through attentiveness to one’s own behavior and the behaviors of others. Furthermore, under feudalism, nobility might have resolved their differences through duels and other forms of spontaneous and violent arbitration, in absolute monarchies, sovereign rulers claimed what Max Weber has referred to as a “monopoly on violence” ([1968] 1978). In Elias’s argument, this change in governance obliged court dwellers to modify their behavior and customs in order to reduce conflict. Elias points out that court attendants, no longer able to resolve their own disputes through violent means, were compelled to curb displays of emotion, passion, and affect, and endeavor not to “shock” others ([1939] 2000, 69).

The social transformations wrought by the consolidation of absolute monarchies precipitated a new form of attention epitomized in the role of the court “attendant.” Departing from externally oriented, kinetic, and responsive modes of attending of the feudal era, court attendants had to develop a heightened awareness of their own appearance, speech, and movement in a society in which there were different expectations for courtiers depending on rank, gender, age, and location. While the lower classes and those living in more rural settings

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<sup>16</sup> Shannon Claire Mitchell has proposed that, even if mobility was rare, it served as a motivation for good behavior, and was framed as such in etiquette manuals: “English translations of earlier French texts show a new English concept of nobility as something that can be acquired through noble words and thoughts, rather than a purely inherited rank that is demonstrated through physical conduct” (2007, iv). French and English conduct manuals were attempts to control social disorder, French writers did so by discouraging all but the most limited advancement, and English writers did so by implying that great advancement was possible if readers would only follow their rules.

would still have exercised previous forms of attending, members of the nobility, and especially those compelled to join the court as “attendants,” were required to develop what Elias terms a new “manner of seeing” ([1939] 2000, 67). This entailed surveilling the behavior of others, while cultivating graceful nonchalance. Whereas feudal attentions were largely spontaneous, courtly attention required that one observe actions in the present with an eye toward the future, charting a course through a crowded room, saving information for later use. Finally, while codes of *civilité* were primarily directed towards the nobility, the invention of the printing press and the expansion of non-noble literate classes facilitated the dissemination of this new mode of attention beyond court spaces. This decreased the importance of physical presence in the practice of attending, enabling those who would attempt to cultivate it to do so at a distance from the circumstances in which it was necessary.

Reconstructing attention from the role of the court attendant yields a practice that still hinges on acts of service to someone of a higher rank. Court attendants, usually members of the nobility or monarch’s family, were required to provide company and assistance to those they attended. Ladies-in-waiting in particular were responsible for a variety of tasks, including overseeing the Queen’s wardrobe, helping to host banquets, educate royal children, and accompany the Queen in her daily activities (Akkerman and Houben 2013). In a description of Anne Boleyn’s retinue in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, Elizabeth Benger describes the duties of a female attendant:

The Queene under her canopy came into the hall, and washed, and satte down in the midst of her table, under her cloth of estate: on the right side of her chaire stood the Countess of Oxford, widow, and on her left hand stood the Countesse of Worcester, all the dinner season, which divers times in the dinner time did hold a fine cloth before the Queen’s face, when she list to spit, or do otherwise at her pleasure... (1827, 336)



The above depiction of the lady-in-waiting holding a cloth for her Queen to spit into references multiple choreographic aspects of attention: physical presence, extension towards, durational waiting, and readiness to act on command. Like servants in the feudal eras, court attendants might be asked to be eyes and ears, or to act as sensory “extensions” for their superiors. In the account of Duke Saint-Simone, Louis XIV relied on a network of attendants who kept watch over public and private spaces:

These attendants had orders to stroll morning, noon, and night, along the corridors, the passages, the staircases, even into the private place, and when it was fine, in the court-yards and gardens; and in secret to watch people, to follow them, to notice where they went, to notice who was there, to listen to all the conversation they could hear, and to make reports of their discoveries. (Saint-Simone, n.d.)

By commanding his attendants to notice and report on actions in the castle, Louis XIV extended his individual powers of observation through a form of surveillance that relied on the attentive labor of subordinate bodies. This trend repeated and evolved in subsequent historical periods, broadening the power of leaders of various political systems by expanding their attentive reach. At the same time, information became a kind of currency in the courts that could be collected and spent by people of lesser rank. Historian Nadine Akkerman describes how court attendants—particularly ladies-in-waiting—exercised political power through keen observations, which they shared strategically. A lady-in-waiting might use her courtly observations to procure a favorable marriage, a promotion, or other desired outcome by listening in on conversations, relaying information, and bending the ears of influential people in the private spaces to which she had access (Akkerman 2013, 2018).

Through the above descriptions, we can see how court attendants carried forward the choreographic aspects of attention from the previous era: physical presence, extension towards, a temporality of waiting, and readiness to respond. In addition, courtly attention also contained

multiple novel modes of awareness. Chief among these was a concern for how one appeared, sounded, or even smelled to others. Baldessar Castiglione's 1528 tome, *The Book of the Courtier*, affords a glimpse of the kinds of self and social awareness that would have been required of male and female nobles.<sup>17</sup> Castiglione instructed the courtier "to be handsome and cleanly in his appaile" while tailoring his choice of garments "after the facion of the most." He should avoid being "overseene in speaking words otherwhile that may offende," or being "a babbler, brauler, or chatter, nor lavish of his tunge" (15).

A shared nuance within these instructions is that they do not prohibit the behaviors themselves, but rather, the observation of those behaviors by others. Furthermore, in a heterogeneous social space, it was important to know who those others were. In order to fulfill codes of *civilité*, one had to control one's public appearances, while also accounting for the complexities of rank, role, age, and gender of the others present and modifying one's behavior accordingly. For example, Castiglione exhorts the courtier to "consyder well what it is that he doeth or speaketh, where in presence of *whom, what time, why, his age, his profession*, the ende, and the meanes" (17). Likewise, women were advised "to have a sweetenesse in language and a good uttrance to entertein all kinde of men with communication woorth the hearing, honest, *applied to time and place and to the degree and dispostion of the person which is her principall profession*" (18) and "to use a somewhat more famylyar conversation wyth men well growen in yeeres, then with yonge men" (19). Thus, in order to be able to modify one's behavior

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<sup>17</sup> *The Book of the Courtier* was written in 1528 by Baldessar Castiglione, an Italian courtier and Renaissance author, who served as ambassador of the Holy See to Spain (1524-1529). His tenure in the Spanish courts served as the inspiration for the book, which was translated to English in 1561 and was influential among the English elites. I rely on Castiglione for my reading of late medieval etiquette because it is comprehensive, provides insights into gendered differences, and was widely read in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Through its patterns of circulation, it also reflects a cosmopolitan view of etiquette, encompassing customs from multiple countries.

appropriately, one had to be well-informed. In addition to being able to converse in Italian, French, and Spanish (and being able to play well on the lute and violin), a successful courtier also took note of abilities of others and used this information to decide how he would act towards them. Castiglione cautions noblemen “Not to renn, wrastle, leape, nor cast the stone or barr with men of the Countrey, except he be sure to gete the victorie” (16). In other words, if you are going to spar with a commoner, make sure you will win.

While social observation was essential to civilized behavior, it also created vulnerability. As Elias points out, when monarchies consolidated monopolies on violence, information (in the form of scandal and intrigue) took on new importance as a political tool ([1939] 2000, 398).<sup>18</sup> Courtiers, then, had to curb outward displays of emotion and avoid unflattering movements in order to avoid shocking others, but also to curb gossip that could affect their good standing. Critical dance studies scholar Mark Franko describes how the European nobility developed *homo clausus*, or “closed personality,” internalizing external constraints and becoming “civilized” by “relinquishing the empire of his drives over his actions” (Franko 2015, 10). This is evident in Castiglione’s directives “To shon Affectation or curiosity above al thing in al things” (1528, 14) and to make sure “never to be sad, melancho[l]ie or solemn beefore hys Prince.” (17). Courtiers should take the utmost pains to cultivate a positive social image, while hiding it all under the gloss of what Castiglione called *sprezzatura*, or “nonchalance,” concealing the effort behind the artifice. He suggests the courtier should “*do his feates with a slight*, as though they were rather naturally in him” (14). Likewise, the gentlewoman should “sett out her beawtye and disposition

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<sup>18</sup> “The pressure of court life, the vying for the favour of the prince or the “great”; then, more generally the necessity to distinguish oneself from others and to fight for opportunities with relatively peaceful means, through intrigue and diplomacy, enforced a constraint on the affects, a self-discipline and self-control, a particular courtly rationality...” (Elias [1939] 2000, 190).

of person with meete garmentes that shall best beecome her, but as feininglye as she can, makynge semblant to *bestowe no labour* about it, nor yet to minde it” (19).

Courtly attention also required the concealment of effort. Castiglione describes correct and incorrect attentions, advising the nobility not to care about tales and “trifling newis” (15), and, particularly for women, not to let one’s gaze wander or appear “wanton.” Instead, they should maintain a downward cast of the eyes, projecting docility and submissiveness. At the same time, historical research has explained how watching and listening were essential to the political functioning of the courts, both in terms of espionage, as well as in the realm of pursuing individual social advancement (Akkerman and Houben 2013). In addition to being beautiful and graceful without trying, one should see without watching, and hear without listening. Thus, the downward cast of the lady-in-waiting’s gaze was not the absence of seeing, but a way to steer attention away from the wrong people and things. Nevertheless, we should assume that the lady-in-waiting was using peripheral vision and other senses to keep apprised of the people and events taking place in the room.

Dancing created an opportunity to practice the attentions required of court attendants. In Franko’s description of medieval geometrical dance, he describes how one would have to notice one’s spatial location in relationship to others and assimilate into a group (2015, 30). The Basse Dance, a popular social in Western European medieval courts, consisted of a processional that reflected social hierarchies, with the order and precedence of the dance corresponding to the ranks of the performers (Rust 1969, 36). Observing and performing these dances would have provided opportunities to study the social rank and behavior of others in the court without being obvious about it. In addition, their movements, which progress slowly and eschew rapid turns and intricate steps, cultivated the erect posture and bodily composure that was thought to prove

one's noble virtue. These ways of organizing one's body and perception are reflected in Thoinot Arbeau's widely influential dancing manual, "Orchesographie" (1588):

A nobleman can dance the Pavane with cape and sword, and you others dressed in your long gowns, walking decorously with a studied gravity, and the damsel with chaste demeanour and eyes cast down, sometimes glancing at the onlookers with virginal modesty. And as for the Pavane, it is used by Kings, Princes and great lords, to display themselves on some day of solemn festival with their fine mantles and their robes of ceremony: and then the queens and the princesses and the great ladies accompany them with the long trains of their dresses let down trailing behind them... (Arbeau [1588] 1925, 57-58)

In Arbeau's description, dancing provides an occasion for practicing the gendered and classed movement protocols required of the noble classes. The downward cast of the eyes, the rich attire, the decorous walk, and the intricate spatial awareness are aspects of attending that can be fostered through the practice of dancing the right dances. Despite the appropriateness of the Basse Dance and the Pavane, Castiglione advised that ladies still their enthusiasm for the activity. Reiterating the importance of corporeal and emotional restraint, Castiglione cautions noble ladies to not only avoid jumping or moving too swiftly while dancing, but to appear to need coaxing, "to come to daunce, or to shoue her musicke with suffringe her self to be first prayed somewhat and drawn to it." ([1528] 1997, 19).

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, printed manuals facilitated the circulation of courtly comportment and the modes of attention associated with them beyond castle spaces and into the domain of bourgeois society. Courtly attention, which paired intense observational activity with corporeal and emotional restraint, offered a blueprint for attentive training that would become essential to the good bourgeois subject. As Michel Foucault has illustrated, Western European economic, territorial, and population expansion in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries exceeded the control of monarchical systems. This gave rise to parliamentary regimes, new forms of administrative governance presided over by the bourgeoisie (1995). In this new configuration and exercise of

power, discipline replaced punishment as a strategy for social control. The next section will explore how attention became “disciplined.” Yoked to the rational thought of the free white subject during the “Age of Enlightenment,” it would also be instrumental to the subjugation of Western European Man’s numerous others in an era marked by colonial and racial domination.

## **Disciplining Attention**

After passing through different iterations as a noun and professional role, attention finally emerged in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe as a stand-alone concept—a noun that objectified a way of engaging conceptually, sensorially, and corporeally with the world. Enlightenment philosophers created a role for attention as a mediator between the separate spheres of body and mind. Dominant techniques of attention during this period were intimately linked to the comportment of the Western liberal “human.” These techniques of attention extended the attentive practices of the courtier but further narrowed its perceptual field through bodily stillness and selective engagement with sensory stimuli. Attention— both a “technique of the self” for the bourgeois Enlightenment thinker and a disciplinary technique imposed on lower classes in the military—trained verticality, visual dominance, and physical distance as characteristics that associated with the free, individual, rational subject. Whereas attending previously described a bodily practice of extending-toward, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century attentions centered on an action of turning-away. Extending the body along the vertical axis turned the Enlightenment subject away from bodily and environmental contexts. This helped align “humanness” with the European, white, male, and bourgeois subject, while suppressing knowledge that emanated from other sources and practices. In what follows, I hypothesize that attention is further codified as a means of asserting one perspective over others in response to the

cultural collisions catalyzed by European colonization. It has both epistemological and material implications as it set parameters for thought while also facilitating military coordinations.

Enlightenment philosophy, which proposed a dualistic understanding of mind and body as fundamentally distinct, found a new use for attention as an intermediary between the two. For Enlightenment philosophers, the mind was the captain of the body's ship, the seat of awareness, and the site of intelligence and knowledge. In this framework, the universe was composed of two different kinds of substances: the thinking (mind/soul) and the unthinking (body/matter) (Wright and Potter 2000, 3). This bifurcation posed a problem. Within a rationalist framework, deductive reasoning (thought that did not rely on sensory experience) was celebrated as the gateway to "truth." However, the senses were crucial to the cultivation of empirical knowledge about the world. Attention, which entered the English language as a noun in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, intervened as a mental process by which inchoate sensation might be put to order.

Enlightenment philosophers endeavored to define attention in increasingly specific terms. In 1674, philosopher Nicolas Malebranche described attention as a mental activity that organized one's ordinarily "confused and imperfect" perceptions of things.<sup>19</sup> In 1690, John Locke advanced the definition that, "When the Ideas that offer themselves, . . . are taken notice of, and, as it were, registred (*sic*) in the Memory, it is *Attention*" (II. XIX. 111). Similarly, Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Henry Home Kames wrote in 1762: "*Attention* is that state of mind which prepares a man to receive impressions" (18). These new definitions of attention described a conscious

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<sup>19</sup> From Nicolas Malebranche's, "The Search After Truth" (1674): "It is therefore necessary to look for means to keep our perceptions from being confused and imperfect. And, because, as everyone knows, there is nothing that makes them clearer and more distinct than attentiveness, we must try to find the means to become more attentive than we are" (411-12).

process of selection, without which perceptions and sensations lacked meaning and were considered to impede rational thought.

Enlightenment/colonial attention, fulfilled through upright posture, selective engagement with the senses, and actions of turning away from others and objects, physicalized an exclusive conception of “the human” that installed white, male, bourgeois subjects as the standard. This technique of attention literally lifted the body out of geographic context, inhibited leanings toward others, and repressed information that emanated from nonvisual senses. Critiques of Enlightenment philosophy, particularly within critical race, queer, feminist, and decolonial theory, have pointed out how Enlightenment philosophy’s aversion to bodily and spatial context is interwoven with processes of social stratification. This denaturing of the Enlightenment subject from their context was not purely philosophical, but rather, was imbricated with colonial and racializing projects (Ahmed 2006; Cavarero 2016; Crawley 2016; McKittrick 2015; Wynter 1995a). As Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter have argued, the invention of Western liberal notions of “the human,” created through a turning away from context, cannot be thought without accounting for the ways in which European arrival in the “New World” ruptured Europeans’ existing ways of understanding self, other, and space (Wynter 1995b). “Humanness,” writes McKittrick, “was thrown into crisis by the seeable, ungodly, indigenous peoples and their lands” (2006, 124). In response to the discovery that there are multiple modes of being human, European philosophy created one “human” to preside over others, aided by a system of classificatory categories, which identified subtypes of human otherness, including race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability” (130). Theorists of decolonial pluriversality have further argued that colonial encounters would have brought different modes of perceiving into friction with each other (Vazquez and Mignolo 2003; Firmino-Castillo 2018). It is no coincidence, then, that



Enlightenment/colonial attention would have invested in a coherent narrowing of focus, delimiting precisely which kinds of postures and senses would be considered to produce attention, and which kinds of subjects would be deserving of heed.

Attention became more prominent as a Foucauldian “technique of the self,” which “permit[s] individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves” (1997, 225). Performed through visual dominance, vertical posture, and objective distance, attention was foundational to the rational and bourgeois self, who cultivated his own independence by first asserting authority over his experience. Foucault differentiates techniques of the self from disciplinary techniques by proposing that a technique of the self is a kind of agentive self-fashioning rather than a disciplinary formation. This technique of the self enabled the rational subject to distance himself from numerous others.

During the Enlightenment/colonial period, vision ascended to the top of a hierarchy of newly separated senses. As the emerging field of sensory studies has shown, “sensory relations are social relations (Howes 2003, 55). The senses became imbricated with racialized and gendered sensory hierarchies that structured the selection and appraisal of sensory information. Within Enlightenment frameworks, “higher” senses of vision and hearing were associated with spirituality, transcendence, and intellectualism while the “lower” senses of smell, taste, and touch were tied to the mortal, immanent, and passionate body. In an obsession with classification, sensory hierarchies were assumed to be related to racial, gender, and class hierarchies. These created a socio-sensory framework that associated vision and hearing with whiteness and masculinity while attaching smell, taste, and touch to racialized and gendered others (Howes

2003 and Classen 1997).<sup>20</sup> In addition, in an era in which the senses were considered the gateway to the rational world, those with sensory disabilities such as deafness or blindness were regarded as incapable of rational thought and placed in the racialized category of “savage” (Lindgren 2020).

Vertical posture is a second defining characteristic of the Enlightenment/colonial technique of attention. Even before Darwin theorized the human as *homo erectus*, upright physical posture was invested with moral significance. As critical dance studies scholar Emilyn Claid has argued, conceptualizations of space in Western Europe, have been informed by human motor functions. “Western culture,” she writes, “persists in an endeavor to rise, to resist falling, to strive towards institutional control, upwardly focused verticality, linearity, and steadfast uprightness, pinned up by morality, spirituality, propriety, and virtue. The metaphorical binary from rising to falling infiltrates aesthetics, religion, psychology, economics, and race relations” (2021, 19). Uprightness, and the ability to stand up on one’s own, was the physical manifestation of the Enlightenment ideal of individual freedom through self-determination. By contrast, to incline or be swayed in a particular direction suggested a condition of dependence. In contrast with courtly modes of attention, which extended towards those of higher rank, Enlightenment attention prized verticality as a movement away from monarchic governance and toward more parliamentary and democratic structures. Susan Leigh Foster describes how dance notation in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries reflects this shift in posture from “the gracefully curved *contra posto* aesthetic of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries” to the uprightness of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which was

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<sup>20</sup> In the early 19th century, German natural historian Lorenz Oken would go as far as to create an ascending scale of “sensory perfection” that situated the white, European “eye-man” at the top of the hierarchy, and the Black, African “skin-man” at the bottom. In between were the Australian and Southeast Asian “tongue-man,” the Amerindian “nose-man,” and the Asian “ear-man.” (Oken as cited in Howes 2009, 10-11).

cultivated through exercise (2011, 175). For Enlightenment thinkers, verticality was anything but natural. In fact, Pietro Moscati, an Italian doctor, proposed in 1771 that two-legged posture was “not a gift of the benevolent nature [but] is perhaps something man created himself” (Moscati 1771, as cited in Cavarero 2016, 66). Kant, critiquing and building upon this idea, believed that the “germ of reason” was what had enticed man to occupy a more “suitable position for society [...] the two-footed one” (Cavarero 2016, 27). Thus, this two-legged posture, *essential* to rational thought, raised man over the animal, the body, and over subjects associated with those terms. As an order-imposing device, attention formally adopted this upright posture. Like the senses, conceptualizations of space during this period were also gendered, classed, and racialized (Cavarero 2016; McKittrick 2006; Massey 1994; and Adeyemi 2019). Thus, the attentive requirement of vertical posture, when ideologically yoked with whiteness and maleness, elaborated a physical practice that reinforced the belief that white men were the main sources of thought and agency.

A third important aspect of Enlightenment/colonial choreographies of attention is the requirement of physical distance between the attentive subject and the object of attention. In an era in which the notion of objectivity functioned as a guiding principle for knowledge production, increased physical distance between the two helped to minimize entanglements between observer and observed. For this reason, vision, in addition to being “higher,” was also valued for enabling a greater spatial separation between observer and object. Similarly, the “lower” senses were less valuable in part because they were close to the earth and others. While one might view phenomena from a distance, touch, taste, and smell all require closer contact with the objects being observed. Ashon Crawley has referred to the Enlightenment-era suppression of the proximal senses as an “aversive choreography,” in which the rational subject

pursued knowledge by actively turning away from his bodily, social, and environmental context (2017, 117). Crawley describes Kant’s philosophical *oeuvre* as expressing: “a desire to dance by oneself on the dance floor and to be unbothered by the sweat of another, nor their rhythms, nor smells. And not only dance but to move without such movements sounding out” (113).

Following Crawley, we can imagine how the aversive choreography also describes a technique of attention that hinges on physical, sensory, and cognitive gestures of turning away, removing oneself from, looking down upon, and ignoring how one is implicated in relations with others and objects. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, this dominant choreography of attention is part of a colonial *habitus*<sup>21</sup> that reproduces what Indigenous educational scholar Dwayne Donald has called the colonial “denial of relationships” (2020). Attention helps create physical and conceptual distance, isolating the colonial self from land, body, and relations with others.

Many aspects of attention as a bourgeois “technique of the self” were repackaged as a disciplinary technique that was imposed on the lower classes through military exercise. A 1792 military field guide, titled *Rules and regulations for the formations, field-exercise, and movements of His Majesty’s forces*, lays out “the most essential general *attentions*, required in all movements of the battalion” (Great Britain Adjutant-General’s Office 1792). The first of these attentions is the basic standing position:

Position of the Soldier [without arms]:

The equal squareness of the shoulders and body to the front is the first and great principle of the position of a soldier.—The heels must be in a line, and closed.—The knees straight, without stiffness.—The toes a little turned out, so that the feet may form an angle of about 60 degrees.—Let the arms hang near the body, but not stiff, the flat part of the hand and little finger touching the thigh; the thumbs as far back as the seams of the breaches:—the elbows and shoulders to be kept back;—the belly rather drawn in, and the breast advanced, but without constraint;—the body upright, but inclining forward, so that the weight of it principally bears on the fore part of the feet:—the head to be erect, and neither turned toward the right no left. (4-5)

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<sup>21</sup> I am using Bourdieu’s term *habitus* from *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977).

Military attention exemplifies Crawley's "aversive choreography." It directs the soldier's head and eyes forward towards the somewhat arbitrary "front" (as designated by the commanding officer), and away from phenomena in the soldier's periphery (including fellow soldiers). The soldier is compelled to maintain simultaneous stillness and readiness, responding only to the commander, and not to environmental or circumstantial stimuli. In fact, they must actively inhibit thoughts and reflexes that might intercede in the soldier's ability to respond immediately to the command: waiting to urinate, stifling sneezes, and avoiding scratching itches or adjusting uncomfortable clothing.<sup>22</sup> Like the court attendant, the soldier serves their commander by lending their senses exclusively to the commanding officer. At the same time, there are temporal and structural differences between the two modes of attention. Whereas courtly attention was generally dispatched immediately, the soldier's attention is held in "reserve" for future use, and in much larger quantities. This exemplifies a broader trend that will repeat over time—namely the abstraction of attention from a responsive mode of acting towards others in an emergent situation, to a freestanding concept that is not necessarily dependent on context.

Attention's integration within military procedure extends the idea that attention's role is to impose order on body, mind, and increasingly, nation. As such, attention is a disciplinary technique par excellence. Discipline, which replaced control as a governing strategy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, spatializes, individualizes, and observes an expanding population. Unlike authoritarian control, discipline governs by controlling the development of action, rather than the results

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<sup>22</sup> Today, technical practice of "standing at attention" has been pushed to virtuosic levels of aversion. Soldiers in the United States hold marathon competitions in public spaces in order to raise money for various causes. In England, the Queen's Guard trains its members to bear extreme thresholds of sensation in order to maintain their still posture, ignoring intense heat, digestive imperatives, and even "fainting to attention" when necessary (Fuller 2017 and Coghlan 2011).

(Foucault 1978, 147). It creates techniques by which bodies become docile and cooperative, without the need to exert overt force. Codifying attention in the position of the soldier bears the signs of discipline in that it standardizes and renders visible the labor of attention. The codified posture of attention would have allowed commanders of battalions to see who was and who was not complying with orders. At the same time, Foucault's estimation that discipline supplants terror becomes more complex when one considers the role of military attention within struggles to maintain dominance over colonized people and lands. If, in philosophy and early scientific discourse, attention underwent a narrowing in order to conform to the ideal appearance and comportment of the bourgeois European subject, it was also essential to the organization of military forces within colonial wars on multiple continents, materially enforcing the same domination.

## **Manufacturing Attention**

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the labor conditions of industrial capitalism ushered in a new phase in the disciplinary technique of attention. In order to sustain long hours of repetitive factory work, laborers would have to cultivate the ability to maintain concentration on repetitive tasks in a fixed space. This mode of attention retained many aspects of Enlightenment/colonial attention, while implementing several modifications to support new configurations of labor in factory settings. In this period, attention was further elaborated as a discipline—trained within schools, measured by scientific and medical institutions, and, of course, still relevant as a military command. Industrial attention retained upright posture and visual dominance, although it would formally add hearing and listening as valued modes of sensing. It carried forward the requirement of corporeal restraint but did so through a new

concept of cultivating unresponsiveness to “distraction.” Through synergies between industrial engineering, education, and the nascent fields of psychology and statistics, attention was refashioned using the same strategies that industrial engineers such as Frederick Winslow Taylor, Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, and Henry Ford used to systematize industrial production. Throughout the industrial era, attention, conceived of as a mental process, operated in an ambivalent relationship to the body and its movements. Medical, commercial, and educational treatments of attention conceptualized it as a state of motor inhibition that intensified mental processes (Ribot 1889; Wundt 1910). At the same time, reaction time—the amount of time between stimulus and response—was frequently invoked as a measurement of attention. Thus, industrial attention was charged with the task of discernment—focusing and responding as quickly as possible to some stimuli while inhibiting responsiveness to others.

We can think of attention during this period as becoming “industrialized”—that is, broken down into aggregate parts, and analyzed with the goal of maximizing output and minimizing the time needed to complete each action. As Jonathan Crary has argued, the conditions of the industrial era put a high premium on a particular kind of attention, while paradoxically making that kind of attention more difficult to perform (2001). Industrial labor conditions, which were generally less complex and more repetitive than craft models, required the worker to sustain attention for long periods of time, increasing the length of their attention span, with less likelihood that their work would hold intrinsic interest. Although labor conditions contributed significantly to what has been termed a “crisis” of attention (Crary 2001), scientific and educational discourses attributed the inability to perform the right kind of attention to other factors. An emerging culture of normalcy, fueled by the rise of statistical science, would portray “abnormal” attention—reaction times and durations of concentration that fell at the margins of

the normal curve—as a disability, informed by intersecting discourses around class, gender, and race. In this process too, socially constructed expectations about superior forms of attention, and who could perform those kinds of attention, gave rise to disabilities and abnormalities of attention and reified what Sylvia Wynter has referred to as “dysselected” categories.<sup>23</sup>

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the rise of mass production in Great Britain and the United States created the demand for new choreographies of attention that integrated human and machine movement. Frederick Winslow Taylor and Lillian and Frank Bunker Gilbreth, forerunners of industrial engineering, developed models for studying and standardizing individual work movements and workflows to maximize production by decreasing the amount of time required to produce each unit. Each engineer took a different approach to streamlining the manufacturing process. Taylor used a stopwatch to break down work actions into their discrete parts, created thresholds of “normal time” for each, and used that data to reallocate tasks among workers so that each worker performed simpler tasks with more repetitions. Frank Bunker Gilbreth and his wife Lillian Gilbreth were more concerned with posture and motion. They filmed and studied individual work actions and body postures, seeking what they believed was the “one best way” to perform each action (Price 1989). These approaches—optimizing for time and eliminating “movement waste” by isolating the most efficient actions—would find parallels within attentive training in schools during the industrial era.

Late 19<sup>th</sup>-century teaching manuals reflect two central assumptions: first, that attention is the foundation of all intellectual and professional activity; and second, that there are good and

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<sup>23</sup> This is a reference to the eugenic application of Darwin’s theory of evolution in which the traits of inferior peoples are “dysselected” within the process of natural selection. See Sylvia Wynter’s pathbreaking critique of the human in her 2003 article, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument.”



bad ways to pay attention. In his widely read manual, *How to Secure and Retain Attention* (1885), Canadian author and educator James Laughlin Hughes asserted that “the extent to which a man can rivet his attention, and control the working of his own mind, decides the standard of his intellectual power” (18). Educators also promoted attention as integral to the performance of most trades and professions. Fellow educator Catherine Aiken’s *Methods of Mind-Training: Concentrated Attention and Memory* (1895), extolls the widespread benefits of developing attentional skills, contending, “He who possesses the ability to concentrate his attention at will, whether his task be the learning of a trade or profession, or the solving of a mathematical problem [...] will sooner and more satisfactorily reach success than he who, though possessed of more skill and learning, fails to fix his attention upon his subject” (17-18). Both Hughes and Aiken advocated for the training of voluntary or “willingly given” attention in primary school education. Voluntary attention differed from “instinctive” attention in that it could be focused at will, regardless of interest. Whereas instinctive attention was understood as being motivated by fear, beauty, or attraction, voluntary attention described a new kind of attention which, through discipline, produced a “power of fastening the mind upon non-attractive objects.”<sup>24</sup> Hughes defined and contrasted “positive” and “negative” attentions. Positive attention was active, controlled, willingly given, undivided, intense, and fixed. Negative attention was passive (“listless”), wandering, and rapidly jumped between topics. Hughes pointed out how, problematically for teachers, pupils could affect the appearance of positive attention while actually practicing negative attention. Hughes highlights the detachment between attention’s

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<sup>24</sup> Aiken includes this quote from the psychologist Théodule-Armand Ribot (Aiken 1895, 80). The quote is from Ribot’s 1889 book, *Psychologie de l’attention*, which outlines the aspects of voluntary attention, and describes how it can be cultivated through education.

internal and external characteristics, cautioning teachers that “the minds of [one’s] scholars may be a thousand miles away, whilst their bodies may occupy positions of reverent attention” (7).

Comments like the one above propose that the mind and body are on separate tracks and must be brought together through the cultivation of positive attention. It was the work of the teacher to cultivate this form of attention, which, far from organic, was “exhaustive” and required progressive strengthening (Hughes 1885, 22). This approach hinged on a conceit that the mind was like a muscle, that could be made more powerful through calisthenics. Like other exercise practices of the industrial era, Hughes and Aiken treated the mind as part of the “divinely crafted [machinery]” of the body (Davis 1995, 87), which was consistent with a reciprocal way of thinking about bodies and machines prevalent in the industrial era. Both teachers seemed to grapple with conflicting ideas of attention as a purely mental action, and one that was also reliant on the body’s sensations, movements, and environmental circumstances. They recognized attention as a form of quasi-muscular exertion and devised a number of ways to strengthen it. Aiken reasoned that a brief exercise of attention was like lifting weights, “imparting strength and vigor throughout the day” (1895, 65). Both authors outlined exercises that would guarantee the quick acquisition of attention among all pupils. These included drills to be performed at the beginning of each class period, often under time constraints. Aiken asked students to remember numerical sequences and create sketches of objects after only a quick glance, emphasizing speed, accuracy, and memory retention. Other exercises entailed quick counting, musical sight-reading, or reproducing a text after reading or listening to it once. Hughes and Aiken both agreed that attentional calisthenics should be brief at first, to ensure that students were able to maintain an intensity of focus without becoming exhausted.

Whereas Aiken's writing primarily linked mind and muscle through metaphorical association, Hughes was concerned with how mind and body should be exercised in tandem to maximize attentive power. Because voluntary, fixed attention was exhausting to perform, physical activity such as free gymnastics should be given to students during short breaks between studies (1885, 22). Echoing the interest of industrial engineers like Taylor and Gilbreth on the impact of posture and work environment on the worker, Hughes encouraged teachers to consider how environmental and corporeal conditions supported or hindered "positive" attention. Classrooms, he suggested, should be well lit, ventilated, and maintained at a comfortable temperature. Seats must be comfortable, neither too high or too low, and chairbacks should support the pupil's spinal curvature. These adjustments were intended to ensure that pain and discomfort did not become unintended foci, "[compelling] the withdrawal of the mind from the lesson" (31-32) and, presumably, into other locations in the body.

In Hughes' advice, we can discern one of the central paradoxes that animates prevalent anxieties around attention in the industrial age—namely, that the physical postures required to perform "positive" attention were also the cause of its unraveling. Even in an era in which mind and body were theorized as separate, practically speaking, they were difficult to isolate. This is apparent in Hughes' remarks on disorder. He describes how unnecessary movement interrupts attention, but so too does excessive stillness. Exercise, in bursts of half a minute and especially for children, could be used to alleviate inattentiveness caused by the injurious practice of remaining in one position for too long (32). Ultimately, Hughes's hope was that, by developing enough attentional strength, one might overcome bodily distractions to the student's willful mental concentration, enabling continuous attention "under any external conditions" (34).

The educational cultivation of attention took inspiration from new psychological research, which, in line with industrial engineering, attempted to deconstruct attention into its constituent elements. Nineteenth century psychological research sought to isolate and quantify aspects such as reaction time, sensory and perceptual sensitivity, attention spans, reflex actions, memory retention, pattern recognition, and response conditioning (Crary 2001, 25-26). As in Taylor and Gilbreth's time and motion studies, scientific studies of attention separated it into discrete parts and used statistical plots to establish thresholds of "normalcy" for each. Influenced by Darwin's evolutionary theory of the "survival of the fittest," these studies tended to associate common traits with health and virtue, while marking off the fringes of statistical bell curves as "deviant."<sup>25</sup> Disability studies scholar Lennard Davis has referred to this pervasive culture as a "hegemony of normalcy," which assumed that whatever was most common was most evolved and thus superior (1995, 44).

The hegemony of normalcy was not a mere mathematical creation; it was both an ideological product and a functional instrument of industrial capitalism. This regime equated commonality with virtue in part because it dovetailed with standardization as a central tenet of mass production. Quantifying attention through these measurements assigned economic value to a very specific way of using one's capacity to notice and respond to objects in a perceptual field, while pathologizing others as deficient or degenerate. In this context, the most valuable forms of attention were spatially bounded, continuous monofocus, and heightened, yet discerning state of motor readiness. This required workers to inhibit their responses to many stimuli within their environment, while responding as quickly as possible to a specific set of sensory prompts.

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<sup>25</sup> See Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (1995) for a study of how "normalcy" came to prominence in the industrial era as an iteration of the ideal subject. Davis describes how the introduction of the bell curve or "normal" curve that constructed the "'problem' of the disabled person" (24).

Extending the rhetoric of Enlightenment philosophy, medical and educational discourses extolled attention as a stopgap to disorder, because it organized perception out of an incoherent jumble of undifferentiated sensations. Writer and physician Max Nordau stated this explicitly: “Culture and command over the powers of nature are solely the result of attention; all errors, all superstition, the consequence of defective attention” (1892, 56). However, 19<sup>th</sup> century scientific and medical research showed attention to be a highly fallible system. Although attention was central to the “normal” and “rational” subject, it also existed in “disturbing proximity to ‘pathological’ and ‘irrational’ effects” (Crary, 2001, 64). Even desirable attributes of attention, such as sustained monofocus, could slide perilously into trance. Likewise, reaction time, when pushed to the extreme, resulted in dangerous impulsiveness.<sup>26</sup>

Scientific and medical studies of attention, far from neutral, justified existing hierarchies including race, class, and gender, while creating new categories of disability. Nordau linked inattentiveness with racialized and feminized behavior:

Untended and unrestrained by attention, the brain activity of the degenerate and hysterical is capricious and without aim or purpose. Through the unrestricted play of association representations are called into consciousness and are free to run riot there [...] Weakness or want of attention, produces, then, in the first place false judgments respecting the objective universe, respecting the qualities of things and their relations to each other. (1895, 56)

Nordau specifically links inattentiveness to the “degenerate” and “hysterical,” using it as an explanation for why women, people with disabilities, and racialized others were supposedly incapable of objective thought. Social degeneration, a widely influential concept in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, attempted to explain cultural and ethnic differences through a theory of reverse

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<sup>26</sup> Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936) portrays this ambivalent attitude toward industrial attention. Recall the famous scene where The Tramp focuses so intently on twisting his two allotted washers, that he begins to see washers everywhere, and twists many inappropriate items, including a coworker’s nipples, the foreman’s nose, and the buttons on a woman’s dress.

evolution in which some cultures and individuals had evolved backwards from the white, European, normatively able ideal. Hysteria, on the other hand, was a quasi-medical feminized disorder of uncontrolled emotion attributed to sex-related differences to stress responses. Inattention, thus, was viewed as inherent to the feminized, the racialized, the disabled, and the uncivilized subject. Attention, the natural state of European man, was instrumentalized as a tool in the civilizing process, as in the example of Hughes and Aiken's attentive calisthenics. However, Nordau's assertion also foregrounds how the framework of attentiveness/inattentiveness could be used as a tool for marginalizing non-normative perspectives—and particularly perspectives that dissented against the highly racialized and patriarchal order of the “objective universe”—by dismissing them as capricious.

Reaction time, or the period of elapsed time between stimulus and motor response, is one of the domains in which we can clearly witness the entanglements between industrial production and conceptualizations of race, gender, ability. Scientific and medical studies of attention reveal a preoccupation with the connection between attention and movement. On the one hand, reaction time was used as a measurement of how well a subject was paying attention. However, 19<sup>th</sup>-century studies of reaction times found that Euro-American were not the quickest responders, requiring a convoluted narration of possible reasons why African American and Indigenous subjects had quicker response times. Like Hughes and Aiken's attentional calisthenics, scientific discourses on reaction time implied that movement was central to attention, and yet existed on a bell curve in which either end of the extreme implied abnormality and degeneracy. The white male subject, then, reacted quickly, but with discernment. This quality of discernment was what slowed him down in comparison with others who were considered to have smaller brains or less capacity for thought.

In 1895, R. Meade Bache published a study called “Reaction time with reference to race” in *Psychological Review*. His research design and interpretation dovetailed with Herbert Spencer’s then-prevalent application of Darwinism that mapped the theory of evolution and natural selection onto the development of races and social classes (Claeys 2000). In Spencer’s theory, “primitives” (non-white/non-European) outpaced “civilized” (white/European) people in psychophysical performance because the latter group spent less of their energy on “higher functions” such as rational contemplation. Bache’s study sought to confirm this theory by measuring reaction times among different races to substantiate, with quantitative data, a preconceived racial hierarchy among African American, Euro-American, and American Indian subjects. Before listing his table of measurements, Bache detailed his views on the objective inferiority of African American subjects to whites, which he said could be “[proven] by many facts, and among these by the quickness of his automatic movements as compared by those of the white” (1896, 481). According to Bache, all men consisted of “two physical beings”: the intellectual (centered in the brain) and the automatic (centered in the spinal cord and bodily reflexes). For if, as Bache wrote, “the automatic man is the educated slave of the brain,” (478) then his ensuing measurements of automaticity among racial groups set up the conditions for viewing non-white people and women<sup>27</sup> as more suited for manual labor and requiring oversight by white men. Bache and his colleagues measured small groups of subjects and then reverse engineered their analysis to support racialized and gendered ideologies. First, he characterized slower reaction times among women as an effect of inferior brain development and smaller physical size (482). Then, he used racial narratives to describe the quicker reaction times of African American and Native American test subjects according to their racial inferiority. He

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<sup>27</sup> Non-white women, it seems, were omitted from consideration entirely.

reasoned that (1) Indians had “cultivated quickness of movement as a necessity of his existence,” (2) that African Americans had more racial mixture with Euro-Americans, and that (3) the numbing conditions of slavery had made them slower than the Indians, but still faster than Euro-Americans (484).

Bache’s study and the surrounding analysis illuminates how understandings of the relationship between attention and movement was informed by social hierarchies of race, class, and gender, and naturalized through biased interpretations of biometric data. As we know, the connection between attention and corporeal restraint was not new; it hearkened back to the medieval courtier’s carefully curbed affect and the soldier’s trained impermeability to sensation. However, the use of scientific and medical research to frame this corporeal restraint as an evolutionarily superior and “normal” way of acting ensured that this mode of attention would be disseminated in institutions, and that any aberrances would be marked as pathological and corrected.



## Consuming Attention

**TV** *happiness shared by all the family!*



*Model 17 F6—in mahogany and lined oak, 17 inch TV... FM and AM radio... 3 speed phonograph.*

Whether it's a party for friends or just a quiet evening at home... your Motorola TV will add plenty of pleasure with its variety of entertainment. Drama, music, sports and educational programs... all these are yours on Motorola's big-screen, photo-perfect television! Hear your favorite recorded music faithfully reproduced with Motorola's dependable and easy-to-operate "Multi-Play" record changer. And for the best in both FM and AM radio, there is nothing finer than Motorola's famous "Golden Voice" tone that's as rich and true as the original sound itself.

# Motorola TV

LEADER TODAY BECAUSE OF 25 YEARS OF PIONEERING IN THE ELECTRONICS INDUSTRY

ONLY MOTOROLA GIVES YOU THESE EXCLUSIVE FEATURES... IN FASHION AWARD CABINETS!

 <p><b>GLARE GUARD</b> THE CROWN ART REFLECTOR SCREEN</p>	 <p><b>TWO SIMPLE CONTROLS.</b> Sharp, steady pictures with just two simple controls. Turn it on... select your station... that's all! Billion-Antenna. Rectangular black picture tubes.</p>	 <p><b>THREE-SPEED RECORD CHANGER.</b> Automatically plays all size 78, 45 and 33 1/3 rpm speed records without complicated adjustments. Single, feather-light tone arm, permanent needle.</p>	 <p><b>"GOLDEN VOICE" AM AND FM RADIO.</b> New "Music Lover" sound system faithfully brings you true pitch and tone in both musical and voice reproduction, from lowest bass to highest treble.</p>	 <p><b>LONG LIFE "DEPENDABLE" CHASSIS.</b> Factory tested... we play it before we ship it... to make sure that it brings you long, reliable TV reception. It's built to perform better... longer!</p>
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SEE YOUR CLASSIFIED DIRECTORY FOR THE NAME OF YOUR NEAREST MOTOROLA DEALER • Specifications subject to change without notice.

Figure 3 - Motorola advertisement, 1951.

*"TV happiness shared by all the family!" Father, wearing blue suit sits in a padded armchair, his right arm crooked to hold a pipe that hangs out of his mouth. To his left, Son sits in a smaller chair. To his right, Daughter is sitting on the floor. Behind Father, Mother stands upright, holding a tray with an assortment of drinking glasses. The Whole Family gazes excitedly*

toward a large piece of wooden furniture that holds a black and white screen.<sup>28</sup> “TV makes home-life happier” Husband in a suit sits in a padded armchair, his right elbow propped up on the armrest. He appears tired in his reclined position but wears a look of pleasant entertainment, watching two pugilists on the screen. Wife stands at his left side in a house dress. She bends toward Husband, offering a tall drinking glass. Husband, absorbed by the fight, does not respond.<sup>29</sup> “How television benefits your children:” Son and Daughter watch a marionette puppet, who smiles back at them from the screen. The Whole Family sits together, their faces bathed in a warm glow. Son, who might normally be out causing trouble, has returned home to catch the evening’s cartoons. Daughter, who might be throwing a tantrum, is in a quiet state of awe. Mother and Father are seated with the children, wearing pleasant looks on their faces, enjoying the wholesome entertainment and family togetherness. They face the screen, their bodies huddled close together, but without touching. Their eyes are fixed forward; they do not converse.<sup>30</sup>

The figures in the above television advertisements make a tableau of quiet attention. They sit, immobilized, transfixed by the screen’s glow, on various pieces of furniture in a living room that has recently been redesigned to center around the television set. Another advertisement suggests that a TV can fit in just about any room, but that one should reorganize the furniture around the TV set, arranging the most comfortable chairs or sofas about 8-10 feet in front. In all of the images, people are arranged by their rank in the idealized nuclear family: Father relaxes in the largest and most spacious seat, while Son and Daughter sit on the floor. Mother often perches

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<sup>28</sup> Description based on Motorola advertisement, “TV happiness shared by all the family!” (1951).

<sup>29</sup> Description based on Motorola advertisement, “TV makes home-life happier” (1950).

<sup>30</sup> Description based on Motorola advertisement, “How television benefits your children” (1950).

on the armrest, ready to return to the kitchen to fetch beverages or take the TV-friendly casserole, which is advertised on the next page, out of the oven. All (except for Mother, of course) are still. Each viewer's focus continually extends in the direction of the appliance, occasionally throwing a sidelong glance that seems to say, "Did you see that?" There is little interaction between watchers; even though they look at each other briefly and exchange expressions, their gazes always return to the screen. While they are close enough to brush elbows or smell each other, the pull of the visual spectacle is so strong that they are unlikely to register any but the most intense stimuli from other sources.

Like the example of the factory worker, the television spectator practices attention in a spatially bounded, continuous state of monofocus. They gaze in one direction for many hours at a time,<sup>31</sup> but whereas the factory laborer had to acquire the technical skills required to sustain continuous monofocus, the spectator's focus is less effortful and less technical. Their focus is sustained not by will, but by a rapidly changing display of images, plots, and moods. Like a conveyor belt for images, television programming makes it easy to retain a spatially limited focus because of the novelty and variety it offers. Both the factory laborer and the spectator end up with a limited array of physical activities and postures, but while the laborer is forced into a position of physical restriction by the conditions of the work, the spectator passively cedes other activities such as listening to the radio, reading books, playing in the street, or going out to live performances because television proposes a more convenient and seductive replacement.<sup>32</sup> Other advertisements laud the convenience that television brings. Couples no longer have to go out on

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<sup>31</sup> Nielsen ratings from the 1950s cited the average amount of time people in America spent watching TV as between four and five hours per day. By 2009-2010, that number rose to nearly nine hours (Madrigal 2018).

<sup>32</sup> In 1949, the *New York Times* published an article, "What Is Television Doing To Us?", which described a number of activities that had been superseded by watching television. See Gould (1949).

dates...they can stay in and be entertained! Children are kept away from the kinds of trouble they might find playing in the street; they need less minding because they are absorbed in the programming.

Extending a trend that began in the industrial era, this new choreography of spectatorship reconfigured the attentive environment in order to reduce distraction, enabling the attentive subject to maintain a bounded and uninterrupted state of focus for increasingly long durations. In the factory, assembly lines helped workers to reduce sideways movements, shaving seconds off of each action to decrease the overall time-to-production. In the “TV room,” comfortable furniture reorients the viewer away from previous focal points like the street, the hearth, or the piano and towards the TV cabinet. Both choreographies of attention inhibit horizontal interaction, but whereas the conditions of the factory required constant oversight to ensure that workers are not idling, chatting, organizing, or otherwise stealing time away from production, the conditions of the TV room use novelty to pull attention towards the screen. Central to both choreographies is the requirement of an attentive subject whose actions are predictable. Just as systems of scientific management sought to streamline the individual actions of the laborer in order to create a pool of interchangeable workers, marketing firms and broadcasting companies engineered a society of consumer-spectators who could be depended on to “tune in” to interchangeable programming, ensuring the quantifiable visibility of paid advertisements.

By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Taylorist systems of industrial management were eclipsed by a new management system promoted by automotive producer Henry Ford.<sup>33</sup> Taylor’s scientific

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<sup>33</sup> Henry Ford’s influence on American movement patterns also extended beyond the assembly line. In the 1920s, Ford promoted and subsidized square dancing in an attempt to eclipse the influence of jazz music (which he believed to be a product of a Jewish and Black conspiracy) on American culture. For more on Ford’s promotion of country music as a white supremacist counter to Jewish and Black cultural production, see Richard A. Peterson’s *Creating Country Music* (1997).

management secured workers' efficient cooperation through incentive systems, offering rewards for the quantity of parts produced. Fordism, by contrast, streamlined production through standardized, modular parts and specialized machinery, which required very little skill to operate (Gilbert et. al. 1992, 13-17). What was novel about Ford's mass production model was that, in addition to reformulating production jobs so that "anyone could do it," it allowed the goods produced to be sold at such a low price that (almost) anyone could *buy* it.<sup>34</sup> In addition to driving the prices of manufactured goods down, Ford's interventions set wages at a rate high enough to ensure that workers could afford to buy the same goods that they produced, even as the labor required in order to produce the goods required less specialization. In doing so, Fordist production set the conditions for the emergence of a new cadre of choreographers of attention—an entire industry concerned with directing the consumer's focus and actions in leisure settings.

The evolution from industrial to consumer capitalism gave rise to new attentional episteme in the United States. If, in the previous era, industrial engineers, teachers, and doctors, worked as collaborative choreographers of attention, in consumer capitalism, a new choreographer made their debut: the "consumer engineer."<sup>35</sup> Working in the environment of consumer capitalism, which centers on increasing production and consumption, the consumer engineer transformed people into "markets" by measuring, seducing, and selling attention. Like

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<sup>34</sup> Ford is perhaps most known for creating new markets for the Model T by offering it at a base price that would have been unimaginable under previous manufacturing systems.

<sup>35</sup> Earnest Elmo Calkins coined the term "consumption engineering" as an aspect of the nascent field of "business science." See "The New Consumption Engineer and the Artist," 1930, quoted in Jeffrey Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925–1939* (1979, 70). By the 1930s, groups like American Marketing Society, the National Association of Marketing Teachers, and the American Marketing Association further professionalized the field through conferences and publications, and by the 1940s and 1950s, many corporations had opened dedicated departments for marketing and market research.

other choreographies of attention, consumer engineered attention stimulated consumption by exploiting the mutually reinforcing relationships between attention, perception, and action. Consumer engineers targeted what educators and scientists in the previous era would have called “involuntary” or “instinctive” attention in order to exert influence over the consumer’s actions.

A key difference in these two structures lies in the role of the attentive subject. Whereas in industrial choreographies of attention, disciplinary institutions focused on training “positive” habits of attention that conferred agency and self-control to the attentive subject, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, consumer engineers attempted to entrap the attentive subject’s attention through an array of psychological and sensory marketing strategies, thus eroding the kind of control over attention that was achieved by discipline. Within consuming attention, the attentive industrial subject was supplanted by a more passive performer. Industrial attention helped to constrain the kinds of actions that attention might produce. Consumerist attention had only one possible result: the purchase.

In consumer capitalism, marketing and the manufactured necessity for new commodities hinged on the ability to measure and attract consumers’ attention. Legal scholar Tim Wu narrates the rise of modern marketing between the 1890s and 1920s, describing how media and broadcasting companies treated attention to a “cash crop” that could be harvested with the proper methods (2017). The first “attention merchants,” as Wu refers to them, used newspapers and other printed matter to attract readership through spectacle and effectively sold the readers’ attention to companies seeking to advertise their products. In the then-nascent advertising industry, Wu argues that marketers found ways to convert attention from a raw material to an industrial commodity that could be used, resold, and exchanged (13). Thus, consumer engineering rang the bell on a new market for attention in which those who were able to control

its flow reaped significant economic and social rewards. In other words, attention was monetized.

Before it could be converted into a commodity or currency, attention first had to be measurable. Between the 1930s and 1940s, new technologies such as the “audiometer” enabled market researchers to quantitatively measure attention by tabulating how much time radio listeners spent tuned to different stations.<sup>36</sup> These early attention estimators were not able to discern the listener’s level of engagement with the content, but nonetheless provided metrics that determined the worth of advertising spots in various media. Once the audience was in place, consumer engineers relied on a number of strategies to harness attention to sell products through appeals to both unconscious and conscious desires. Capitalizing on scientific research that revealed how attention is shaped by emotion, they actively cultivated the “negative attention” that 19<sup>th</sup> century educators like James Laughlin Hughes sought to avoid. If Hughes saw negative attention—attention that moved from topic to topic, emanated from a passive or “listless” posture, and was directed by external stimuli, rather than one’s own willpower—as an impediment to decisive action, consumer engineers valued it as a way to influence behavior.

In a radical shift from earlier techniques of attention that exclusively prioritized vision, consumer engineers appealed to both visual and non-visual senses to engineer affective attachment to the products they branded. In an influential advertising manual, *Consumer Engineering; A New Technique for Prosperity*, Roy Sheldon and Edgmont Arens argued that products that were pleasing to the non-visual senses—especially the tactile sense—would be more popular, even if the consumer did not register the attraction (Sheldon and Arens 1932). By

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<sup>36</sup> Early efforts such as Robert Elder’s “audiometer” paved the way for Nielsen TV ratings, which helped broadcasting networks determine the worth of their primetime advertising slots based on projections that predicted how many listeners might tune in (Wu 2017, 109).

the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, advertisers adopted multisensory marketing and design as a means of inducing positive emotional experiences with particular brands. Beyond the pragmatic actions of purchasing, shopping now meant participating in a curated mood. Muzak, artificial scents, “jingles,” specialty lighting, free samples, ergonomics, and plush showroom carpets are some of the strategies used to add dimension to visual displays.

Multisensory plays for attention seemed to refute anxieties in the industrial era that the conditions of industrial capitalism would result in a deadening of both worker and bourgeoisie senses. For example, in *Capital*, Marx described how, “Every organ of the senses is injured in equal degree by artificial elevation of temperature, by the dust-laden atmosphere, by the deafening noise, not to mention danger to life and limb among the thickly crowded machinery...” (1954, I: 401-2). According to Marx, the bourgeoisie, even though they controlled the means of production, were also at risk of diminished sensory capacity. By focusing solely on capital, the owning class narrowed their experience such that they sacrificed sensory pleasure and intellectual interest in order to accumulate wealth. Sensory historian David Howes has pointed out that the senses were central to Marx’s early architecture of a socialist revolution. Marx reasoned that part of the worker’s oppression was that the worker was only utilizing their “primitive” senses of taste, touch, and smell—due to the fact that the worker only had time to eat, drink and procreate. According to Marx, a socialist revolution would call the worker to cultivate the “higher” senses of vision and hearing through music and other aesthetic activities (Howes 2003, 206, 230). Marx’s argument dovetails with prevailing beliefs among educators, engineers, scientists, and administrators, that responsible control of one’s senses through a cultivated practice of “good” attention was central to the subject’s capacity to ascend in social hierarchies, and that likewise, misuse, injury, or abuse of the senses was likely to lead to social



degradation.<sup>37</sup> Howes has pointed out that the “hypersensuality of the contemporary marketplace” contrasts with Marx’s prediction that capitalism would alienate the bourgeoisie from their senses (2003, 211-12). While, in industrial capitalism, the conditions of the factory may certainly have strained workers’ sensory capacities in the ways Marx predicted, the evolution of consumer capitalism hinged on the seduction of the worker’s multiple senses in their off-duty hours.

As with all of the earlier forms of attention discussed, consumerist choreographies of attention reinforced hegemonic power dynamics, with some important similarities to previous phases. The architects of attention, especially in the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, were white-skinned and white-collared, possessed “normal” abilities, and were almost always male workers. We can think of them as a new technocracy that fused the psychological study of attention with the interests of consumer capitalism. Extending notions of the good subject that derived value based on their capacity to perform “positive attention” in the industrial era, the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the rise of new ways of valuing individuals based on the judicious investment of their own attention and the possession of the attention of others. New terms like “attention getter” (1900s), “attention seeker” (1910s), “attention grabbing” (1920s), and “attention deficit” (1950s)<sup>38</sup> provided ways of referring to subjects’ attentional wealth. However, it was not exactly a free market. Consumerist attention, like industrial attention, was subject to gendered, racialized, and ableist ideas about who performed and deserved attention.

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<sup>37</sup> This repeats from previous eras, in which ideas about civilized (also known as profitable) uses of the senses were inflected with racial hierarchies.

<sup>38</sup> I used Google Books’ Ngram tool to trace the usage of these words within books digitized by Google, which I cross checked with dated citations in the Oxford English Dictionary.

We can see these social forces at play in the language used to describe the kinds of people who possessed and/or deserved attention. “Attention getter,” a term that came to prominence within advertising manuals at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, refers to someone or something that demands notice, generally in the context of public speaking or advertisement. Attention getters were advertisers, public speakers, and other influential types who, informed by scientific research and quantitative metrics on attention, could attract involuntary attention and convert it into purchasing action. We can imagine the attention getter as the man who sits at a desk or paces his office, brainstorming clever turns of phrase or graphic arrangements that will draw the eye toward the product. He stands in front of his coworkers at the morning meeting, kicking off his presentation with a rhetorical maneuver that entertains and has everyone sitting on the edge of their seats. He points to bold graphics in a new mockup his team has come up with for Lysol disinfectant. “Another love-match *shipwrecked*... on the dangerous reefs of half-truths about feminine hygiene. Lysol has prevented many such tragedies,” it reads. The ad depicts a woman holding a young child and frowning while a man, suitcase in hand, exits the room. Back at the office, the attention getter pores over metrics and uses them to decide when and where to place his message to guarantee peak visibility. All of this activity is premeditated—that is, the attention getter sets traps in the present to catch attention in the future. He makes strategic use of color, font, rhetoric, and body language, and plays upon emotions like shame and fear to draw his audience in.

The “attention seeker,” by contrast, is generally female or juvenile, defined by their unsuccessful and/or inappropriate bids for attention. Unlike the “attention getter,” who plans ahead, the attention seeker makes demands in the moment and in response to unsatisfactory conditions. The term “attention seeker” was and still is used to describe women who attempt to

divert the flow of attention in unproductive directions.<sup>39</sup> The “attention-seeker” might be the woman who has left the private space of the home to pursue her financial independence through office work. Her attention-seeking behaviors are transgressive because they make her visible in a male-dominated public workplace and society. We can imagine her as standing too close, exposing too much of her body, speaking too loudly, or showing too much emotion. Attention seeking is not just a colloquial term; it is also a psychopathology. Gendered biases persist in contemporary medical pathologies. According to the American Psychological Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), “attention-seeking” (also known as “histrionic personality disorder”) consists of: drawing attention to oneself; seeking reassurance or approval; inappropriately seductive appearance or behavior; rapidly shifting emotional states; outsize concern with one’s physical appearance (and using it to attract attention); susceptibility to influence by others; and/or excessive display of emotion (DSM-5).

With attention-seeking, there is considerable overlap between what is pathologized as medically “normal” and what is codified as “etiquette.” In *Etiquette in Society, in Business, and at Home* (1923),<sup>40</sup> Emily Post asserts that a well-bred man or woman walking on the street “in no way draws attention to her or himself.” They should be careful not to touch, not to speak loudly, express inner feelings or thoughts, or do anything that might attract attention (28). These directives—to keep the body and emotions concealed and to observe how others are acting such

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<sup>39</sup> In a 1910 *New York Times* article on summertime social engagements, an author vilified the attention-seeker as “ill-bred and common,” charging: “Nothing is so disgusting to the people worth knowing as the girl who plays for notice. She might as well label herself ‘attention seeker’, for no one is fooled as to her actions” (*New York Times*, 1910, X3). Today, “attention-seeking” still reflects misogynistic ideas that infantilize women and treat their bids for visibility as pathetic. As columnists Elspeth Reeve and Rebecca Onion have pointed out, the term “attention-seeking” also references a dynamic in which men are the bestowers of valuable attention who “discover” worthy women by recognizing their unadvertised positive qualities (Reeve 2016).

<sup>40</sup> This was originally published in 1922 but remained widely read in subsequent decades.

that one might blend in—are strikingly similar to those of courtly attention. The key difference was that they became medicalized as psychological norms. Even though “attention seeking” is considered a misuse of attention, it was nonetheless useful to the consumer engineer, who exploited this and other undesirable modes of attention in order to increase sales. For example, an advertisement for Dormeyer kitchen appliances reads “WIVES,” in massive, capitalized letters. “Look this ad over carefully. Circle the items you want for Christmas. Show it to your husband. If he does not go to the store immediately, cry a little. Not a lot, just a little. He’ll go, he’ll go” (Dormeyer 1956, as cited in Harrison and Edwards 2014). This advertisement displays the gendered meaning of “attention seeking” as a strategy women supposedly use to manipulate men. It also leverages it as a psychological marketing strategy that gives access to men’s purchasing power through women as proxies.

Consumerist attention inaugurated a breach between how attention was expected to be directed and shared in social settings, and how it was treated in commercial enterprise. This established a gendered double standard in which white-collar workers in the advertising industry benefitted from grabbing attention while women were chastised for doing the same. Whereas attention seekers were criticized for displaying too much emotion in public, attention getters were lauded for their ability to play upon the emotions of fear, desire, and anxiety in order to create a sense of need for their products. Similarly, while attention seekers were shamed for wearing revealing clothing, the same feminized body parts might be featured in a glossy magazine spread as a provocative attention getter. In some ways, attention seeking behavior is a logical outcome of the commodification of attention. If individuals were embedded within an unevenly distributed economy of attention, it is understandable that they would pursue attention using the means available to them. In this sense both the conversational and medicalized

meaning of “attention-seeking” spoke to alignments between attention and power in a consumption-driven economy. To be an “attention-getter” was to play the role of choreographer by controlling the flow of attention and the resources it delivers. To be an “attention-seeker” was to desire, but to lack the influence to control that flow, like a background dancer who breaks with the choreography and upstages the soloist. Thus, assumptions about who was an industrious “getter” and whose attention was ill-begotten, retained previous eras’ gendered assumptions concerning who really has and *does* attention. Furthermore, designating the “attention-seeker” as the deviant impediment to productivity obscured the more insidious actions of the “attention-getter” who sold his product by artificially engineering demand, often through psychological manipulation.

In both industrial and consumer choreographies, attention figured as a medium through which actions might be individually shaped, sustained over time, and coordinated with the actions of other bodies. The contexts and motives of each system were quite different: in industrial choreographies of attention, the management of individual and group attention through standardized techniques helped to accelerate production. Meanwhile in consumer choreographies of attention, the management of attention as a commodity stimulated consumption by gathering and exploiting attention in domestic and leisure settings. Thinking of each of these scenarios as a form of choreography illuminates the way in which attention has served as a means of directing action on a mass scale in ways that serve the needs of a dominant political and economic system.

## **Commodifying Attention**

*I sit at my desk, ready to write. I tuck my phone behind my computer, where I can't see it. I hope that by being out of sight, it will be out of mind. I start the timer on my computer and it*

*counts down a new 25-minute increment of active work time. When the timer is on, I work diligently, and when the 25 minutes are up, I have five minutes to stretch, use the bathroom, make tea, or check my phone. I have had to do this in order to sustain focus on writing. I have learned that I think and write more effectively in the mornings, and my capacity for this kind of work wanes after 12pm. I know this because I keep a spreadsheet of all of my 25-minute increments and tally them up for the week, in order to identify impediments to my own productivity. For a durational project such as this dissertation, it helps me distance myself from my own work, playing the roles of both worker and manager at once. Often, this method works for me. However, today I feel particularly distractable. I try to coax myself back to work by putting on a supportive playlist. Opening Spotify, I click the “Browse” button to look for something else and am offered a number of playlists, selected for me by the algorithm: “Feelin’ Myself: (When you feel like 100% that b\*\*\*\*),” “Confidence Boost: (You’re on top of the world. Don’t forget it).” Irritated with the feigned intimacy of these playlists, I open YouTube. I choose a “focus-enhancing” playlist of isochronic tones that guarantee “to slow down the ADHD mind.” But before I play it, I have to watch part of an advertisement for Grammarly, an AI-powered grammar checking app that promises to help me write more clearly and succinctly. As I wait for the ad to conclude, other ads in the sidebar peddle me goods and services: standing desks, apps that aid concentration by blocking notifications, blue light blocking glasses, ergonomic chairs, surgical masks, and weighted blankets. RING! Seemingly out of nowhere, the timer sounds. Twenty-five minutes have passed. My back is stiff from hunching over my computer. My hip flexors are sore from sitting in the same position for hours. I sigh and tell myself it won’t happen again, but I know it probably will. I refresh the timer and take a breath, determined to channel my focus back to the task at hand.*

In the aftermath of World War II, a shift from industrial to digital production, aided by the rapid efflorescence of new communication technologies, ushered in what many have termed the “Information Age.”<sup>41</sup> As access to information increased on a massive scale, our capacity to process that information remained relatively fixed.<sup>42</sup> Recognizing the escalating tension between the increasing abundance of information and the organic limitations of attention, Nobel Prize laureate Herbert A. Simon coined the term “attention economy” and predicted that the information age would place new demands on attention, rendering it a scarce commodity in a surplus of content. “A wealth of information,” he noted, “creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it” (1971, 40-41).<sup>43</sup> Legal scholar Larry Goldhaber adapted this argument for digital age in a 1997 presentation at Harvard’s Kennedy School for Government:

If the Web and the Net can be viewed as spaces in which we will increasingly live our lives, the economic laws we will live under have to be natural to this new space. These laws turn out to be quite different from what the old economics teaches, or what rubrics such as ‘the information age’ suggest. What counts most is what is most scarce now, namely attention. The attention economy brings with it its own kind of wealth, its own class divisions - stars vs. fans - and its own forms of property, all of which make it

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<sup>41</sup> According to a study by researchers at the Global Information Industry Center at the University of San Diego, in 2008 the average person received (verbally or audibly) about 105,000 words per day. After accounting for pictures, videos, games, and other media, they tabulated that each person was exposed to roughly 34 Gigabytes of information daily (Bohn and Short 2009, 13).

<sup>42</sup> This is subject to some debate. Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi estimated the speed at which human brains can consciously process information has hovering around 120 bits per second (2014, xvi). Daniel Kahneman has described attention as a reservoir of mental energy from which resources are drawn (1973). Other studies have found evidence for the fixed capacity model by tracking how subjects are able to pay attention to multiple locations (Ester et. al. 2014) and have tested the capacity by tracking visual working memory (Fougnie, Marois et. al. 2006). However, there are also studies that have identified that culture shapes attentive capacity, and particularly, the capacity to pay attention to multiple aspects simultaneously (Silva et al. 2010, Correa-Chávez, Rogoff, & Mejia Arauz, 2005, Chavajay & Rogoff, 1999). These studies have demonstrated that European American middle-class children typically attended to one event at a time, while Mexican American, Guatemalan Maya, and Navajo children tended to pay attention to multiple simultaneous events.

<sup>43</sup> Simon explained, “In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients” (1971, 40-41).

incompatible with the industrial-money-market based economy it bids fair to replace. Success will come to those who best accommodate to this new reality.

Highlighting the connection between something that is “enthraling” and a “thrall” (slave or serf in the Viking Age), Goldhaber illustrated how holding the attention of others implies the power to influence their thoughts and actions. After discussing the intrinsic value of attention as inherently advantageous and always in limited supply, Goldhaber argued that, in the information age, attention would take on the attributes of a currency, provoking changes in our behavior and systems of value. Unlike industrial capitalism, whose best practices emphasized repetition and standardization to efficiently produce goods for sale, the attention economy, Goldhaber predicted, would require endless novelty, originality, and diversity (1997).

The attention economy has heralded yet another transformation in the dominant choreography of attention. This choreography stages a conflict between (a) “executive functioning,” or the ability to maintain exclusive focus on a topic of one’s own choosing despite distractions, and (b) the relentless conversion of attentive subjects into “users” through the addictive intermittent rewards systems of algorithmic design. This conflict intensifies the tensions that permeated consumer attention and industrial attention, in which the conditions of production both demanded a particular kind of attention and made it nearly impossible to perform. As in earlier eras, the capacity to “manage” one’s own attention is a prerequisite for social advancement, and is promoted in educational, medical, and labor settings. Carrying forward trends from consumer capitalist choreographies, the attention economy also places a premium on the ability to attract the attention of others, whether as a teenage influencer or as an employee in “Big Tech.” As is true with free market capitalism, the attention economy appears to be, but is decidedly *not* a meritocracy. Racialized, gendered, and ableist logics continue to shape the ways in which subjects are imagined to be capable of and deserving of attention.



In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the vocabulary and logics of the attention economy pervade corporate business models and leadership strategies. Business management experts Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck claim that the capacity to manage attention is the single most important determinant of business success. They liken the management of one's attention in the information age to a form of investment: "to consume information, we must also be investors of our own attention portfolios" (2001, 11). Through financial metaphors, Davenport and Beck argue that the role of the corporate manager is to direct the flow of attention as "the rare resource that truly powers a company," counteracting the "flows of unnecessary information [that] clog worker brains and corporate communication links" (17). Just as industrial engineers of the previous century imagined workers as parts of a complex machine, these corporate strategists reconstituted the workplace as a large brain across which flows of information travel, connect, or become stuck.

To be a successful manager in the information age is to regulate one's own attention, to attract the right kind of attention to oneself, to direct the attention of one's followers, and to retain the attention of customers and clients. In this approach to management, attention is a form of labor, a currency, and a choreographer. It spatially orders laborers, assigning them tasks according to the forms of attention their labor entails and compensates them according to the attentional value they provide. At the top, executives make broad strategic decisions concerning the direction of the company and ensure productivity by limiting the number of programs that compete for attention and directing the allocation of employees' attention across different job descriptions and programs. At the next tier, lower-level managers and employees are charged with processing smaller tasks, analyzing data, and feeding information back to the CEO. Davenport and Beck suggest that low-value work that would be mere "distraction" to a CEO

should be farmed out to the bottom tier of employees: concierge, secretaries, assistants. These workers perform boring, repetitive, and often physical tasks like standing in line at the DMV, picking up dry cleaning, serving lunch, or providing onsite childcare (Davenport and Beck 2000). This hierarchical system organizes bodies through the distribution of attentive tasks such that decision-making power is held at the top, strengthened by information gathered at the middle, supported by low-wage employees who take on the tasks that might be considered a “waste of time” for higher-paid workers.<sup>44</sup> The corporate management of attention indicates both transformations and continuities in the way attention is part of a social choreography. The correlation between attention and financial investment is unique to this period. However, as we have seen, the powerful have always used the less powerful as sensory extensions, tasked with expanding the overall reach of the monarch or the manager’s eyes, ears, and more.

Evoking the structure whereby the executive manages the cognition of the corporation, the concept of “executive function” came to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s as a way to describe the favored practice of attention in the information age. While it is often deployed as an ahistorical and biological concept, executive function describes a codified practice of attention that is valued within a particular cultural context and historical era. By now, it should not be surprising to find that scientific and medical theories of attention coevolved with economic and managerial models—indeed this has been true within other historical periods described in this chapter. Echoing the metaphorical juxtaposition of human body and machine in the industrial era, institutions in the attention economy have produced a similar conceptual marriage between flows of information within the human brain and flows of information in a multi-person

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<sup>44</sup> Notably, these lower-paid tasks are more closely aligned with medieval models of attending-as-tending. Many of them can only be performed in person, through physical action, and in responsive relationship with others.

corporation and its clients. Whereas industrial-era management sought to render human movements more machine-like in pursuit of efficiency, attention-based systems of management emphasize the importance of imposing the right attentional filters.

Among the core executive functions are “inhibition,” (self-control, the ability to resist temptations and resist impulsive action) “interference control,” (selective attention and cognitive inhibition), “working memory,” and cognitive flexibility (the ability to think outside the box, see from different perspectives, and adjust to changed circumstances) (Diamond 2013). Executive function retains many of the attributes of earlier practices of attention: the courtly imperative of corporeal and emotional restraint, the Enlightenment/colonial emphasis on attention as selective focus, and the industrial era’s conception of “positive attention” as voluntary, controlled, fixed, and intense. All of these formulations have equated attention with agency. Over time, attention has evolved as a practice of responding selectively to stimuli. We can think of this conceptualization of attention as the capacity to self-choreograph—to control how one relates to the world by determining which kinds of objects, ideas, and others will merit a response.

Executive function illustrates a broader trend discussed in the previous section in which medical literatures pathologize behaviors that do not conform with the norms set in place by a dominant value system. However, whereas pathologized attentions in the industrial era were characterized as “abnormalities,” they are now described in economic terms as “deficits.” Economic metaphors also shape scientific and medical definitions of attention. In 1990, Michael Posner compared the areas of the brain that manage voluntary attention to an “executive branch” (Posner 1990) responsible for directing the subject’s voluntary focus on aspects of the perceivable environment. In doing so, he used a metaphor that modeled the body after a corporation, a complex organism that needed steering from the top. To possess executive

functioning is to be able to organize one’s thoughts and actions according to management protocols that align with a capitalist system—to make productive and efficient investments of energy. This framework allows for the classification of executive “impairments,” which are associated with mental disorders (such as addiction, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, depression, and schizophrenia) and social disorder (including poor productivity, inability to sustain relationships, and susceptibility to antisocial, criminal, or violent behavior) (Diamond 2013).

Disability and neurodiversity activists have critiqued the use of “executive function” especially in the ways it has been touted as a base requirement for agency, citing how this framework marks some forms of cognition as superior and controlling while others are supporting, without accounting for the context in which those forms of attending, thinking, and acting are useful. Neurodivergent activist Marta Rose has denounced “executive function” as the “new little black dress” of capitalism,” because of the way the term is used to obscure the effects of an economic system that causes the “bad outcomes” associated with executive disfunction. Rose argues that executive functions are poorly defined and subject to considerable debate among scientific experts but have become a catch-all term to divert culpability from structures to individuals. Rose writes on her blog:

...There are many other explanations for why [people who suffer from “executive dysfunction”] have a hard time with some things—trauma, abuse, neglect, racism, poverty, shame, the demands of capitalism and industrial school/employment, the Western fetishization of individualism, independence, and self-reliance. Just to name a few. (2021)

For Rose and other neurodiversity advocates, “executive functioning,” especially when used as a paradigm for all manner of social and economic disfunction, is not only an expression of

ableism, but also a concept that has been inspired by and in service to the demands of a dominant economic order.

The attention economy paradoxically both constructs and erodes executive function as a requirement for the functioning person. Even as schools, hospitals, and corporate environments attempt to groom attention into the controlled ideal promoted by 19<sup>th</sup>-century educators, the digital economy encourages the less desirable and more reactive modes of attention. Furthermore, the attention economy creates the “user” as an entity who is defined by this latter kind of attention. Due to the ubiquity of digital devices and services, most people are simultaneously asked to be both executives and users, creating an extended struggle between two conflicting modes of attention.

“User” attention is defined by a shift in emphasis from reflection to reflex. In digital settings, attention is measured in terms of “engagement,” or how the user interacts with a website or service. Even while executive functioning requires the inhibition of reflexes, user attention aims to stimulate them such that they fire before conscious thought. Mixpanel, a platform that measures user engagement, defines engagement as a metric that corresponds with users’ valuation of a product or service:

User engagement is highly correlated with overall profitability. [...] User attention is a finite resource and if users choose to spend their time on a particular app or site, they’re signaling that they find value in it [...] Highly engaged users are more likely to buy, return, and share the product or service with friends. (*MixPanel* 2021.)

The emphasis on user engagement supports an understanding of attention as fundamentally linked to action. However, in contrast with previous disciplines of attention, it targets the kind reflexive actions that the executive inhibits. By centering and amplifying engagement through

the exploitation of information about individual and collective user attention, user attention privileges action over reflection.<sup>45</sup>

While “user” attention favors action, it also targets actions that are smaller and simpler. The parts of the user’s body involved in these actions are further constrained, so as to make them more automatic. This has implications for the spatiality of attending bodies. User attention situates bodies in bounded space; the user generally looks in a fixed direction towards the screen, while completing actions with their thumbs and forefingers.<sup>46</sup> Fulfilling efficiency drive of the industrial engineer, the physical movements that a person might have performed in order to accomplish the task (i.e. of grocery shopping or going to the bank to withdraw funds) are reducible to a few swipes and clicks which themselves are rendered increasingly minimal as e-commerce platforms “optimize” for sales by reducing the amount of user actions required to complete a purchase.

Even as the immediate corporeal space of the user constricts, the portability of devices and the software they house allows this mode of attention to take place in any kind of space: not just the home and the office, but the gym, the car, and the bathroom.<sup>47</sup> Because the content and delivery of media on devices is tailored to maximize engagement, user attention produces tensions between onscreen and offscreen spaces. User attention pulls the user’s focus into the two-dimensional space of the screen, while inhibiting the user’s navigation of three-dimensional

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<sup>45</sup> A recent study showed that the rewards structure of social media contributes to the spread of misinformation, suggesting that sharing “fake news” is not a problem of critical thinking and media literacy, but of how social media is designed to reward more sensational content (Ceylan 2023).

<sup>46</sup> The effects of this spatial transformation are registered in bodies through the emergence of new repetitive stress injuries such as “tech thumb” and “tech neck.”

<sup>47</sup> A 2018 survey conducted by electronics trade-in website BankMyCell found that, among 2,114 users polled in the United States, 80 percent of men and 69 percent of women use their phone on the toilet (Moscaritolo 2018).

space. This is evidenced by instances of death and injury attributed to texting and scrolling while driving, as well as the highly publicized phenomenon of “death by selfie.” In these situations, the “attentional pull” (Throop and Duranti 2015) of onscreen engagements inhibits the capacity of the user to track and assess environmental hazards because of their absorption in screenic activities. In the case of selfie-related deaths, the tensions between two- and three-dimensional space are present inasmuch as the onscreen attentional value of an extreme selfie (on a precipice, in front of a moving train, and et cetera) is high enough to warrant placing one’s body at risk while also hampering one’s awareness of the environmental circumstances in which that risk is present.

Finally, user attention choreographs the user through their relation to time. In user attention, content is endlessly renewable and perpetually available according to 24-hour delivery cycles. Intermittent notifications remind the user of the presence of new content and encourage the user’s continual acts of “refreshing”—early in the morning, throughout the day, before bed, and in the middle of the night. Because of the glut of information, content derives value from its ability to quickly capture the attention of the user. While the user spends considerable time onscreen throughout the day, the time given to individual pieces of content is measured in seconds (Facebook estimates this to be between 1.7-2.5 seconds per piece of content on its platform).<sup>48</sup> The novelty, personalization, and immediacy of content helps to extend the amount of time the user spends engaged, even as the temporality of engagement with individual pieces of content is quite limited. Furthermore, the model of engagement as a mode of attentive action creates conditions under which the more the user engages, the more plentiful and valuable the return. For example, if a person posts a selfie to Instagram, they are more likely to receive

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<sup>48</sup> Facebook conducted internal advertisement rating in 2014-2015 that yielded this metric (Facebook IQ 2016).

attention through likes and comments from other users, triggering the chemical rewards of dopamine while building their overall “platform” from which to accumulate further currency.<sup>49</sup>

Through engagement, both the user and the algorithm train each other: the algorithm trains the user to adopt particular patterns of response (liking, commenting, sharing, refreshing, posting, buying, reviewing, and so on...), while the user trains the algorithm to display increasingly personalized and relevant content, thus perpetuating the cycle.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, the algorithm accumulates information for the corporation about the user’s schedule, behavioral patterns, social connections, and moods, using this information to modulate the content, timing, and tone of messages. Along with user data, algorithms utilize larger behavioral patterns drawn from cognitive science and psychology to build in factors like immediacy, delayed gratification, and systems of intermittent rewards to maximize the intensity and duration of time spent on the platform (Bhargava and Velasquez, 2020). In a repetitive cycle, this precipitates further engagement, more time to deliver ads, and increased information about how the user *uses*.

## Conclusion: Artist as Special Perceiver

Choreographic Aspects of Attention According to Historical Era					
	<b>Feudal</b>	<b>Courtly</b>	<b>Enlightenment/ Colonial</b>	<b>Industrial</b>	<b>Consumer</b>

<sup>49</sup> In the commercial dance industry (as well as many others), the importance of one’s social media profile and viewership has increasingly become a hiring criterion. See Easter, “The Rise of the Dancefluencer” (2020) and Weber, “A Choreographer Tells You How to Book Dance Jobs Through Instagram” (2021).

<sup>50</sup> As recent studies have shown, this cycle rewards users when they post sensational content and misinformation, leading to the dissemination of content based on what will elicit a response, rather than whether or not it is accurate (Ceylan, Anderson, & Wood 2023).



<b>Meaning</b>	action	profession	concept	technique	commodity
<b>Presence</b>	compulsory	compulsory	not required	compulsory	virtual
<b>Action</b>	responsive	restrained	still	standardized	reflexive
<b>Control</b>	unregulated	restrained	divided	measured	passive
<b>Senses</b>	undifferentiated	undifferentiated	vision	vision, hearing	multisensory
<b>Posture</b>	hustling, bowing, bathing	sitting, dancing, dining	sitting, standing	ergonomic	reclined, hunched
<b>Time</b>	irregular	irregular	linear	repetitive, most actions in least time	24-hr, interrupted
<b>Space</b>	relational	relational	independent	bounded	mobile
<b>Turning toward</b>	monarch, deity, flock	social superior	abstraction	task	novelty
<b>Turning away from</b>	n/a	passion	body, senses	waste	distraction

Figure 4 - Table. Choreographic Aspects of Attention According to Historical Era

The above chart reflects a diversity of practices associated with attention. Attention has been conceptualized, choreographed, and performed in Europe and North America as the cornerstone of agency while simultaneously serving as an instrument of behavioral modification and social control. Throughout these different attentional epistemes, the source and method of control has varied, but many continuities remain. This demonstrates how attention is not an

ahistorical biological process, but rather a set of techniques that have fluctuated over time and in relationship to dominant political and economic paradigms. Attention has, since its earliest uses in the English language, been linked to physical actions that take place in a particular relationship to space, time, and others, even as these relationships have shifted over time.

Dominant techniques and choreographies of attention have shaped the contours of the good subject by establishing frameworks for valuing categories of stimuli and determining which are to be deemed worthy of response. In addition, dominant choreographies have supported the project of differentiating subjects and arranging them in central and marginalized positions, either through their capacity to pay attention in desirable ways, or through the logics by which they are considered to be deserving of others' attention. In many cases, dominant choreographies of attention have helped to construct and reproduce hierarchies of race, class, gender, and ability by designating some ways of perceiving and relating to the world as valuable, while marking others as irrational, inefficient, and deviant, or deficient.

By elevating visuality, subduing the body and its reactivity to stimuli, and promoting monofocus, dominant Western conceptions and practices of attention have championed a specific way of being in and knowing the world that centers Eurocentric worldviews and standards of behavior. A choreographic analysis demonstrates how definitions and practices of attention, while often referred to as timeless biological attributes, are also subjective and socially constructed. The history of attention chronicles a process of progressive narrowing. Attention, beginning as an improvisational and spontaneous way of channeling the self towards others, now has a much more constrained meaning as selective cognitive engagement with some things and not others. The increased efforts to define, discipline, and manage attention according to Eurocentric value systems has produced a scenario in which the restrictions of dominant

attention seem to have generated anxiety concerning the possible perspectives that are made inaccessible by dominant attention. In capitalist terms, the repression of non-normative practices of attention has also created a market for those same practices as vehicles for circumventing and critiquing hegemony. Additionally, because of the way dominant attention was constructed in opposition to people and practices at the social margins, marginalized people and practices are often considered keepers of modes of seeing, hearing, and feeling that are not accessible through dominant perspectives.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries—the same period in which attention was recast as a physical and perceptual discipline that served the demands of industrial capitalism—Western artists took on the role of breaking entrenched practices of attention in order to reveal those perspectives it blocks out. This marked a shift from previous roles for the artist in European cultures as Renaissance craftsman or modern individual genius (Wolff 1993). Cultural historians have argued that, in this period, Western conceptions of art evolved from associations with a range of physical skills to a specialized institution for special types of people (Williams 1960). These people, called “aesthetes” were endowed with unique access to “imaginative truth” that lay beyond the crude domain of politics and social affairs. Artists participated in the capitalist marketplace, deriving value for their products through their capacity to access the “superior reality” that industrial civilization threatened to obscure (Williams 1960, 33).

In pursuit of this superior reality, which simultaneously offered a mode of social critique and a source of value in the modern capitalist market, artists experimented with attentive practices that would give access to perspectives outside of dominant frames. In *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, poet William Blake lamented: “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all

things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern" ([1794] 1994, 14). For Blake, the perceiving subject's narrowed vision was a result of the relentless sensory training, part of the civilizing process that filtered out broad swaths of experience, foreclosing the possibility of perceiving reality in its expansiveness. A century later in 1871, Arthur Rimbaud would describe how the work of the poet was to become "a seer" through "a long, involved, and logical derangement of all the senses" (2004, 33). The mantle of the artist as "special perceiver" was taken up again by French surrealists, who, inspired by Rimbaud, promoted a technique called "psychic automatism" as a means of bypassing the rational brain to reveal the "actual functioning of thought," unfettered by the strictures of reason or morality. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a subset of the white American artistic avant-garde, influenced significantly by Romanticism and Surrealism, attempted to awaken perspectives that were rendered invisible by dominant culture. Responding to the homogeneous "American Way of Life" produced through scientifically managed work and mass consumption, artists envisioned their role as one of reawakening the masses from their collective stupor, using spontaneity and improvisation to correct what they saw as the Western "bias of attention"<sup>51</sup> (Belgrad 1998, 90).<sup>52</sup>

Drawing from this lineage of artists as "special perceivers," dance artists in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have continued to generate strategies for expanding awareness beyond the strictures of dominant Western epistemologies. Attention and consciousness provided musculatures through which a new conception of dance could be shaped. Working with attention

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<sup>51</sup> Historian Daniel Belgrad takes the term "bias of attention" from Charles Olson, an avant-garde poet who linked the "Western" culture with a way of regarding things that was encouraged by commodification and objectification. Belgrad argues that Olson and others sought to promote an alternative humanism by correcting the Western "bias of attention," which operated at odds with human value (1998, 11, 93).

<sup>52</sup> Today, the idea that artists (implicitly assumed to be visual artists) perceive differently from other sectors of society has been taken up by scientists, who have measured aspects like visual-spatial measurement and "attentional processing" (Chamberlain 2019).

and consciousness rather than effort and shape enabled this cadre of artists to break with previous aesthetic trends in modern dance and to accrue capital as innovators and purveyors of the new. However, as dance scholars have pointed out, the practices that have been canonized as innovative or iconoclastic within white-dominated Western art institutions often borrowed heavily from Asian, Indian, Oceanic, African American, Indigenous, and Latinx sources and methods (Dixon-Gottschild 1996; Moten 2003; Foster 2003; Manning 2004; Murphy 2007; Goldman 2010).

The dynamic in which white avant-garde artists have staked their claims to innovation based on the extraction and abstraction of non-Western aesthetics and practices has been well-documented. This is not the point at which I wish to conclude. Instead, I will suggest that, in the practices I analyze in the next chapters, several genealogies converge. First, brooks, Suseno, and Monson all draw from U.S. American concert dance lineages that recognize the choreographic implications of attention. That is, they work within a field that has adopted attention as a means of structuring movement, in part to critique Western conceptions of attention, agency, and knowledge with postures of still-bodied restraint. Second, they use their practices as mediums through which dancers might reflect upon the ways in which dominant modes of attention have prescribed their perceptual and kinetic habits. Third, each artist intentionally engages a range of attentional counter-practices that have been marginalized within Western choreographies of attention as a means of unsettling hegemonies. However, rather than abstracting attentional counter-practices and using them as unmarked aesthetic methods, these three artists mobilize alternative modes of attention as instruments of political and ethical enunciation. Capitalizing on attention's synthesis of perception, action, and value, brooks, Suseno, and Monson articulate

alternative techniques and choreographies of attention that provide new directives for how subjects might act in relationship to space, time, objects, ideas, and each other.

As will be shown in future chapters, Brooks, Suseno, and Monson take up aspects of the role of artist as “special perceiver,” but expand the responsibility of “special perception” to include questions of social justice. Using attention as a medium from which to redesign more ethical ways of acting, they reactivate attention’s early association with care. In addition to occupying perspectives that are inaccessible through dominant practices, they urge a consideration of the politics that determine who is deemed worthy of care and consideration. In the subsequent chapters, I explore how each artist develops counter-choreographies of attention that intervene within the biases of dominant society. Each artist takes on different aspects of hegemonic attention, highlighting its role in anti-Blackness, enduring colonialisms, ableism, and anthropocentrism.

## Chapter 2 | Disorienting Attention: Confronting Choreographies of Anti-Blackness and Activating the Otherwise in mayfield brooks' Improvising While Black Pedagogy

### Introductions(s)

*Twenty-five people assemble in an oblong dance studio in downtown New York City. In just a few months, the city will shut down in response to the first surge of the COVID-19 pandemic, which takes Black and Brown lives at a disproportionate rate, drawing increased attention to racism as an ongoing public health crisis. Ignorant of the impending virus that will soon make the very premise of an in-person dance workshop impossible, we gather in the space.*

*The pacing is relaxed; our facilitator, mayfield brooks<sup>53</sup>, does not officially begin until ten minutes after the advertised start time. They suggest we start by moving rather than talking and invite us to walk backward through the space. Then they ask us to introduce ourselves to one another by connecting back first. I note the perpendicularity of these little back bumps with some other dances I experienced in a different Movement Research workshop earlier today. In the morning workshop, a contact improvisation class, I allowed myself to be coached into a series of smooth, flow-oriented dances, sharing weight with different members of a group of mostly white dancers from the U.S. and Europe. I note the contrast of these two different back-to-back dances: one smooth and flowing, following an implicit aesthetic of merging and cooperation between dancers; the other a series of bumpy, nudging collisions. The backs of other dancers meet mine with varying degrees of friction. There are near-misses, evasions, playful feints, and soft*

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<sup>53</sup> mayfield brooks uses they/them pronouns and lowercase letters to write their name. I refer to mayfield brooks by their last name in most of the text, but in my workshop field notes, I refer to them as “mayfield” in recognition of the multiple relationships and ways of relating to each other that converge in the production of this text, and to retain the practice of engaging the self as multiple.

*collisions in addition to more sustained connections between partners. Shoulder blades press into the flesh of my back with little rhythmic bumps: “Here I am. Are you there? Who are you?”*

*As we ease into dancing with one another, mayfield turns up the volume on a song that has just come on over the PA:*

*When will we be paid for the work we've done?  
When will we be paid for the work we've done?  
We have worked this country from shore to shore  
Our women cooked all your food and washed all your clothes  
We picked all your cotton and laid the railroad steel  
Worked our hands to the bone at your lumber mill  
When will we be paid for the work we've done?  
When will we be paid for the work we've done?*

*Dancers run excitedly over to mayfield's phone to look up the artist. It's the Staple Singers, calling for reparations within a danceable R&B groove. The music—and especially its invocation of a “we” that is owed reparations—elicits questions about the multiple instances of “we” that might configure in a workshop called “We Got Soul: Improvising While Black as a Movement Practice,” which is open to people of different racial identities.*

*mayfield steers us toward a circle and finally we introduce ourselves. But there's a twist. Quoting a practice they learned from another dance artist and friend, jumata tu poe, they ask us to say our names three times. In fact, they invite us to say our names in three different ways, to include fake names, given names, chosen names, nicknames, and alternative pronunciations. Some participants say their names in other languages or make up names on the spot. After each person says their names, the rest of the group repeats all of the names back, trying to reproduce the intonation and timing in which they were vocalized. Sometimes, the group's voices arc upward, mimicking the questioning and tentative tones that accompany a new name. Other times our voices echo the punctuation of amusement and delight of this activity of improvisational self-naming.*



*As the extended introduction continues, mayfield asks for help constructing a special zone in a corner of the studio. They assemble a nest-like area from materials available in the room: cushions, yoga mats, pillows, and blankets. This will be the “nap space.” The work of Improvising While Black (IWB), they explain, can be disorienting. They invite us to use the space at any time, formally acknowledging dropping out and resting as a valuable form of participation in IWB. Over the course of the intensive, mayfield will lead the group in practices that include shaking, spiraling, and falling, sometimes pushing us to the limits of our endurance by inviting us to sustain these activities for twenty minutes at a time. Almost immediately, the importance of the nap space becomes apparent. The rhythm of the nap space and its occupation at different times by different people in the workshop suggests that disorientation is felt divergently among members of the group. What is disorienting for one may not be disorienting for another...*

The passage above describes activities that happened during the first day of mayfield brooks’ 2019 Winter MELT workshop at Movement Research, whose full title was “We Got Soul: Improvising While Black as Movement Practice.” Improvising While Black is brooks’ larger life/art practice that is anchored in their experience of “meeting life” (brooks 2021b) amidst ongoing anti-Black violence. What is being offered within the workshop are movement practices and sensory attunements that have been distilled from IWB and shared with participants across a range of identities, ages, and modes of dance experience. Among the sources brooks references in their workshops are contemporary dance, somatic practices, Afropessimist theory, contact improvisation, tuning scores, biomimicry, composing and decomposing, disorientation, mourning, radical rest, and practices from brooks’ upbringing as a

member of an Evangelical church, including “praise dance,” speaking in tongues, trembling, catching the spirit, and other ways of moving what brooks calls the “soulful body.”<sup>54</sup>

In this chapter, I focus on how brooks uses spatial, discursive, and vestibular disorientations to intervene within anti-Black regimes of attention. Taking cues from brooks’ words and practices, I work with a definition of disorientation that considers the interwoven nature of perception, bodily actions, and social relations. If orientation emerges through the repetition of physical actions of locating oneself in relation to time, space, and others, such that they become naturalized (Ahmed 2006; Ngo 2017), disorientation describes experiences in which those orientations might become denatured. To disorient, as a verb, is to disrupt a particular orientation and to find ways of perceiving and moving beyond it.

My engagement with mayfield brooks’ disorientation practices brings choreographic analysis to serve conversations taking place in critical race studies.<sup>55</sup> I draw from phenomenologies of race, which consider how race is both socially and perceptually constructed. I build on the work of theorists including Frantz Fanon ([1952] 2008) Sara Ahmed (2006, 2007), Saidiya Hartman (1997), Christina Sharpe (2016), and Sachi Sekimoto and Christopher Brown (2020), who have articulated racialization as a process that takes place at the level of sensory experience in everyday interactions in addition to playing out on structural and discursive planes. Expanding on Sekimoto and Brown’s concept of “racialized regimes of perception” (2020), I argue that brooks’ pedagogy reveals the contours of a set of choreographic patterns that undergird racialized regimes of *attention*. These choreographic patterns include the whole body,

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<sup>54</sup> These are all words that brooks uses to define their practice in artist talks and in workshop descriptions.

<sup>55</sup> Earlier iterations of this project have appeared in *Contact Quarterly* (Bibler 2020) and *Dance Research Journal* (2022). I extend my appreciation to CQ editors mayfield brooks and Lisa Nelson, DRJ editor Rebecca Kowal, and my anonymous reviewers for helping me to develop these ideas.

but extend, avert, numb, and frame perception in racialized ways. These include perceiving from a vertical posture, leading movement from the head, navigating based on visual cues while inhibiting responsivity to other senses, turning away from cultural and ancestral context, and relating to self and others as individuals. I consider how the strategies brooks uses to guide dancers into states of disorientation both highlight and refuse participation within this choreography as a means of destabilizing anti-Black attentive regimes.

Furthermore, brooks' guided disorientations open up potential for attunements that exemplify what Ashon Crawley has theorized as the "otherwise" (2017)—which I identify within brooks' pedagogy as modes of sensing that *already* exist but are inhibited within dominant regimes. I explore how disorientation creates opportunities for otherwise attunements that lead to alternative movement possibilities, experiences, and modes of relation. Leading participants into practices of multisensoriality, synesthesia, falling, stumbling, spiraling, traveling backward, dancing off-center, expressive breathing and sounding, speaking with ancestors, and dreaming, brooks creates opportunities for participants to experience alternative modes of moving, being, and relating with each other. Thus, brooks' disorientations activate both resistive and speculative properties by critiquing what is and enacting "dreams and desires for a different future" (brooks, n.d.).<sup>56</sup>

brooks' disorientations, often practiced within a racially heterogeneous group of dancers, add complexity to discourses concerning the kinds of work it would take to repair ruptures wrought by anti-Blackness, including the Afropessimist position that there can be no repair

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<sup>56</sup> In brooks' description of IWB, they use this language: "IWB is an interdisciplinary dance project and dance improvisation experiment which grew out of artist mayfield brooks' multifaceted inquiry into the creation of spontaneous movement, racial representation, survival, and a collective of dreams and desires for a different future" (see brooks n.d.).

within a framework that has been designed to deny Black life. I consider how disorientation operates in alignment with brooks' Afropessimist philosophy, which holds that the world that equates Blackness with social death must end. At the same time, brooks' disorientations, in their commitment to re-sensitization, have a worldmaking capacity<sup>57</sup> inasmuch as they attune participants to "otherwise possibilities" or ways of "making sense" that are co-present with anti-Blackness. In brooks' pedagogy, disorientation is a potent tool but not an end in its own right. They use disorientation as a gateway to witnessing—a counter-choreography of attention that brooks activates within IWB. I observe how disorientation is a crucial aspect of training the witness, whose efficacy depends on their capacity to maintain critical states of unknowing. By redistributing attentional resources, witnessing constitutes a form of repair that, while distinct from material reparations, may help to address some of the ontological and relational harms inflicted by white supremacist capitalist society.

## **Pedagogy and Lived Experience**

mayfield brooks introduces themselves as a Black, queer, nonbinary, Lenapehoking/Brooklyn-based, movement-based performance artist, vocalist, urban farmer, and writer. The succession of signifiers is emblematic of brooks' resistance to identifying the self according to a single profession or pursuit, instead combining many modes of thought and practice. brooks locates much of their creative work, which includes performances, installations,

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<sup>57</sup> Dorinne Kondo (2018) has described the worldmaking possibilities of performance. She theorizes how performance processes, including onstage and "backstage aspects," contribute to race-making through structural and representational means. She holds that, in addition to reinforcing the racialized status quo, performances can imagine new ways of existing that reach toward a more equitable world outside the theater. brooks' interventions take place at the level of practice as opposed to performance. Instead of presenting a coherent model for enacting a different world, the worldmaking that occurs in IWB is decentralized and ongoing.

zines, and workshops, under the umbrella of Improvising While Black, which they describe as a “life/art/movement practice.” They contextualize their work inside of the always-ongoing project of surviving as a Black person in an anti-Black world. IWB activities take different forms: a body of performance works, a set of somatic techniques and improvisational practices brooks teaches at workshops and dance intensives, and an ongoing project of honoring Black artists and traditions that have been influential to, but minimally recognized within, the white-dominated avant-garde.

brooks has likened their choreographic process to that of an architect: “Architects that have to deal with earthquake-prone terrain have to imagine structures that move with the earth, and this is similar to how I choreograph with improvisation” (brooks, “mayfield brooks,” n.d.).<sup>58</sup> In addition to creating structures that can withstand the trembling of unstable and changeable contexts, experiences of rupture, loss, rage, and grief, and flashes of the spiritual and ancestral, brooks’ choreographic process situates itself within what brooks refers to as the “wreck”<sup>59</sup> of slavery and its afterlife.

Improvising While Black is rooted in brooks’ lived experience as a Black person navigating the turbulent and deadly conditions of anti-Blackness. One of their key interventions as a teacher is to be explicit that they are teaching from that perspective, rather than conveying a codified technique.<sup>60</sup> brooks explains that they developed their teaching strategies from hours in

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<sup>58</sup> This description appears in mayfield brooks’ artist statement for the Foundation of Contemporary Arts.

<sup>59</sup> brooks cites Adrienne Rich’s poem “Into the Wreck” as source material for this kernel of their research. The figure of the wreck has also been taken up by Christina Sharpe, who uses extended metaphors of the slave ship’s spaces (the hold, the wreck, the wake) to illuminate the continued disruptions and turbulences in the afterlife of slavery.

<sup>60</sup> Thank you to Makisig Akin, who drew my attention to brooks’ pedagogical philosophy that one’s particular life experience—which includes all that they have learned about movement, touch, and relationship in non-dance spaces—generates some of the most valuable teaching material.

practice, engaging the question, “What is happening with this body?” (brooks 2021b). Like other somatics dance practices, brooks’ study stems from a process of sustained inquiry into ingrained patterns, but points to the exclusive character of Eurocentric somatic strategies that assume a neutral or universal body, coded as white, who can be healed without reference to personal or cultural experience.<sup>61</sup> Somatics is one of many lineages brooks engages and critiques within IWB, drawing from their training at the School for New Dance Development (SNDO) in Amsterdam. They explain how they are well versed in modalities such as Body Mind Centering, Feldenkrais, and Alexander Technique, but point to the prohibitive pricing structure of training programs as a barrier to people of color. On a conceptual level, they also illustrate the limited nature of the concept of humanity promoted and served within the field of somatic practice:

All of them have been codified by people of European descent [...] my interruption is to say that this is my experience, as a body without agency, as a captive body, as a Black body. And I’m not talking about the Black body as an identity. I’m talking about this as a relation. So, it throws a wrench in the whole humanity that somatics is trying to establish. Somatics is trying to establish a kind of universal humanity that we can all heal. And what I’m saying is, from my experience, that does not exist. So, I want to open up something else for people who have been rejected from this idea that there’s a universal way to heal or that there’s a universal body that we have to understand. Because that’s what somatics does: it pushes you to enter the space of universality. I don’t have the capacity to go there. I can’t go there. I don’t have the permission. I will never have the permission. (brooks 2021b)

Instead of looking for universally effective strategies for healing or making presumptions as to the nature of the wound, brooks works from their lived experience as a point at which different practices, modes of being, and sources of knowledge intersect. They reference somatics as a lineage that they both draw from and destabilize while also making the case for a more expansive definition of somatics that integrates spiritual, communal, and ecological healing modalities. By

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<sup>61</sup> Doran George has provided a comprehensive articulation of the neutral, universal, and “natural” body within Western somatics dance practices in their book, *The Natural Body in Somatics Dance Training* (2020).

assembling these strategies, brooks points to the intersecting wounds of capitalism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, ableism, anthropocentrism, and other structures that render the world unlivable for human and more-than-human beings on earth. They also pose questions concerning the types of beings that might receive healing through practice, challenging the exclusive framework of “the human” that is the assumed participant in somatics practices.<sup>62</sup>

I reference these multiple practices that brooks gathers in IWB to foreground one of the central principles of brooks’ teaching, namely, to work from lived experience rather than abstract or universal concepts. Instead of thinking about how brooks’ approaches to improvisation perpetuate or intervene in lineages like Pentecostalism or Euro/American concert dance and somatics, I propose that it is more generative to attend to brooks’ alchemical combination of different lineages of practice, and their explorations of what those practices produce in the context of their own lived experience. When they teach, brooks also leaves space open for practitioners to observe their own relationships to the lineages with which brooks engages and how those relationships intertwine in a heterogeneous group.

The collision of lineages can produce disorientation in its own right (“What are we doing?” “Is this spiritual or secular?”<sup>63</sup>), by blurring the framing or, as phenomenologists would say, the “intention” of the activities. This combinatory strategy is exemplary of brooks’ commitment to “decomposition” as a practice that can unmake ingrained habits and perspectives. Decomposition, hearkening back to brooks’ work with compost as an urban farmer, is related to

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<sup>62</sup> When I invoke “the human,” I am again referring to an exclusive Eurocentric construct of the liberal individual subject that has been imposed as universal (Wynter 2003) while being fashioned through opposition to Blackness and animality, which have also been conceived of as linked (Jackson 2020). For additional critiques of the human, see McKittrick (2015), Wynter (2003), Spillers (1987), Weheliye (2014), and Wilderson (2010, 2018, 2020).

<sup>63</sup> These are questions that have surfaced in IWB workshops as well as in post-workshop interviews with participants.

disorientation inasmuch as it provides a way of understanding the potential for new possibilities to emerge when things break down. Decomposing layers different materials, which lose their distinction as separate things and create a substrate that can support new life. Decomposing as a theme also tacitly refers to “composing” and “composition” as central activities within choreography and contemporary dance practice, asking “What might happen if we released ourselves from the need to compose ourselves for others?” In a recent interview, brooks underlined that the process of decomposition can be specific to each person. As a regenerative process, decomposition, they shared, is also about the acknowledgment of different kinds of rupture that occur in one’s living: “I don’t know what is going to come out of it. I won’t want to project onto you or anything else. I can only be with it” (2021b).

Decomposition is thickened by another important lens that informs IWB. brooks self-identifies as Afropessimist, a philosophy and area of scholarship<sup>64</sup> concerned with the mechanisms by which Black people are actively excluded from the category of the self-possessing, rights-bearing, modern “human” being. The term “Afropessimism” was introduced by Frank B. Wilderson III and describes a critical framework that accounts for civil society’s dependence on a regime of anti-Black violence that positions Black people as its opposite. Building on Orlando Patterson’s concept of “social death” (Patterson 1982), Frank Wilderson has asserted that the only way to end slavery, which continues in the present through the denial of humanity and futurity to Black subjects, is apocalypse. Only by ending a world built on the destruction of Black life can new growth emerge (Wilderson 2010; 2018; 2020). Afropessimist theory rumbles underneath many of brooks’ IWB manifestations, particularly through the

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<sup>64</sup> This framework has also been associated with work by theorists including Dionne Brand, Patrice Douglass, Saidiya Hartman, Achille Mbembe, Christina Sharpe, Hortense Spillers, and Sylvia Wynter (Douglass, Terreffe, and Wilderson 2018).



provocation that Blackness exists in a paradoxical relationship to both life and death. If, according to Afropessimist theory, Blackness has been constructed as a form of social death, IWB practices improvise within the wreckage of living-while-dying, seeking out strategies for “meeting life” (brooks 2021b) under these conditions.

The relationship between IWB as a pedagogy and a lived experience is important to clarify from the start and will continue to produce tensions to be grappled with throughout the workshop and within this chapter. Whereas a pedagogy might be shareable with others, a lived experience is non-transferrable. By establishing their own experience as the grounds upon which their pedagogical practices have developed, brooks asks each participant to consider how the specificities of their own living inform how they engage with the practices and with fellow participants. IWB workshops in which I have participated convene numerous vectors of commonality and difference, among which race is prominent. In this context, the pronoun “we” is vexed and unstable. brooks invites participants by invoking a “we” in their descriptions and spoken instructions,<sup>65</sup> which allude to the activities “we” will practice together. However, they also destabilize this speculative “we” that *might* come together in IWB by including more particular constellations of “we,” such as the “we” in the Staple Singers’ refrain. In this article, I follow brooks’ lead by referring to a “we” that is invited to practice, and that may or may not exist as a felt sense of “we” for any participant at any given moment. This “we” is not meant as an authoritative universal voice or a claim to unity,<sup>66</sup> but intended as one of many questions to be grappled with improvisationally.

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<sup>65</sup> “*We* witness each other! There is play, dynamic partnering, deep belly laughter, wandering, reading, writing, questioning, critiquing, seeking, democratizing, deconstructing, and whatever else *we* find in the wildness of improvisation” (brooks 2020 [emphasis added]).

<sup>66</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw has highlighted the use of “we” to denote an authoritative universal voice as a maneuver that inhibits intersectional analyses of experience (see Crenshaw 1989).

## Methods

brooks' centering of lived experience implicates me and informs my methodology. My analysis draws from my experiences as a white participant in IWB workshops between 2019 and 2021. As a participant, I used a multisensory ethnographic approach<sup>67</sup> to engage participant observation, tracking the details of brooks' pedagogy, the strategies participants use to respond to brooks' proposals, and the conversations that ensue around the practice. I took special note of the language, imagery, questions, and actions that recurred over multiple practices, and considered how individual practices were layered to produce nuanced and varied experiences of themes including disorientation, sensitization, witnessing, resistance, and repair.

Adopting Sachi Sekimoto and Christopher Brown's method of "critical sensory awareness," which attunes the observer to the ways in which racial (and other) ideologies become naturalized as instincts and reflexes, I track the ways in which IWB practices confront the corporeal habits I have assimilated as a white person. In attempts to acknowledge, but not to center whiteness, I also use the method of "critical sensory awareness" to guide conversations with other participants from a range of identities and experiences, which I employ to complement and complicate my own experiences of IWB workshops. I rely on interviews I conducted with brooks and other participants to thicken the insights from my own experiences as well as informal group discussions and conversations that occurred before and after IWB practices in Los Angeles, Seattle, New York, and on Zoom. In interviews, I asked participants to describe what they perceive as the main aspects of the practice, as well as to describe their relationships to and experiences of aspects like disorientation, sensitization, and repair within the

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<sup>67</sup> See Sarah Pink's *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (2015).

practice. Drawing from these interviews, I use discourse analysis to consider how brooks and participants are framing the practice and their experiences therein, and in particular to emphasize how participants draw a range of different experiences and meanings from the practices.

To ground the experiential and sometimes philosophical dimensions of the practice that emerge through participant-observation and conversation, I carry out choreographic analyses that attune me to the material results of IWB practices. Choreographic analysis supports my exploration of how the sensorial, kinetic, and discursive intersect within the improvisational actions that unfold in IWB workshops. Through aspects like space, time, affect, tone, movement, levels, arrangement, and formation, I consider how brooks' attentional interventions play out in movement, space, and relationships among dancers.

This combination of methods entails a constant shifting of perspectives: from participant, to observer, to friend, to collaborator, to student, to choreographic analyst. The synthesis forces me to zoom in and out to different ways of regarding IWB practices, occupying different physical positions in the room, and situating myself at varied distances from others. Rather than attempting to be objective, I see my position as inextricably entangled by these multiple relationships and perspectives in ways that are not possible to separate into neat, orderly roles. Instead, by pulling strings, I attempt to reveal different contours of the tangle. This approach is indebted to Martiniquan poet and scholar Édouard Glissant's call for opacity, which makes the case for relationality rather than transparency in intersubjective exchanges (1997).<sup>68</sup> Critiquing Eurocentric and colonialist systems of “understanding” predicated on comparison, Glissant argues that this necessarily entails a process of reduction that distorts the person being regarded.

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<sup>68</sup> Thank you to Will Rawls who introduced me to this text in his course Thick and Opaque: Writing on Dance at UCLA in winter 2021.

Instead of transparency, Glissant suggests one might adopt relationality as an ethical intersubjective approach that resists “grasping” the other (191). Drawing inspiration from this ethics of relationality, I acknowledge what Glissant calls the “opacities”—the mysteries and non-transparencies that each participant brings with them, which inform our improvisations with one another but cannot be fully known.

### **Framing Disorientation in Theory and Practice**

Standard Western definitions characterize disorientation as an altered mental state in which the person is suspended in confusion and impaired awareness, often as a result of intoxication, illness, or injury. For example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines disorientation as “the condition of having lost one's bearings; uncertainty as to direction. Also, a confused mental state, often due to disease, in which appreciation of one’s spatial position, personal identity, and relations, or of the passage of time, is disturbed.” Within these definitions, disorientation implies a lack of agency due to a loss of ability to locate oneself in time, space, and relationship with others.

Brooks and other dance artists have illustrated that not all disorientations entail a sudden plunge into chaos. In contrast with dominant definitions, choreographers have used disorientation to expand—rather than to decrease—their sense of agency by maneuvering around kinetic and aesthetic habits. They have proliferated techniques for cultivating disorientation by

restricting their dominant senses,<sup>69</sup> exploring thresholds of dizziness,<sup>70</sup> and stimulating vestibular disturbance through dancing in extended inversions.<sup>71</sup> In these practices, artists have rejected the assumption that disorientation is an accidental or negative mental state, and instead have channeled it through corporeal techniques that enable dancers to induce, sustain, and exit from states of disorientation while modulating physical risk. With notable exceptions,<sup>72</sup> many artists have treated disorientation as an apolitical strategy for moving “beyond” their enculturated movement habits. However, paralleling processes of appropriation pointed out by critical dance studies scholars, these approaches have exhibited a racialized dynamic in which white artists have instrumentalized Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Latinx movement practices as tools for disrupting their aesthetic habits, valuable for their “otherness” from white norms (Gottschild 1996; Novack 1988; 1990; Manning 2004; and Foster 2002).<sup>73</sup>

Scholars working within critical race studies and Black studies have articulated disorientation's political implications by connecting it to experiences of marginalization and ontological negation (Wilderson 2011; Thomas 2018). In an influential example, Frantz Fanon,

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<sup>69</sup> Some examples include Ishmael Houston-Jones's work with blindfolding, Anna Halprin's blindfolded outdoor walks, and the closed-eye explorations of Authentic Movement.

<sup>70</sup> Here I am referring to Ralph Lemon's twice repeated “drunk day” rehearsal in which he asked his dancers to rehearse after drinking and smoking pot as a way to pursue a “compositional formlessness” or “no-dance” (Lax 2016).

<sup>71</sup> Steve Paxton and Nancy Stark Smith have researched inversion's capacity to stimulate dancers' awareness of 360° (rather than gridded) space. Smith has also identified moments of disorientation or “temporary absences of reference” through her concept of the “gap”—defined as a naturally occurring phenomenon that arises within contact jams when the dancer is between dances. By noticing and avoiding the tendency to get a drink of water or use the bathroom during “gaps” in activity, Smith suggests that dancers might open themselves to new choices that arise from a lack of clear direction (Smith and Koteen 2008).

<sup>72</sup> Ishmael Houston-Jones, Ralph Lemon, Nia Love, and iele paloumpis are all artists who have used disorientation in their studio and/or teaching practices to challenge habitual ways of relating to and moving through the world in ways that bring together physical, cultural, and political orientations.

<sup>73</sup> In a noteworthy example, Steve Paxton celebrated the aikido roll for its ability to disrupt Euro/American movement patterns, having “arrived on our shores from the Orient” (Paxton 2003, 181).

hailed into Blackness by a hostile white gaze, stumbles both physically and existentially, losing his sense of self as it is collapsed onto his skin ([1957] 2008, 82). Although catalyzed by oppression, disorientation can also provoke an opening. Fanon writes, “Nevertheless with all my strength I refuse to accept that amputation. I feel in myself a soul as deep as the deepest of rivers, my chest has the power to expand without limit” (108). Disorientation, in this literature, is described as a Black space reclaimed through what Fred Moten has theorized as a double refusal or “a refusal of what has been refused” (Harney and Moten 2013, 96). To be thrown from exclusive conceptions of humanity that equate subjectivity with whiteness is to occupy perspective from which one might refuse the difference-producing logics and conceptualizations of order that make that ontological negation possible. Reading this refusal in choreographic terms, Jason King describes how Blackness “[performs] the direction of indirection, the mobility that is immobility; the re-orientation that is dis-orientation” and “remobilizes the concept of directionality” (2004, 28, 23). Dance and performance studies scholars have expanded the conversation about disorientation's political valences by examining corporeal gestures such as the lean (Adeyemi 2015; 2019), the stumble (Lepecki 2004), and the fall (King 2004; Whitehead 2017). In these examples, disorientation accrues political potency by enabling the disoriented to both move and forge community with others in spaces outside of the central, the vertical (King 2004; Albright 2018), the ordinary (Chaleff 2018), and the neutral (Willis 2016), which have been coopted by whiteness.

brooks’ approach to disorientation lays bare the interconnectedness of its choreographic, political, and ontological conceptualizations. Resonating with Fanon and King, brooks has described how, while developing the core elements of IWB, they gravitated toward disorientation as a somatic strategy for reckoning with and resisting ontological negation:

Falling off center, flailing arms, spiraling spine, loose neck and head, threatened consciousness, inviting danger, sadness, poetry, and failure. In this disoriented state, I entered the embodied experience of partially disembodied dancing: dancing that disrupts, misbehaves, and moves out of the line and form of Euro-American modern dance, tells stories, honors ancestors, asks questions, breaks rules, and improvises while Black. Because the veil disoriented my sense of a whole-body, I danced myself to pieces. (2016, 38–39)

With the help of a fabric veil, they used disorientation to create a space to grieve, study, explore, and connect with ancestors. In this instance, disorientation does not promise an escape from the “warped ontology of Blackness” but allows brooks to “shapeshift<sup>74</sup> in and out of the warp” (39).<sup>75</sup>



Figure 5 - mayfield brooks in performance at Movement Research.  
Photo: David Gonsier, 2018.

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<sup>74</sup> See Aimee Meredith Cox (2015) *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*.

<sup>75</sup> I am not taking up the question of freedom or escape in this chapter, although one of the aspects of brooks’ critique of contemporary dance and somatics is to reject the possibility that disorientation enables the practitioner to “escape” habit. Artists like Deborah Hay and Steve Paxton, both prominent within Euro/American concert dance canons, have explored disorientation as a way of “freeing oneself up” from one’s habits (see Bibler 2020). brooks’ framing of disorientation resonates more with Danielle Goldman’s theorization of improvisation as a skillful negotiation of shifting constraints (2010).

Like the contemporary dance and somatics practices brooks engages critically in their pedagogy, brooks' research approaches disorientation as a state one might access intentionally through skillful practice. However, brooks' cultivated disorientations are informed by racialized ontological disturbances that cannot necessarily be entered and exited at will. By mobilizing both valences of disorientation, brooks critiques somatic strategies that assume a neutral or universal body that can be invoked without reference to personal or cultural experience. Instead of constructing healing as a return to a primordial state of wholeness, brooks redefines somatics as a practice of questioning, "What is happening with this body?" and perhaps, "What is there to be healed?" (brooks 2021b).

Eschewing neutrality, brooks channels disorientation as a Black strategy for exposing and refusing a racialized regime of attention. With the term "racialized regime of attention," I build on the term "racialized regime of perception" developed by Sachi Sekimoto and Christopher Brown, who have highlighted how oppression takes place at the level of sensory practice (2020).<sup>76</sup> Modifying this to include attention, I emphasize how regimes of perception are held in place by corporeal actions of attention that organize perception. This regime of attention contributes to what David Howes and Constance Classen have called "social control of perceptibility," which determines who is seen, who is heard, whose pain is recognized. "Such control," they argue, "is exercised both officially and unofficially and determines not only who is perceived, but also *how* they are perceived" (Howes and Classen 2013, 66). Racialized regimes of attention oppress by ensuring that Black people receive less of the advantageous forms of attention while simultaneously being subjected to dehumanizing modes of attention. Examples

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<sup>76</sup> Sekimoto and Brown build this thinking from David Panagia's "regime of perception" (2009, 6-11), who expands on Jacques Rancière's "partitions" or "distributions" of the sensible (2006).



include the systematic undertreatment of Black patients' pain in medical settings (Trawalter et al. 2012; Hoffman et. al. 2016) and surveillance, policing, and tokenism that mark Black people as threatening or out of place in majority white spaces. Other forms of racialized sensory oppression that occur within the dominant attentive regime include objectification (Moten 2003), flattening or "epidermalization" (seeing people of color as defined by skin color or other visual traits) (Fanon [1952] 2008), and the projection of numbness or invulnerability (seeing people of color as less sensitive or vulnerable than white people) (Sharpe 2016; Hartman 1997). Because attention and action are closely linked, dominant regimes of attention also give rise to racially coded protocols for response. Regimes of attention inform inequalities concerning how subjects are policed, punished, supported, and cared for.

While attention and perception constitute domains for the enactment of racialized oppression, they can be sites for resisting, redressing, and enacting alternatives to the dominant regime. Christina Sharpe's "anagrammatical Blackness" (2016), which edits and reorganizes anti-Black optics, Ashon Crawley's theorization of Blackpentecostal breath and sounding practices (2017), and Hartman's careful assessment of the possibilities of witnessing (1997), each exemplify attentive practices that disrupt the materially, ideologically, and socially damaging effects dominant regimes of attention.

Racialized regimes of attention are consolidated through a process that Sekimoto and Brown theorize as the "sensory bioaccumulation of race." Through this sensory bioaccumulation, racial ideologies are felt and lived corporeally and become part of "natural" instincts and habits (2020). The ensuing regime is manifest in racialized sensory hierarchies that have linked vision with whiteness and truth, while devaluing knowledge that arrives from other senses and subject

positions.<sup>77</sup> It projects invulnerability based on visual markers in order to justify violence against people of color, denying them “sentient visceral subjectivity” (15). The paradoxical projection of invulnerability onto people in vulnerable groups also desensitizes those in dominant positions to the suffering of others, perpetuating the cycle.<sup>78</sup> In a 2019 interview, Brooks explained that their interest in disorientation is motivated by a desire to resensitize to that which is inhibited within anti-Black attentive regimes:

My obsession with disorientation is almost about searching for the senses. I feel so much about anti-Blackness is about de-sensitization and being de-sensitized from the ability to see people, hear people, acknowledge people.... With IWB, I’m constantly wanting to disorient and disrupt that normalcy, you know, that gratuitous violence that has become so normalized that it’s just part of the culture. The work of disorientation is about getting into a more sensitized place.... I’m working to disorient as a way to reach into something a little bit deeper and a little bit closer to a kind of understanding, whereas the first impulse might be to think of disorientation as just confusion. (2019c)

They connected the types of knowing that can emerge within states of disorientation to networks of transmission across the Black Atlantic that include the underground, the Undercommons, and the ancestral realm. They acknowledged that engaging disorientation as a sensitizing strategy might be counter-intuitive, but then added that their work is fundamentally concerned with the “counter,” wielding intuition and disorientation as a counter to the straight lines, road maps, and official histories of colonization and racial capitalism. “It’s more about that space of improvisation that is really in the abyss,” they offered, connecting the abyss to Glissant’s concept of opacity as a space that allows people to survive through being unintelligible and uncategorizable within systems that seek to hail them into stereotypes and fixed roles (1997).

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<sup>77</sup> As I discussed in Chapter 1, in the 19th century, German natural historian Lorenz Oken went as far as to create an ascending scale of “sensory perfection” that situated the white, European “eye-man” at the top of the hierarchy, and the Black, African “skin-man” at the bottom. In between were the Australian and Southeast Asian “tongue-man,” the Amerindian “nose-man,” and the Asian “ear-man” (Howes 2009, 10).

<sup>78</sup> For more on the reversal of perceived and actual vulnerability, see Gilson (2016).

“So, it’s not about shutting down?” I asked. They responded with, “My study is noticing and experimenting how the disorientation brings you into and through and maybe outside of the matrix, you know, what’s being presented...and also what might be possible” (2019c).

In their teaching, brooks guides participants into experiences of disorientation using strategies developed in their personal practice, including dropping the head, falling off-center, and moving backward. Here is a juncture in which IWB as a lived experience and a shared practice should not be conflated. Ontological and vestibular disorientations are not interchangeable, yet brooks highlights the ways in which anti-Black regimes of attention and the specific corporeal actions and postures that give rise to normative orientations are mutually constitutive. Rather than intervening in how participants perceive, brooks addresses verticality, head-firstness, visual dominance, and individualism as choreographic elements that help to reproduce anti-Black attentive regimes. It is this choreography that can be accessed by a racially integrated group that improvises with the possibilities that emerge through its subversion.

I use the term “choreographic elements” in an effort to describe how corporeal actions may help to reproduce anti-Black regimes of attention and vice versa, without implying that all performers bear the same relationship to them as habits. Some of these patterns overlap with Tema Okun’s fifteen characteristics of white supremacy culture—toxic behaviors that are valued, trained, and often required within institutions (2021). Like tenets of white supremacy culture, the elements affect participants differently. Addressing anti-Blackness through a set of choreographic elements points to the uniqueness of brooks’ intervention and highlights how brooks nurtures a “critical sensory awareness” (Sekimoto and Brown 2020, 11) of the ways in which attention is directed by racialized ideologies. Highlighting choreographic elements of anti-

Blackness as an “underscore,”<sup>79</sup> enables its subversion through subsequent “anti-scores”<sup>80</sup> that both unveil and interrupt a pattern by performing its opposite.

Returning to brooks’ opening directives, which sent us both backward and *toward* one another, I suggest that these introductions instigated a series of micro-disorientations by calling participants out of alignment with standard introductory procedures that often take place within institutional spaces. In doing so, they pointed to an implicit choreography that structures how people relate to time, space, and one another, even in actively anti-racist, queer-affirming, progressive organizations like Movement Research. Beginning by taking our time, beginning with music, beginning backwards, and beginning with multiple names instituted a “politics of beginning”<sup>81</sup> by subverting standard practices of introduction.

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<sup>79</sup> “Underscore” is a term that is often associated with a practice developed by Nancy Stark Smith and students. In Smith's practice, “Underscore” refers to the things a group of people do without necessarily knowing that they are doing them. “Underscore” is a helpful term because of the ways it parallels “orientation” as a set of actions, naturalized through repetition, that often goes unnoticed as “the way it has always been done” (Ahmed 2006, 87). The term also alludes to mayfield brooks’ involvement as a self-named “critical participant” within contact improvisation communities, especially as a co-editor of the journal *Contact Quarterly*. My understanding of “underscores” is also informed by Nia Love, who called me and other students of her 2018 advanced improvisation course at UCLA to use the Underscore to observe the economic, social, cultural, racial, and spiritual scores that operate in different spaces “before us and without us.”

<sup>80</sup> “Anti-score” is a term I use to describe identifying the principles of a score and completing its opposite. Ishmael Houston Jones and Fred Holland’s “‘Wrong’ Contact Manifesto 1983” is an example of an anti-score and spotlights the assumed whiteness and straightness of the contact improvisation dancer, who prioritizes cooperation and flow in a silent environment. If the normative scoring of CI practice encourages participants to filter out the social dimensions of their experiences by instead focusing solely on the universal laws of physics, “‘Wrong’ Contact Manifesto 1983” insists that race, class, gender, sexuality, and other dimensions of identity are integral to how the dance is experienced from the inside as well as the outside. Anti-scores make absences apparent by asking: What is implicitly left out of a score? Who is not in the room, and how does that change what can develop within the dance?

*“Wrong” Contact Manifesto 1983*

We are Black.

We will wear our ‘street’ clothes, (as opposed to sweats.)

We will wear heavy shoes, Fred, construction boots / Ishmael, Army.

We will talk to one another while dancing.

We will fuck with flow and intentionally interrupt one another and ourselves.

We will use a recorded music score—loud looping of sounds from Kung Fu movies by Mark Allen Larson.

We will stay out of physical contact much of the time.

<sup>81</sup> The term “politics of beginning” is inspired by a talk called “Bodies at Risk” given by choreographers Emily Johnson and Alice Sheppard (2021). Johnson and Sheppard used the bulk of their conversation together to talk about beginning and introducing, rather than addressing what it meant for Johnson, who is Indigenous, and Sheppard who is Black and disabled, to speak as “bodies at risk.” Citing the extractive and presumptive nature of the invitation by

The relaxed timing created a counter-rhythm to the temporal practices of racial capitalism, which promote an ethos of urgency in the drive to extract monetary value from time. Instead, participants had time to greet one another and take care of their own needs, which introduced well-being and community as otherwise values. Within the context of a workshop called “Improvising While Black,” taking our time was anything but casual. On an individual level, taking time allowed for time to take care of our basic bodily needs, to greet each other, to find ourselves in our dancing bodies after coming in off of the street.<sup>82</sup> Taking time articulated a value system that moved in friction with institutional time and its associated practices of efficiency, expediency, and urgency. Taking time can also be read as an act of reclaiming time within a system that has historically sought to extract and exploit Black labor-time through compartmentalized temporal structures, which allow that labor to be measured and extracted. In this way, starting late also refers back to lineages of Black resistance that have reclaimed time for their own purposes.<sup>83</sup> In “Black Time: Slavery, Metaphysics, and the Logic of Wellness,” Calvin Warren explains how the capitalist politics that underlie regimented time are disorienting inasmuch as they rob subjects of a felt sense of time. Warren describes how the theft of Black time was a key strategy of domination within the practices of chattel slavery. The translation of felt time into commodities disoriented Black beings, making them “*temporally homeless*. This disorientation provided the existential ground to discipline, punish, and destroy Black bodies”

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the University of Massachusetts Fine Arts Center, Sheppard and Johnson instead modeled slowness and care as a way of counteracting the extractive dynamics of the creative economy particularly in relationship to issues of identity and social justice.

<sup>82</sup> During interviews, my co-participants have also noted that the late start to IWB intensives made the space feel more “human” because there was time to meet each other as people rather than simply as students within a student-teacher hierarchy.

<sup>83</sup> For other descriptions of time-based resistances to racial capitalism, see Saidiya Hartman’s explication of “Stealing Away” (Hartman 1997, 13) and Tricia Hersey’s project, the “Nap Ministry” (Hersey 2023).

(2016, 61 [emphasis from original]). As this insight from Warren demonstrates, disorientation is not hegemonic, but relative to one's prior orientations. Thus, taking time is not an accidental gesture, but part of the praxis of Improvising While Black that helps to remap an "empty" dance studio as a Black-centered space that honors Black lineages and practices.

Following brooks' second directive, the group bypassed verbal introductions and started by moving backward toward one another. By sending us backward, brooks' directives both marked and circumvented visual dominance while instigating connections that occurred through multisensory exchanges. Instead of appraising each other visually, dancers met one another through heat, moving air, sound, and skin, connecting without ever looking at one another directly. Meeting back-first entailed a physical orientation towards one's partner(s) by facing away from them, but used facing away as a mode of connection, rather than negation. This pivot in facing rewrote normative definitions of orientation as being-towards by destabilizing the frontal nature of that exchange. Meeting back-first problematized vision's position at the apex of a racialized sensory hierarchy and demoted its utility as a mode of navigation and connection. In IWB practices in which white people are present, this is crucial because of the ways in which the white gaze can reinscribe anti-Black regimes of attention (Fanon [1952] 2008; Hartman 1997; Sharpe 2016; Fleetwood 2011). Decentering vision made space for other modes of address to emerge between partners, and furthermore required that we move in close proximity. While vision has been prized within Eurocentric frameworks of "objective" rationalism because it allows the observer to remove themselves from their context and gaze upon an event externally, hearing and touch are more implicating and permeable. To hear is to be touched by a vibration, and to feel the small bones in one's ear move along with it. While one can see without being

seen, touching is impossible without being touched back.<sup>84</sup> Thus, meeting backwards instituted a mode of address in which both partners were changed by the initial meeting either through sonic vibration or touch, which limited the potential for voyeurism. Finally, meeting back-first while listening to music in the background afforded opportunities for synesthetic “listening” through touch to how another person is hearing the music, as the basis for an introduction. Rather than taking in a series of visual markers associated with the standard divisors of gender, age, race, and more, we glimpsed a relational mode of exchange in which, instead of *looking at*, we practiced *listening with and through*.

Finally, when brooks asked us to give three names instead of one, they proposed alternatives to Eurocentric conceptions of the self as bounded and individual. They created opportunities for participants to appear to one another in ontological multiplicity via self-given names and names given by loved ones and relations. Self-naming referenced the practices of other Black artists, including jumatatu poe, Jaamil Olawale Kosoko, and Audré Lorde. In the context of IWB, self-naming invoked self-determination as a strategy for building Black subjectivities that refuse external definition, but mobilized this as a practice that might be adopted by a wider demographic in order to reimagine what it means to have a self. In doing so, they also activated Glissant’s “right to opacity,” or the right to not be transparently available or knowable to others (1997, 190). Working against colonial schemas in which naming is bound up with both understanding and owning, naming-oneself-as-multiple allowed for unstable and multivalent articulations of the self, which in turn, opened up more space for those selves to engage in a process of becoming. Finally, improvisational self-naming supports the enactment of

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<sup>84</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty has described this as touch’s “reversibility” in *Phenomenology of Perception* ([1945] 2013).

a Black-centered space by drawing on a lineage of Black self-determination while also potentially delegitimizing race as the single most important way a person can be identified or known. By “choreographing” introductions as a multi-step process that occurs through multiple senses and modes of address, these actions of arrival in IWB workshops centered Blackness, Black experience, and Black strategies while also undermining racialized attentive practices that fix Black subjectivities.<sup>85</sup>

Starting late, moving backwards, and improvisational self-naming took aim at the orientations of whiteness as present in institutionalized space while also enacting alternatives to the norm. These alternatives—to choose a temporality that is in tune with social and corporeal needs, to meet other people through intersubjective, non-visual greetings, and to exercise the right to introduce oneself as multiple—created individual and collective possibilities that extended beyond mere rejections of a norm. Instead, they scaffolded what Ashon Crawley has theorized as “otherwise possibilities.” Writing about the expressive bodily practices of Black Pentecostalism, Crawley suggests that practices (which he calls “choreosonics”) of whooping, shouting, noisemaking, and speaking in tongues activate alternatives to what he describes as an “aversive choreography” of both whiteness and Enlightenment thought in which the normative subject produces himself by turning away from objects, bodily experience, Blackness, and Black people (2017, 112-113). The aesthetics of Blackpentecostalism, he argues, challenge liberal logics of subjectivity, provide “extra-subjective” modes of being together, and generate “otherwise possibilities” of social organization and mobilization, centering on flesh as a vibrational and constantly moving dimension of being (4). Activating otherwise possibilities,

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<sup>85</sup> Christina Sharpe sensitizes us to the resonances between “holding” and “beholding” in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), in which she uses the extended metaphor of the hold of the slave ship to discuss how anti-Black perceptual practices extend the material conditions of holding through contemporary practices like “stop-and-frisk.”



brooks' initial disorientations enacted a double refusal, a turning-away-from-the-turning-away-from one's body, one's multiple senses, and one's relations with others, which had the effect of sending participants *toward* one another in otherwise configurations.

For Crawley, otherwise possibilities exist in the domain of imagination. They are the “epistemology through which sensual detection occurs” and a “way we think the world” (2). Otherwise possibilities are an inexhaustible resource; there are infinite alternatives to what is. The question, for Crawley, is how we might detect and activate them (3). Crawley's concept of otherwise possibilities brings into relief the ways that brooks' choreographies of introduction provide alternatives to normative practice by activating options that have always been there, but often lie dormant. Brooks' introductory disorientations and complementary sensitizations pivoted us away from habitual ways of attending to each other and in doing so, opened up possibilities for alternative ways of sensing each other, for revealing ourselves, and for building intersubjective relationships with others. Building on Crawley's concept of otherwise possibilities, which occur at the level of how we use our senses and imagination, I view brooks' practices of arriving individually and collectively within IWB as a facilitated choreography of attention in which we attuned to otherwise means of meeting each other. Like otherwise possibilities, these modes of engaging the self and other selves are not invented but have always been there (6). Crawley is careful to note that the otherwise is not utopic, but, if performed with care, might serve the causes of justice and equity (27).

I read these actions of beginning as enacting disorientation from the institutional and usual.<sup>86</sup> At the same time, they led participants into specific ways of orienting to each other,

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<sup>86</sup> This is a reference to Sara Ahmed's idea of “the institutional as usual” (2017), which describes how, through small acts of “use,” institutional regimes become entrenched. This obfuscates the role of individual actors in reproducing institutional harms and makes it difficult to enact change.

which built a foundation for subsequent intersubjective actions in the workshop. They oriented us to the context of racialization and the reality of our own racial heterogeneity, to legacies of racialized violence and their present forms, and to the different ways we are implicated by racializing processes. At the same time, the beginning practices also introduced the possibility of self-determination, which encouraged participants to auto-identify, and to have that identification repeated aloud by others. This process of self-identification—registered in multiple (sometimes contrasting) ways, and across different senses—was framed as an improvisation. It constituted an improvisational self-making in which the self was allowed to move, evolve, and exist in multiple ways rather than being fixed through stable categories and names. In IWB, race is always in the room, but the way it is lived out and grappled with is complex and works against processes of racial identification and representation that rely solely on visual markers, and furthermore, that assume that race is the single most important thing about a person’s identity. Instead, the introductory practices of IWB suggested that positioning oneself (in space, in history, in identity) is an ongoing practice that takes place in community. In this sense, introductions set the ground for a process of becoming that occurs at the individual and collective level. How can we attune to each other in ways that allow each other to continue becoming? What can become possible as a group when we attune to and relate to each other as having multiple identities and selves? How can a dance workshop help us train the capacity to “see” each other in our complexity, while leaving open opportunities for the people we see to continue to evolve and become? What might these modifications in how we perceive each other make possible? And how can this attention to each other’s state of becoming issue a small experience of repair against the anti-Black practices and rhetoric that seek to collapse being into stable identities?

## **Attuning to Backstories and Backgrounds**

*We are seated in groups of three, leaning our backs against one another. My back has been recontextualized several times since the beginning of the workshop. Over the past few days, mayfield has asked us to sensitize each of the vertebrae in our spines by scooting along the floor on our backs. We have explored our “backspaces,” using our pinky fingers to initiate whole-body spirals. One day, we launched ourselves into backward runs, trusting that someone waiting on the other side of the room would step forward to catch our weight. Today, we are taking turns sharing our “backstories.” With our backs connected in an outward-facing trio, we tell one another how we got our names, which often leads us to describe the people who named us or who we were named for. The activity is not an icebreaker. Entering our fourth day together, we already know the names of everyone in the room. Instead, the focus is on illuminating threads of the ancestral webs that are present but not always apparent to others when people assemble in the studio. As each person shares, the whole trio moves, maintaining a supportive, weight-bearing connection.*

*This elision between the physical and historical/ancestral backspace happens in many different ways in IWB workshops. Mayfield layers the backspace with signification, describing it as both an unknown and unseen space, as well as a potential source of support. They recount how, in moments of hardship, they have drawn on Black queer ancestors, including Marsha P. Johnson and Julius Eastman, who have “had their back” in moments when other supports have failed. They ask each of us to acknowledge the people that support our actions in the present. In this context, spiraling into the backspace provides a means of addressing ancestors. Likewise, supporting and being supported through one another’s physical backs invites us to access the*

*strength of both living people and ancestors in the room, sometimes blurring distinctions between the two.*

Activities in IWB that asked participants to engage their ancestors established support and context for the workshop as a whole. We sat together and wrote letters to them, made space for them at a communal altar, spoke their names, shared their stories, and moved toward them by moving backward. Like the phenomenological concept of the “background,” our backstories gave shape to our experiences in the present. In phenomenology, the background is that which is *not* the object of one’s attention but is nonetheless critical to one’s perceptions of objects in the foreground (Ahmed 2006, 32). In contrast, brooks’ invocation of backspaces and backstories asked participants to *foreground* the background as a condition of possibility for interactions in the “present,” while also destabilizing Eurocentric conceptualizations of the “present moment” that surface within many approaches to contemporary dance improvisation. To invoke backstories is to attune to the “present” in ways that acknowledge the circularity of time,<sup>87</sup> the intricacies of lived experience, and the present-tense existence of ancestral entities.

When introducing their broader IWB research, brooks often explains how they arrived at the project after “driving while Black”<sup>88</sup> in San Francisco. They describe an incident in which they were arrested and imprisoned overnight for a minor traffic violation. Catalyzed by this acute

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<sup>87</sup> In a conversation we had in February 2022, brooks pointed out the multiple layers of “present” that are active in this passage as a reference to Black cyclical temporalities, which contrast with Eurocentric and linear conceptualizations of time (brooks 2022). For a discussion of how circular time operates within Africanist ritual and aesthetic practices, see Imani (2012) and Selassie (2012).

<sup>88</sup> “Driving while Black” is a reference to “Driving While Intoxicated” (DWI) and is used to highlight how Blackness is criminalized, such that performing ordinary activities “while Black” or Brown can result in suspicion, arrest, and wrongful death (as in the cases of Philando Castile in 2016, Daunte Wright in 2021, and Caron Nazario in 2021). A 1999 special report by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) described how, in multiple states in the United States, Black motorists were between two and five times as likely to be pulled over, with the presence of less meaningful evidence of offense, even though they are statistically no more likely than white motorists to be found with “contraband” in their cars (Harris 1999).

experience of racialized precarity and lack of agency, brooks turned their focus to the ways in which their experiences as a performing artist were also subject to racial profiling: “Simply put, in the context of slavery, Blackness cannot exist without being profiled by the audience, society, and myself” (brooks 2016, 36). The name, “Improvising While Black,” alludes to the entrenched orientations that regard Blackness as threatening, suspicious, or out of place, and that jeopardize Black life under “ordinary” conditions.

In IWB workshops, brooks shares this backstory as the impetus for the practices they teach, linking workshop improvisations to higher stakes improvisational survival strategies they have inherited and adapted in their lifetime. This framing, which describes what “Improvising While Black” means for brooks, is not an invitation into voyeurism. It is a summons into a “collective possibility of how we are situated in different ways” (brooks 2022) within the context given by their backstory. Working from different locations in a racialized matrix, participants were urged to consider how they related to this background, and how an acknowledgment of anti-Blackness as a history, a regime of attention, and a condition of being exerts pressure on how actions unfold and are experienced within the workshop.

As for my backstory, I trace my entrance into IWB spaces back to an ambiguous invitation that brooks extends within their promotional materials. This ambiguous invitation neither explicitly invites nor restricts non-Black people from participating in IWB workshops. Although brooks often works with all-Black performance casts and workshop groups, noting that some of their work can only be undertaken in all-Black spaces, they also often leave the decision as to who should participate in IWB workshops to prospective participants. In addition to shifting the responsibility for how non-Black participants should engage in IWB to the

participants themselves, this ambiguity encourages participants to sustain a state of questioning that is a core aspect of IWB.

In their “Improvising While Black Manifesto,” brooks defines Improvising While Black as both a “radical embrace” and a “question” (2018a). Being embraced by IWB, which is not for me, reconfigures a yes/no question (“*Should I be here?*”) into a more nuanced and responsive mode of inquiry (“*How shall I go about being here with the specific others that have chosen to be here?*”). This provokes considerations of what concrete actions I and other white or non-Black people of color might take to support a Black-centered space, and in my case, while “improvising while white” within Improvising While Black. This is not just a conceptual exercise, but a choreographic one that elicits such questions as: Where do I place myself in the room in relationship to the events that are unfolding? How can I best support others? Can I move in ways that decenter whiteness without abdicating responsibility for my part in the improvisation? For other participants, the radical embrace provoked different questions: Am I Black enough to be here? Am I “dancer” enough to be here? In what other ways am I being “read” by this room? Can I trust my partner in this exercise? Who will trust me? What parts of myself and my history do I want to reveal within this exchange?<sup>89</sup>

According to brooks, IWB is about resisting the urge to find answers to the questions that arise. This is a critical layer of disorientation that asks participants to “prolong the not-knowing to a point where it’s actually really uncomfortable.” IWB, they shared, is saying “I don’t know” as an experiential provocation that is connected to an ethical position. “To say ‘you don’t know, I don’t know, we don’t know’ is an act of care” because it commits to a durational suspension of

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<sup>89</sup> Questions are synthesized from informal conversations and formal interviews I had with fellow participants between 2019 and 2021.

assumptions such that other kinds of interactions can take place (brooks 2022). Thus, the ambiguity of the invitation requires a certain kind of agility—the ability to be aware of and responsive to the many factors, both knowable and unknowable, that inform interactions in the dance. This ambiguous invitation is a precursor to the spatial and vestibular disorientations that take place later in the workshop and establishes the improvisational space of IWB as fundamentally unstable and always under negotiation.

### **Falling into Otherwise Coordinations**

*mayfield calls us over to watch a demonstration. They ask a dancer if he would be willing to help show the exercise with them and invite him to lie down on the floor. They teach the rest of us how to join our wrists: fanning our fingers outward in the shape of a butterfly to create a cradle for someone else's head. Holding the weight of their partner's head in their hands, they suggest he try to stand up and then return to the ground without engaging his neck muscles. He begins his ascent but stops when he feels his neck muscles fire reflexively. He pauses and restarts while mayfield pivots around him, supporting his skull so that he can release more of its weight. Returning to the ground seems even more difficult. Suddenly, the dancer seems to get a flash of confidence and dives toward the floor in a breathtaking fall. He lets out a shout of surprise. Mayfield does not miss a beat and follows him to the ground, laying his head down safely. When he stands back up, he says something about catching the spirit, as if he had been moved by something else.*

*The first time I experience dropping my head back into someone else's hands is at a workshop mayfield taught at UCLA in 2019. I am partnered with a friend, which makes it easier to trust him to hold my weight. After experimenting with simple trajectories in and out of the*

*ground, we move into a more open improvisation in which I explore different ways of moving around the room without using my head and neck to direct myself. As we test out more daring shifts of weight, I begin to feel like I am in an extended fall—but rather than moving in and out of the studio floor, I am falling toward the moving surface of my partner's hands. I note a dramatic shift in how both of our bodies are organizing to follow the heavy weight of my head as it gathers momentum, flying through the large theater space and trailing the rest of my body like a comet tail. Dropping my head back into my partner's hands, I work against my tendency to orient visually by looking where I want to go. Instead, I let my weight fall and observe what happens next, taking in the whole room as it rotates upside down and sideways around me. Dizzy, yet supported, I find that I can persist in this interdependent state of multidirectional falling, avoiding both horizontal and vertical axes.*

*In conversations with fellow participants, we agree that repeating the exercise with various partners profoundly shaped how we conceive of “supportive touch” as an improvisational practice. One participant tells the group that they are learning something new each time about what effective support entails. Through repetition with different partners, they explain that they are finding that support requires an attunement not only to the volume, mass, and direction of momentum, but also to the ways in which this exercise instantiates an intersection of two people's prior knowledge of touch. Another participant shares that when they partner with friends, they ease into the role without much deliberation. However, when they partner with people they have not met before, and especially if their partnership spans differences in race, gender, age, or disability, they tend to slow down the process of making physical contact, taking extra measures to establish consent to touch. In one workshop, someone voices that they will not consent to be touched at all by white participants. mayfield reminds us*



*that, in instances when “supportive touch” is not possible given the conditions, any of us can exit to the nap space and call on ancestors as alternative sources of support. Alternately, they offer that we can use “energetic touch” (touch from a distance), or simply lend our attention to partners who do not want to be touched.*

To someone who has studied other somatic dance practices, this exercise of partnered dropping and supporting the head may be familiar as it appears in other somatic practices including Alexander Technique, Skinner Releasing Technique, and Feldenkrais. These exercises that seek to diminish “gripping” in the neck often aim cultivate a fluid movement aesthetic by using primarily anatomical references to coach students into “letting go.” By contrast, brooks’ approach to dropping and holding the head enacts a perspectival shift that enables a range of actions, coordinations, and experiences that would not be possible otherwise. In what follows, I offer that the alternating practices of dropping and supporting the head uses vestibular disorientation to articulate an “experiential critique” of racialized regimes of attention.

I propose experiential critique as a practice that sensitizes participants to the existence and limitations of dominant orientations and gives access to an experience of, rather than merely describing, otherwise possibilities. An experiential critique exposes the shortcomings and harms inflicted by the normative, but also loosens the hold of normative orientations, enabling participants to see/feel/think/act beyond them. Echoing Sara Ahmed, disorientation has a critical character because it entails a “‘becoming oblique’ of the world, a becoming that is at once interior and exterior, as that which is given, or as that which gives what is given a new angle” (2006, 162). Experiential critique is not about escaping into fantasy, but about perceiving in otherwise ways, taking note of otherwise aspects, and crafting otherwise ways of responding to others and the world. Experiential critique is potent in the context of a dominant regime of

attention that attempts to impose a hegemonic way of experiencing the world. It leverages experience as a preliminary site of resistance from which otherwise ways of perceiving and coordinating physically might take shape.<sup>90</sup>

There are at least three aspects of disorientation induced by dropping and holding the head: (1) choreographic disorientations that rearranged postures and spatial relationships; (2) perceptual and vestibular disorientations that reorganized sensory hierarchies; and (3) relational disorientations that disrupted individualism and encouraged an attunement to thoughtful flesh. Although I list them separately here for clarity, they are always mutually entangled in practice.

Choreographically, dropping the head changed one's bodily posture from upright to slanted. This is not just a spatial maneuver. As scholarship in critical race studies and feminist theory has illuminated, racial and patriarchal capitalist society maps social marginalization on a geometric grid that measures worth according to one's performance of physical and moral uprightness (Massey 1994; 2005; King 2004; Cavarero 2016; Adeyemi 2019; Claid 2021). Verticality is a central tenet, a physical practice, and an ideological structure of whiteness, which stages Blackness, as Kemi Adeyemi has put it, "in its surrounding angles" (2019). In Adriana Cavarero's view, *homo erectus*, the upright, rational ideal of Western subjectivity, embodies the values of invulnerability and independence. The upright subject is opposed to the racialized, gendered, and disabled subject who is "inclined" towards others. This brings up associations with inclinations toward vice, as well as the labor of caring for others (2016).

Brooks' directives challenged participants to avoid their vertical axes and to move off-center. Through suspensions of leaning and falling, dropping the head presented what Adeyemi

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<sup>90</sup> In doing so, it is allied with decolonial pluriversality (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013 and Firmino-Castillo 2018), which will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

has called an “onto-kinetic mechanism” that troubles the supremacy of verticality (2019). Falling away from 90° verticality, failing to “measure *up*” or to follow the upward trajectory of “progress”<sup>91</sup> are paradoxical actions. Although the logics of verticality have been used to marginalize non-normative subjectivities, Adeyemi proposes that the specificity of 90° leaves numerous other angles available for occupation and furthermore, situates these angles as ripe sites for critique and resistance. Brooks’ invitation into durational falls, which were sustained with support, evoked lineages of Black and Global South performance that have celebrated groundedness (Dixon Gottschild 1996) or an “ethics of the ground” (Banerji 2010) and articulated critiques of racial capitalism’s logics of ascendance (King 2004; Whitehead 2017). Whether or not participants were attuned to these layers of significance around falling (many certainly were), a collective study of mobility outside the binary of 90°/180° affirmed the ongoing possibility of nonvertical ways of moving and being. If one regards anti-Blackness as a choreography that equates verticality with whiteness, actions of sustained falling can be read as both marking verticality’s entanglements with racist paradigms while also asking participants to develop the skills necessary to build community in alternative angles.

In addition to its spatial and postural disorientations, dropping the head introduced perceptual disruptions. When my head fell back, forward, and sideways, it created a micro-inversion in which my angle of sight did not coincide with the rest of my body’s posture. This adjustment rendered my visual sense unreliable as a navigational instrument. Furthermore, because I was being asked to prevent my neck muscles from stabilizing my head, it became

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<sup>91</sup> The logic of verticality and ascendance is also one that is present in discourses around innovation and contemporaneity in critical dance studies. Iconoclasm, newness, and vanguardism are implicated in a structure that situates non-white dance forms as “traditional,” static, and anti-modern. See SanSan Kwan’s “When is Contemporary Dance” (2017).

much more difficult to orient visually. In most of my attempts, tracking visual information exacerbated the feeling of vertigo, which I attempted to modulate by paying less attention visual stimuli, and instead foregrounding tactile and auditory senses. This produced a mode of focus in which my eyes observed what was happening but were minimally involved in making decisions about where I was going. My eyes observed rather than directing, while the rest of my body and my nonvisual senses adopted a more active role in wayfinding.

Dropping the head also demoted the head as a center of command. This action subverted the literal posture of rationalism and its prioritizing of mind over matter by creating a scenario in which matter—the movement of one’s weight—guided both action and thought. Furthermore, staying with this disorienting exercise for a long duration afforded time to hone the perceptual attunements necessary to organize effectively with each other through non-visual senses and on non-vertical planes. More specifically, in a context that acknowledges the racialized discourses and material practices that have sought to reduce some bodies to flesh, moving in this way animated flesh’s exquisite thoughtfulness. I experienced facets of this in my increasing capacity to navigate via my skin, weight, and mass, making sense of the space through the support my partner was offering, the floor, fluctuating temperatures, moving air, and vibrations made by other duets.

Moving with heightened sensitivity to flesh as an instrument of navigation and connection activated ontological and relational dimensions of disorientation. Like disorientation, flesh has been theorized as an aspect of Black being that is both imposed through violence and reclaimed through Black performance practices to generative ends. Hortense Spillers has differentiated “flesh” from “body,” using the former to describe the human form divested of its subjecthood (1987). Sylvia Wynter has argued that flesh is central to the articulation of “new

genres of the human” outside of the Eurocentric bounded individual (2003, 313). Building upon the work of Spillers and Wynter, Alexander Weheliye describes flesh as “a vestibular gash in the armor of Man, simultaneously a tool of dehumanization and a relational vestibule to alternative ways of being” (2014, 44). Flesh, for Ashon Crawley, is otherwise to the enclosed rational subject. Flesh is fundamentally open, vulnerable, and available for connections and vibrations that travel beyond the boundaries of the individual (2017, 25). In their interdependent coordinations, supporter and supported attuned to flesh by tracking each other’s weight, heat, sound, and momentum. Together, partners experimented at the edges of their abilities, working with curiosity to access possibilities within the parameters of trust that formed (or did not form) between partners. Moving this way afforded an experience of modes of co-organization that become available when a group collectively evades verticality and visual dominance and instead practices falling *as* and *toward* flesh.

This sustained investigation of interdependent falling complicates how falling has been imagined and performed in Euro/American contemporary dance and associated critical dance studies scholarship. Critical dance studies scholars have identified productive possibilities within the often negatively connoted experiences of disorientation and falling. Emilyn Claid has argued for a recuperation of falling as a way to activate play with the socio-spatial values of uprightness and upward mobility (2021). Using falling and aging as experiences that are part of what she refers to as a universal experience, she suggests that experimental dance practices that center around intentional falling might serve a broader public. Intentional falling, she suggests, “increases fluidity of thought and provides physical resources for living with psychological uncertainty” (2). Drawing from her experience as both a dancer and a psychotherapist, Claid argues that physical practices of falling can expand one’s “window of tolerance,” opening up

space between the extremes of hyper- and hypo-arousal in which the practitioner can engage with traumatic triggers without re-traumatizing themselves (138).

Echoing Claid, Ann Cooper Albright draws from her experience as a dancer and teacher of contact improvisation to argue that falling techniques drawn from postmodern dance afford ways to balance the “social, political, and economic unpredictability that surrounds us these days” (2018, 1). Physical practices that introduce students to experiences of disorientation can entrain what she calls “psychic tolerance” for dealing with destabilizing aspects of life, including confusion, being off-balance, and feeling uncomfortable (53). Albright furthermore posits that physical experiences in a dance studio can be used to teach concepts like “responsiveness,” “resistance,” and “resilience” outside of the dance studio. She metaphorizes aspects of contact improvisation practice, including “experiencing multiple directions at once,” to suggest that students might use those to help them navigate impulses to fight, flight, and freeze during difficult conversations outside the studio.

Texts like Albright’s and Claid’s advance a somewhat universalizing view of what falling can teach “us.” Albright in particular discusses a general fear of falling, but while she acknowledges that experiences of disorientation and falling have racial dimensions, she does not detail how the techniques she uses—which are largely drawn from contact improvisation—might serve a heterogeneous population. Especially because techniques such as contact improvisation have actively inhibited attention to social and cultural context within the specialized studio spaces in which they are practiced, it seems unlikely that these techniques could, without modification, serve political projects anchored in the same kinds of social and historical context that CI practice inhibits engagement with. Their invocation of falling practices as universally useful reinstates the gaps in awareness that Brooks seeks to unmask. By contrast, Brooks is

invested in creating spaces of unknowing in which solutions can emerge in response to specific needs rather than as prescriptions.

As a self-described “critical participant” of CI and other white-dominated dance and somatic approaches (brooks 2018b, 39), brooks recontextualizes Euro/American contemporary dance’s abstract falls. Dropping and holding the head is one such example that references somatics and contact improvisation but refutes the assumption that there could be a one-size-fits-all way to support a person while they let their head fall back. Instead, when holding each other’s heads in IWB, the goal is to witness how each fall is different. To hold someone’s head in Improvising While Black is to understand that there are social, historical, relational, and anatomical entanglements that inform a person’s falling and how they experience that falling.

In IWB, the project of holding someone’s head is never simply about holding the neutral physical weight of someone else’s skull and brain. Holding the head can also mean holding a lot of baggage. Specifically, it requires contending with the metaphysical weight of objective rationalism and the ways it organizes relationships between people and the social significance of skin color and hair in a racialized regime. Because IWB workshops are generally heterogeneous in terms of race, age, gender identity, ability, and more, dropping and holding the head often places people in partnerships across several degrees of difference and forces them to confront the experiences that emerge from holding and being held across those differences. This was something my co-participants also noted as an impactful element of the practice. A white participant noted that the exercise made her aware of the fact that, despite participating in many similar exercises, she had never held a Black woman’s head before. She remembered how, in a non-IWB workshop, she partnered with the only Black woman in a somatics dance technique workshop. Because her partner did not want her hair touched, they collaborated to reimagine the

anatomical releasing exercise to respect her partner's boundaries. A participant in her twenties remarked that she was excited but nervous to work with a partner in her sixties, and how it was interesting to both support and be supported across that wide age difference. Another participant shared with me that, as a white participant, they had some concern over how to even select a partner and made the decision to be passive and wait for partners to come to her, so that she could be sure she was not coercing anyone. In one workshop, a Black participant voiced that they would not consent to be held, supported, or touched by white participants.

Before the holding even begins, dropping and holding the head presents a number of conditions that have to be negotiated in order to enter into an interdependent experience of support and supporting. Unlike dance workshops that presume that dancers can all equally participate in movement prompts, dropping and holding the head foregrounds the factors that play into whether one person might trust another and be able to relax (one's neck muscles, and more generally) in the other's presence. Dropping and holding the head brings up histories of past touches that are encoded in individual and collective histories, as well as questions about equity, reciprocity, and care among participants. Who is offering support? Is the support in line with the needs of the person being supported? Is the exchange of support equitable? Furthermore, the repetition of the exercise with multiple partners teaches the supporters and the supported that the terms and strategies of support must be renegotiated in relationship to each new configuration.

In IWB workshops, giving and receiving support is phrased as an improvisation; the exercise gives structure to improvisational interactions by determining roles and origin points, but leaves room for interpretation and negotiation. Rather than assuming a fixed destination, dropping and holding the head experiments with the kinetic and relational possibilities that



emerge from a sustained state of disorientation. In this practice, the duet form is part of what enables the disoriented person to endure the disorientation safely, by translating the task of orienting to hazards to the supporting partner (as one of many of the aspects they must track in that role). As an improvisation, dropping and holding the head implies that the exchange of support between partners will take different forms according to the capacities, needs, and desires of both partners, as well as their relationships to each other. As fellow participant Makisig Akin pointed out, the repetition of the activity with different partners *as* an improvisation taught them about the intricacies of giving support. They shared that, while in role of the supporting partner, each person they supported felt different in their hands; the actions required to support that partner had to be negotiated anew with each person. They noted that the experience of repeating the exercise with different partners taught them about different strategies they could use to support others, while also requiring them to suspend assumptions about how to support someone based on their experience with previous partners.

This quality of multisensory listening, accompanied by the suspension of assumptions concerning what a person needs or is “best” for them provides experiential training in effective care practices. As Joan C. Tronto describes it, “what is definitive about care, on the other hand, seems to be a perspective of taking the other’s needs as the starting point for what must be done” (1993, 105). Euro/American somatics exercises that assume that there is one best position for the head, and one best way to bring the head into that position, are thus at odds with this definition of care. Brooks’ exercises can be understood as training attentiveness as the preliminary requirement of care, which requires suspending one’s goals and concerns in order to be attentive to others (128). The physical activity of falling creates both a need for caring support and an

opportunity to practice extending that support, by taking participants out of vertical self-sufficiency.

On an interpersonal level, the exercise asks one person to be vulnerable—to literally let go of the reflexive tightening of one’s neck muscles to give their weight to the supporting person. From experience, this takes skill because it requires one to override defensive impulses to protect one’s neck by controlling the head. This is with good reason—incomplete support, fumbling, or jerking the head could cause physical injury. However, as Erinn Gilson has argued, vulnerability can present a platform for building relations with others. She writes, “only by being vulnerable can one extend oneself beyond oneself” (2014, 2). Vulnerability is a process of “letting go of that to which one has always held on—ways of understanding one’s self, interpretations of other’s actions, established beliefs—so that one may see better” (3). Gilson’s definition of vulnerability overlaps with disorientation. Both lead to a new way of sensing. Gilson furthermore emphasizes the ethical implications of this opening. Countering a negative conception of vulnerability that dominates in Euro/American cultures of independence, she proposes that attuning to our own and others’ vulnerabilities might form the basis for ethical response-ability towards each other (5). So, by asking participants to drop their heads into another’s hands, or to be accountable to the weight of someone else’s hands, brooks invites participants to experience two sides of vulnerability: both the shift in perception that occurs from letting go of the familiar, as well as the ethical obligation to support another. This points to an experience of vulnerability that participants can access in common, but also brings to the fore several ways in which the risks associated with making oneself vulnerable are distributed unequally in the room.

In addition to receiving support, the person dropping their head receives the intense focus of their supporting partner. In the context of IWB, allowing oneself to be seen without looking back brings up the problematics of how one is being regarded by others, particularly in racialized terms. For this reason, the falling partner can be understood as doubly vulnerable. On the other hand, the supporting partner is charged with figuring out how to “see” their partner by using visual and non-visual senses simultaneously: looking at them, noticing the contours of their skull, the texture and color of their skin, the grain of their hair, and perhaps how their clothes lie on their body. Once in motion, the visual details of their partner are subsumed by other multisensory stimuli: the direction of their weight, their proximity to the ground, the location and trajectory of other partners, the ways their breathing changes in surprise, fear, or delight. Dropping and holding the head asks both partners to contend with seeing and being seen while simultaneously heightening the importance of non-visual senses.

Echoing Brooks’ description of dancing under the veil and the ways it opened up ontological space within the warp of anti-Blackness, other participants have remarked on the forms of intimacy that disorientation facilitates. If dominant regimes of attention undergird a relationality predicated on identifying people with categories, dropping the head, in the frame of *Improvising While Black*, catalyzes practices of seeing, feeling, and touching that both acknowledge and exceed social identity:

It’s like being vulnerable with others creates these possibilities. Being disoriented with people is really uncomfortable and being uncomfortable is a vulnerable thing to just sit in. All of those things kind of connect. It leads to a connection with people, or yourself, or a part of yourself that was gone: like my ancestry, or my Blackness, or my connection to Blackness in contrast to whiteness. There are a lot of things that come up for me. (Miles 2021)

The above analysis admittedly focuses more on the possibilities of connection than its risks—which, in IWB, are considerable. What happens when a supporting partner fumbles or

misunderstands a request? Or when two duets collide with each other? Or when support is manipulative? What happens when touch feels violent because of the power dynamics at play between two people? Throughout the research and writing process for this chapter, I have observed how IWB's commitment to grappling with unanswerable questions often unmasks my persistent desire for a resolution, for proof that anti-Blackness can be fixed, or that harm can be avoided within or outside of the practice. Stimulating a relationship to thoughtful flesh is not, of course, inherently liberating; it does not promise to repair generational and personal wounds. It recombinates but does not unify; and the otherwise possibilities I have described may not be reproducible beyond the specialized zone of IWB practices. I do not wish to overstate the scope of this intervention, nor to understate the powerful effect a brush with the otherwise—as existing even within institutional spaces—might have. What the practice does offer is an opportunity to momentarily articulate and experience an otherwise way of relating to each other, and to entrain the perceptual, kinesthetic, and relational skills required to do so.

Exchanging nuanced and adaptive support is one of the skills honed through dropping and holding the head, which emphasizes listening to what a person's needs are, rather than employing a one-size-fits-all approach.<sup>92</sup> Framed as a technical exercise, support must be improvised sensitively in each duet. Because IWB continually invites recognition of partners' diverse contexts, holding another person's head or having one's head held is an activity in which our contexts intersect in ways that are not always legible to each other. Although we were all given the same basic parameters, the exercise offered an attunement to the nonuniversality of touch and weight. It asked participants to account for the complex factors, including race,

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<sup>92</sup> This is consistent with feminist paradigms of care that center on the needs of the person being cared for rather than imposing an idea of what is best for the person (Tronto 1993, 126–137).

gender, ability, personal and generational trauma, and other aspects of lived experience, that inform whether touch feels supportive or violent, and whether one feels safe enough to cede their weight into the care of another.<sup>93</sup> As with other invitations made within IWB, the invitation to touch is ambiguous and incomplete. The modifications Brooks offers and the nap space, which remains in the corner, reminds participants of the ongoing invitation to decide for oneself what one needs, even if it means leaving the exercise.

### **Training Witnesses: Disorientation as a Practice of Critical Unknowing**

*Several days into the intensive, Mayfield introduces a practice of calling for and giving witness, which they have adapted from their childhood experiences as a member of an Evangelical church in Manchester, Connecticut. They qualify that they no longer identify with the church, and in many ways felt that it was a source of oppression, particularly given their identity as a queer, nonbinary person. They also recognize the generative possibilities of witnessing as a somatic practice for the soulful body. Participants can initiate the action by calling out the phrase “Can I Get a Witness?!” or by raising their hand. The ensemble recognizes this as a request for witnessing, which can be performed in a number of ways. Mayfield describes how witnesses can support the caller with their attention, physical touch, or “energetic touch.” They explain that there are several different options for going about witnessing, but do not provide a detailed score. Witnesses must make improvisational choices in relationship to an emerging situation. Thus, the call “Can I Get a Witness?!” elicits a question*

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<sup>93</sup> In her article on the politics of touch within contact improvisation, Royona Mitra has called for “centraliz[ing] bodies of color and their experiences in the discourse that has mostly rendered them absent.” I connect this exercise, which situates touch as a negotiation that includes different dimensions of one's identity and lived experience, to Mitra's (2018, 17).

*in response: “How shall I witness?” The choice making also extends to those who call for witness. mayfield explains that callers have agency and are not required to accept the witnessing being offered “as is.” Instead, they can respond to the witnessing, asking for modifications.*

*“Can I Get a Witness?!” We gather around to support the caller, but every time we offer touch, they seem to collapse. mayfield clasps their arms around them, pinning their arms at their sides. “You can break the resistance. You can break through!” they say to the caller. Immediately they inflate to meet the pressure, moving out of a limp and yielding posture into a voluminous gallop around the room. “Can I Get a Witness?!” Another caller lies down in the circle we have made and begins to vibrate and yell. Many join and yell with them, creating a chorus of words that morphs into sounds and murmurs. Then the group quiets down and gives the caller pressure and light touches. “Can I Get a Witness?!” The next person is quieter. They lie still with their eyes closed and let a single tear fall. We stay with them. Everyone makes a different choice about where and when to touch, how much distance to leave between witnesses and witnessed, how much pressure to give, what kinds of sounds to make, and when to move to a new location. Some people contribute space, supporting from a distance and making soft humming noises to remind the caller that they are being accompanied.*

Within IWB projects, brooks introduces participants to witnessing as a somatic practice that intervenes in dominant regimes of attention. To practice brooks’ witnessing score is to be asked to move toward multiple otherwise possibilities simultaneously. Referring again to Crawley’s term that describes alternative ways of being that exist beyond the normative, the otherwise is a way to “think the world” that is not ideological, but performs its way into existence (2017, 2, 27). Witnessing troubles choreographic patterns that stage the ideal subject as static, vertical, visually dominant, and objective—pursuing rational thought by turning away

from their own context. By contrast, witnessing comes into existence through the mobile, multidirectional, multisensory, and implicated actions of participants, who volunteer support that is tailored to the needs of the person being witnessed.

First, witnessing is not seeing; witnessing is multisensory. In one workshop, as Brooks was describing the somatic components of witnessing, they offered: “our society is very confused when it comes to how we deal with seeing each other, when it comes to exposure.” Witnessing, they explained, “is different than being watched or looked at.” Illustrating the countering aspect of witnessing, Brooks defines witnessing in terms of what it is not: witnessing is not seeing or watching; witnessing is not being an onlooker or checking out the scene. Instead, witnesses contribute something; they tender their perceptual availability (their attention) to whatever needs to be expressed. In addition, witnesses provide feedback, confirming their attunement to the recipient and reflecting what is being witnessed through touch, movement, and rhythmic and vocal response. Witnesses experience that which is being witnessed across multiple senses and amplify it by joining in on the expression. Mirroring, reflecting, responding in complementary rhythm—all of these are strategies for attending to a person in ways that complicate choreographies of the static observer, voyeur, or spectator.

Second, witnessing is not objective; witnessing is implicated. Unlike seeing, which can take place in stillness and from an “objective” distance, witnessing is proximal, agile, and situationally responsive. Witnesses are implicated as participants within the process. The witness makes decisions about where to be in the space and how to support what is happening. They accompany the witnessed rather than watching them from a distance. Witnessing is relational in nature—responsive to both the witness and the witness’s social positionality and history of relationship.

Witnessing is different from understanding; instead, it tunes in to the gaps and absences within dominant regimes of attention and asks witnesses to reflect on why those gaps might exist. brooks explains this in a performance text that they often use to describe witnessing to IWB workshop participants: “This is the message. From the one you are about to witness...who has given up the ghost: I’m not asking you to see me. Sit, sip tea, do whatever you need to do to prepare yourself for the viewing hours. I am asking you to be a witness. CAN I GET A WITNESS?” After distancing witnessing from seeing, they sensitize witnesses to the impossibility of objective witnessing by reframing witnessing as contending with that which cannot be seen within anti-Black regimes of attention: “Remember I am not asking you to see me because the world has not prepared you to see me [...] Witness what you think you are seeing. Do not try to see me, do not try to look too hard.” brooks suggests that, instead of trying to look or watch, witnesses should take their own pulse:

I am asking you to take your pulse by pressing two fingers—the fingers to the left of your thumb on your left hand—against the small cavity of flesh behind & possibly slightly above your left earlobe. I am asking you to find your pulse. Are you alive? Are you a WITNESS of your own life in this moment? Thank your lucky stars that you alive in this moment and that you have this opportunity to recognize your own life. (2019b)

Taking one’s pulse routes the witnesses’ attention away from regarding brooks as a visual object or performer and instead asks them to enter into a state of co-presence with them. Taking one’s pulse forces a consideration of the precarity of life and the recognition that our lives are unequally precarious. Through the simple action of taking own pulse, brooks seems to be asking, “Now what”? To feel one’s pulse is to also consider the implications of living amidst an ideological system that has equated Blackness with social death. To feel one’s pulse also asks for a consideration of one’s aliveness in the absence of others who are no longer alive because of the violence imposed on Black life.



In addition, there are different instructions for witnesses based on their prior experience with anti-Black violence. Reversing the principle of objectivity, brooks implies that experiencing anti-Black violence is one of the conditions that enables one to see them:

If you do see me (really see me), you have most likely experienced anti-Black violence against your body, psyche, and ancestors. You know what anti-Black violence is and you know why I have given up the ghost at this particular moment in time. You know how dangerous it is to be alive. So, you are not just a witness. You need your own viewing hours, and I invite you to sit with me. (2019b)

Thus, brooks' call to witness has a performative<sup>94</sup> effect: it transforms audience members into witnesses while exposing the heterogeneity of the group in relationship to the work of witnessing. The practice of witnessing asks the witness to consider their pulse, their aliveness, their social positionality, and their archive of past experiences and to examine the ways in which these factors determine what they can see when they look at brooks.

Third, witnessing is not passive; witnessing implies future action. Witnessing does not end. Witnesses, in their aliveness, are also marked by their potential for future action: to either call for witnessing themselves, or to commit to actions of repair. In the *Viewing Hours* zine, brooks calls witnesses into an ongoing relationship by explaining that the work has only begun: "After the viewing hours, I would like you to commit to a practice of witnessing what you see, what you don't see, and what you cannot see. In other words, absorb yourself seeing, and not seeing." (2019b) Thus, to continue the practice of witnessing is to commit to dismantling dominant regimes of attention in which racism, visual dominance, and objectivity are entangled. This happens through the IWB praxis of sustained questioning rather than explaining or understanding. Reckoning with the failures of perception is, for brooks, part of attending to Blackness and Black being. A continued practice of witnessing is an ongoing effort to unsettle

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<sup>94</sup> I am using this word in the Austinian sense in that the words constitute an action in their own right (Austin 1962).

reliance on vision, to give up objectivity, and to forgo access to understanding, and to understand oneself as embedded within oppressive structures of perception.

Pointing to the responsibility of witnesses to carry out future action, brooks has cited the legal definition of witnessing as someone who, in a court of law, can give testimony or create a record of events. A witness can potentially participate in the delivery of justice. As brooks explained at a talk at the California State University-San Marcos, “[a] witness takes everything in and actually, in a court of law, is able to tell the story of what they saw to support the verdict, basically. So, I think that witnessing can be a very powerful tool towards regeneration” (2021a). A witness helps record what happened and, crucially, documents experiences that are not represented in official scriptures and histories.

Fourth, echoing brooks’ embrace of unanswerable questions, witnessing is not concerned with understanding or making sense of the expression being shared. Witnesses improvise ways of being with the person and the expression as it moves, rather than attempting to “grasp” the problem or impose solutions. Witnessing activates principles of “Black care,” which, by Calvin Warren’s definition, involves “a particular type of attentiveness or operation” and “a network of strategies and practices entailing the circulation, communication, and sharing of the non-sense hieroglyphic” (2016, 43–44). Black care and witnessing share ground as modes of exchange that operate amidst the gaps institutional authority and “justice.” As a Black care strategy, witnessing is not concerned with measuring the wounds being conveyed, in part because they may be incommensurable. Black care strategies acknowledge and aerate instead of quantifying or classifying; they lift up “non-sense” and unknowability in opposition to conceptions of understanding predicated on transparency and capture.

Asking for witnessing is an action of exposure that invites relation. It is important that “Can I Get a Witness?!” is voiced as a question because witnessing is replete with degrees of risk and the potential for failure. Asking to be witnessed is asking to be seen, to be highlighted, and potentially to be touched. Within a racialized regime of attention, this a dangerous proposition. brooks reminds prospective witnesses of the difficulties of witnessing: “But the question is, do we know how to be witnesses? Do we know how to witness this anti-Black violence? Do we know how to witness grief and be with it?” (2021a). Witnessing in a racially heterogeneous group is a risky practice, in part because it carries within it the possibility of reinforcing harmful perceptual practices. It implicitly acknowledges the dangers of empathy or presuming that one can access another's experience or act on their behalf. As Saidiya Hartman has cautioned, even well-intentioned acts of empathy, especially when performed by non-Black people, can reinscribe the trope of the Black body as fungible and available as a surface for the projection of thought and feeling (1997, 4, 19). To ask for witness in IWB is to make oneself vulnerable to others who are, at best, working to develop the skills necessary for effective witnessing. However, the question also acknowledges that the witnessing may be unsuccessful, misattuned, incomplete, or unavailable. At the same time, because anti-Blackness is reproduced in part through a racialized regime of attention, witnessing, as an otherwise mode of attuning to others, might also constitute a crucial strategy for addressing and repairing harms wrought through that regime.

Disorientation is a fundamental part of the training that prepares people to bear witness in IWB. By activating otherwise postures, sensory practices, and modes of relation, brooks’ disorienting exercises disrupt anti-Black regimes of attention and encourage a resensitization to that which has been obscured. Moving backward and falling, we deprioritized visual modes of

perception and instead attuned to one another through multiple senses. Introducing ourselves by multiple names, we affirmed the fluidity of selfhood rather than identifying one another according to inherited categories. Spiraling and falling helped us build the capacity to sustain states of vestibular and directional fluctuation by drawing on peer and ancestral support. Learning to support without making assumptions about the needs of others enabled us to stay agile and responsive in our delivery, joining rather than simply observing the events taking place. Disorientation, thus, provided kinetic, perceptual, and relational entryways into states of unknowing that enhanced our capacity to respond to an emerging situation. Rather than plunging participants into a state of helplessness, as anticipated within standard definitions, these disorientations sensitized participants to the plurality of options that exist in the realm of the otherwise.

Taken cumulatively, brooks' disorientations encourage a practice of unknowing that differs markedly from ignorance. Unlike ignorance, which connotes a lack of knowledge or information, unknowing is a perspective in which one acknowledges that the unknown and the unknowable vastly exceed the known. In contrast with naïveté, unknowing has critical qualities inasmuch as it entails a recognition of the many different realities that intersect when entities meet in an exchange, which points toward nuance without resorting to reductions and comparisons.<sup>95</sup> Unknowing is also encoded within witnessing as a "Black church literacy practice" (Smitherman 1977, 104), which vests testifiers with the authority to produce knowledge and historical records that exceed the written gospel (Ross 2003, 15). If the role of the testifier is to share their experience so that it can serve the community, witnesses are those

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<sup>95</sup> In addition to brooks' discursive and practical framings, my attunement to an ethic of unknowing is informed by Glissant's theory of opacity (1997) and Thomas F. DeFrantz's "I Am Black: (You Have to Be Willing to Not Know)" (2017).

who can “recognize the truth in the tale,” which hinges upon their willingness to “see beyond the truths they know” (Toliver, 2020, 510). In her synthesis of the components of witnessing, S. R. Toliver has argued that, in order to be witnesses, listeners are asked to suspend their own assumptions and to see themselves within the context of the testimony: “Through this process, the listener is encouraged to participate by challenging prior suppositions, suspending judgment, analyzing the story for meaning, and situating their own stories within the context of the story being told” (508). Thus, in addition to being ready to respond, the witness must also reevaluate their own perspective and the ways in which they may be implicated in the story being shared. R. E. Lathan has referred to the self-reflective aspect of witnessing as an intellectual exercise in which witnesses reflect critically on old ideas, ceding the known in order to receive that which is being shared through testimony (2014). Within both Brooks’ “Can I Get a Witness?!” score and the broader protocols of testifying and witnessing, disorientation is what distinguishes witnessing from other modes of attention. Witnessing is not just listening to a story; it is not observing an expression of pain or joy. True witnessing occurs when the witness considers how the expression shifts the landscape of the knowable and doable and adapts their own actions to this terrain.

## **Witnessing as Repair**

*Several days into the intensive, Mayfield introduces the group to the practice of “hot coals.” They describe how they adapted it from a specific experience she had in a church in East New York. The congregation had gathered in a celebration honoring the middle passage. As part of this, people were invited to walk across a section of embers and were then received by elders standing on the other side. Drawn in by the ceremony, Mayfield decided to try walking across the embers and later translated of some of the dynamics of the experience into an improvisational*

*score. mayfield often sets up the practice of “hot coals” by clarifying that we are not performing a religious practice, but instead finding ways of working with spirit as part of the soma. They also shared that situating these practices as practices rather than religious ceremony is strategic, offering them a way to reclaim their upbringing within the Pentecostal church for their own purposes.*

*In many of the intensives I have participated in, participants often disclose their own histories of religious practice. Often, there are several people in the space who have been shaped by Pentecostal and other evangelical religious practices. Mobilizing practices like “speaking in tongues” and “hot coals” as somatic practices, mayfield extends another ambiguous invitation. To position them within a workshop comprised of individuals with different religious experiences and affiliations is to offer them up for engagement—to imply that we could all participate in some fashion. Extending the idea of the ambiguous invitation, this asks participants to consider how to go about fulfilling the practice in ways that align with their own capacity, relationship to the practice, and relationship to others in the space.*

*To do hot coals, we stand in two lines of equal length, about six feet apart from each other. Following mayfield’s lead, we build a chorus of sounds and rhythms. We send breath and sound through different parts of our bodies: high up in our heads, low in our bellies, and places in between. We’re building, as mayfield calls it, a “field that can support whatever emerges in the space we are making together.” When we feel as a group that the chorus has gained traction, people can elect to walk through the channel of sound and fall backwards into the group’s waiting hands. Working together, we lift them up high and improvise a trajectory through the room. We end at the “nap space,” which has been arranged in advance but always gets reconfigured to address the specific needs of the person being laid down. Continuing the score,*

*we lay our hands on them or give energetic touch, sustaining, amplifying, altering, or softening the sounds we are making. We stay there, moving positions, coming closer or moving further away, shifting what we are doing in tune with what we are witnessing. Individually and collectively, we feel into the ending. Sometimes the person who is lying down stays for a long time. When this happens, one or two people remain to accompany them.*

*Witnessing a person walk across the coals never happens the same way twice. Practiced together, witnessing is a way of assembling our aggregated perceptual and physical capacities in service of the needs of the person being witnessed. We work as an ensemble, stepping up to fill the gaps so that the person can feel supported. If a lifted person's pelvis seems to be dropping down for lack of support, one of us steps in the middle and holds it. If the sounds feel too loud, someone will introduce a whisper. Sometimes, people give affirmations, singing out, "we got your back" or "you don't have to get up right now, you can stay right here as long as you like" or even "we love you."*

*Hot coals is not a neutral exercise, but a request for collective resources. As a participant, I weigh my desire to be witnessed against the implications it will set in motion in this context. Remembering a conversation with a fellow white participant, calling for witness feels like "asking to be centered" in a space dedicated to Black healing. What needs witnessing in this room? The first time we practice, three or four white people in our group step forward and make requests in quick succession.<sup>96</sup> As this dynamic repeats, I notice some people step back and support through energetic touch rather than carrying the white participants' physical weight.*

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<sup>96</sup> The ease with which white participants stepped forward to claim the group's resources is emblematic of Sara Ahmed's theorization of whiteness as an orientation that places objects "within reach," and in which the subject feels "at home" because the world has been constructed to be hospitable to whiteness (2007). When white participants are the first to step forward to claim the opportunity to be witnessed, they fulfill this assumption that objects, opportunities, and the labor of others are automatically available to them.

*After several turns, a number of BIPOC participants walk across the “coals” in quick succession. As each of these dancers asks to go up, the group shouts and cheers in encouragement, calling the walkers by name.*

The practice described above presented field of “hot coals” in its own right—dangerous to come into contact with, but potentially transformative. How does one go about finding their way across? Treading lightly? Moving quickly? Looking to others for support? How does one support a person walking across the coals? How can one know what support a person needs? Hot coals organized witnessing into an event—a dense situation that summoned many different interpretations of witnessing and used them to create transformative possibilities. It assembled the perceptual, material, and spiritual resources of the group and offered them up in service of the person making the journey. If attention constitutes a valuable resource, “hot coals” articulated a counter-choreography of attention that redistributes the resources created through attention and used them to create otherwise kinds of value. At the same time, the history of “hot coals”—as a Black somatic/survival practice—added to the intensity of the scenario. Racialized histories of value and the extraction of wealth from Black labor informed how we performed hot coals and interpreted each other’s contributions to the event. One fellow white participant shared that, within the frame of IWB, they felt that it would be impossible to ask to cross the coals as a white person:

The hot coals practice at the end. I was like, ‘there’s no way I’m putting myself forward for that, in terms of taking up space and my whiteness’ [...] Maybe if we were in for a week, and there was enough of a pause, that I could trust, proportionally, that the space was inviting me (space, meaning everybody in it) was really inviting my body... if I felt invited... that I could trust the invitation more than the question. But in two contexts (in New York, and in San Diego), I was like, ‘uh uh.’ (Cloud 2021).

The same participant shared that even their decision to stay in a supporting role was not a safe haven or fixed principle. After hearing a Black participant say that they would not consent to be



touched or supported by white participants, they observed that they felt sensitized to their whiteness in a way that they couldn't absolve or "step away from": "So it feels like a big welcome to be stewing in my own discomfort [...] because [we're] just building capacity to be in really shifting conditions, which then comes back to a priority around how things can move" (2021).

This practice reminds me of mayfield's ambiguous invitation to participate. Taken at face value, we were all invited to step up to be supported and witnessed during "hot coals." At the same time, each participant had to decide when and how to request the group's resources. Returning to the idea that IWB mobilizes questions rather than giving prescriptions, I interpret brooks' choice not to dictate how we engage with the practice as one that kept the question afloat so that we had to negotiate with each other. Rather than looking to mayfield to tell us how to relate to the practice and to each other based on our identities, we had to figure out how to improvisationally address the exploitative habits of whiteness as they surfaced amidst our attempts to practice care for each other. Furthermore, we all found different way of responding. Some people stepped back and withdrew or modified their offers for support, while several white participants stepped forward together, as if to offer to shoulder the burden that other white participants had placed on the group.

Echoing this ambiguity, a fellow participant shared that "hot coals" afforded the chance to practice supporting people in ways that were responsive to the situation:

For me, what stayed with me was the practice of laying someone down after lifting them up from the floor. Do you remember that? The act of that [...] and the repetition of it for me was solidifying the practice. That I'm able to practice it multiple times, and the importance that we do it all together to *everybody* was really great. And then the physicality and like the symbolism of it: you're down and then they bring you up, and then we give you this experience of being brought back [to the nap space] [...] The act of bringing someone up, the doing of it, was teaching me something, and it was making me more sensitive to what else is happening for me. Like, 'what does it feel like to carry this

person? What does it feel like to carry this other person? What does it feel like to bring them back down? What does it feel like to bring the other person back down? So really, the action was teaching me something. (Akin 2021)

Successive repetitions of “hot coals” required us to stay responsive to the events as they were unfolding rather than imposing the lens of past experience or trying to find a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting a person as they walked across the coals. All participants shared a requirement of openness in the role of the supporter to both perceive and respond to the walker.

I feel like the intensity started because I was standing across from mayfield, actually. And I could just see mayfield like doing all these movements and, like really getting into it. So, I really wanted to get into it. So, I was actually really getting into it... And I felt this energy building in me, I was like, ‘Oh my god this is like... Shoot! I can *feel* this!’ And, and then I remember kind of stopping and slowing down because I was starting to get overwhelmed by the intensity because I was looking around at everyone and I started feeling the energy of everyone trying to speak in tongues and do their thing. And I could feel a bit of our bodies kind of hitting each other and that kind of added to the intensity and I saw when somebody decided to walk to the front and then you know, get carried out, that was like building the tension. And after lifting and then walking to the corner and dropping them, it was just such a spiritual moment. It was it was very surreal. It was like a fever dream. (Miles 2021)

Still, as another participant described it, witnessing is a “high-risk practice.” The risks associated with witnessing, which are born differently by participants, have to be understood in light of the potential these activities hold for bringing about repair and transformation.<sup>97</sup> brooks situates witnessing as a potential avenue toward repairing the historical, corporeal, and ontological ruptures that lay open in the aftermath of slavery. They propose witnessing as an improvisational somatic practice rooted in histories of Black care and Black somatic survival strategies. They qualify that witnessing is something that can be practiced but will never be complete. At the same time, through repetition and continued commitment to practice, witnesses may become more skillful in their ability to redistribute attention as a parallel form of repair.

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<sup>97</sup> As Janet O’Shea has pointed out, engaging with risk can be generative because it enables people to negotiate dangers and threats under semi-controlled circumstances (2018).

To witnesses, brooks says:

Witness what you think you are seeing. Do not try to see me, do not try to look too hard.... I would like you to commit to a practice of witnessing what you see, what you don't see, and what you cannot see. In other words, absorb yourself seeing, and not seeing. You are responsible from this moment forth to commit yourself to this practice *as a move towards reparations*. And as you know, repair work takes centuries. You and I will not live to see the repair work completed, but you can still be a witness, because witnessing what you see means a lot. It's not everything, but it counts. The world that does not allow you to see me must end. Hopefully, you will aid in the process of ending that world. (2019b [emphasis added])

Thus, to practice witnessing is to unsettle anti-Black regimes of attention *as* a form of ongoing repair. Within witnessing practices, several types of repair are possible. The first is witnessing the wound. The second is reflecting on one's implicatedness in a racialized regime of attention. The third is assembling and redistributing attentional resources for the purposes of healing different kinds of wounds.

Saidiya Hartman theorizes witnessing as a form of repair in its ability to “attend to the breach instituted by the Middle Passage” (1997, 75). Among people who have a shared experience of rupture, witnessing offers the possibility of remembering the “connectedness experienced at the site of rupture, where the very consciousness of disconnectedness acts as a mode of testimony and memory” (73). Echoing brooks’ practice of veiled dancing wherein they self-witnessed and “danced [themselves] to pieces” (brooks 2016), Hartman’s definition of the repair that can come of witnessing is concerned with recognizing “the amputated body in its amputatedness, in the insistent recognition of the violated body as human flesh, in the cognition of its needs, and in the anticipation of its liberty” (73-74). Thus, witnessing occupies a temporal space of recognizing layers of past harms and past wholeness in order to move toward otherwise possibilities in the future. Like brooks, Hartman regards everyday practices of redress like witnessing as inadequate—they are not enough to restore that which has been lost through the

ruptures of transatlantic crossings, chattel slavery, and continued oppression, but they are nonetheless relevant as “counterinvestments” that can elicit “a re-membering of the social body” through the acknowledgment of devastation (76-77).

Echoing Hartman, Calvin Warren connects the project of repair to witnessing the lacerations produced through anti-Black violence. In his model for “Black care practices,” he expands the focus of repair from material wounds to the metaphysical realm of psyche and spirit, building on Christina Sharpe’s “wake work” as “a mode of attending to Black suffering and Black life that exceeds suffering” (Warren 2016, 42). Warren, Sharpe, and Hartman underscore a fundamental line witnessing must tread in order to attend to suffering while also avoiding reinscribing Black people as always already suffering. Warren describes Black care as “a particular type of attentiveness or operation,” and “a network of strategies and practices entailing the circulation, communication, and sharing of the non-sense hieroglyphic” (43-44). Warren also explains that Black care operates by the principles of opacity and non-sense, countering the dominant mode of attentiveness that seeks understanding and instead receiving the energy and texture of what is being shared.<sup>98</sup> Crucially, Black care does not fix suffering in place, but allows it to move and transform, circulating with the help of other participants who can share the weight of what is being communicated.

What Warren is pointing to is “an essential practice of attentiveness” (43) which he suggests may be found in artistic practices such as music, dance, and forms of expression that can communicate the laceration while retaining its non-sensicality. That is, these nonverbal or

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<sup>98</sup> “The objective of this [collective] sharing is not to understand the laceration with apodictic certainty, but to remain open to its opacity—to receive its affect. Institutional care rejects this affect; in fact, it pathologizes it in order to justify passive/violent practices. Sharing the sign, remaining open to its anagrammaticity is a form of Black care” (Warren 2016, 43).

non-sensical, affect-driven forms of communication help retain the opacity of the wound, safeguarding it from being understood through logic. Black care, in its emphasis on the non-sensical, also seems to tread closely with the disorienting aspect of witnessing, which remakes the grounds of experience through a dialogic communal practice.

One key difference between brooks' invitation to witness and these other articulations is that brooks mobilizes witnessing within a group of people whose experience of racialized violence is heterogeneous. IWB centers Blackness, Black people, and Black methodologies but remains permeable to the participation dancers of other racial identities, including white dancers. brooks' call to witness in *Viewing Hours* acknowledges that the labors of witnessing will be performed and felt differently because of the racialized differences in experience represented among the audience (2019b). Within the invitation to call for witness within IWB practices lies an ambiguity that requires the caller to consider what they are asking for and from whom. We are all invited to call "Can I Get a Witness?" but are asked to reflect on our relationship to the practice and the resources available in the room—not only spatially (in brooks' request that we monitor how many witnessing groups are active), but also according to our position within a matrix of forces that have necessitated the practice of witnessing. In IWB, the heterogeneity of potential witnesses informs the possibilities and stakes of attempting repair.

I have asked participants to reflect on what the word "repair" means for them within IWB. Some have mentioned that they experienced healing by participating in the work. At the same time, all of their definitions of healing and repair are different. One participant said that for them, "healing is acknowledging first: 'What is there to heal?'" (Akin 2021). They explained that, while taking brooks' IWB workshop they saw how brooks organized the space according to a set of values that contrasted sharply with other facilitation styles at their dance department

and university. They referenced brooks' practice of setting up a "nap area" in the space as an invitation to move in and out of the IWB exercises as an intervention that promoted wellness and self-determination rather than enforced participation and coercion. Another participant shared that IWB practices instigated repair by connecting her with parts of herself and her history that felt lost or minimized, citing IWB practices of connecting with and including ancestors reestablishing a sense of connection with their lineage as an adopted person. She also referred to the Black Pentecostal elements in the practice as giving opportunities to revisit aspects of their upbringing that they felt ashamed of (Anonymous 2021).

Other participants were skeptical of the possibility of repair within IWB practice; one person shared that they felt it was not theirs to presume the possibility of repair, especially as a white person discussing repair within a practice that defines Blackness as its frame. They said,

the only thing I could hold onto is maybe that it's a practice of showing up with the *what* and *how* of showing up [...]to me, presuming repair feels... I wouldn't... or I haven't... maybe...I don't know if I would in the future. I think I'm open to the proposal that the practice could be a practice of repair. That also feels like a question more than a statement (Cloud 2021).

Echoing feminist theories of care, this participant reaffirmed that the only person with the authority to call something reparative is the person to whom something has been lost.

## **Conclusion: Witnessing to Destroy the World**

In brooks' IWB manifesto, they define Improvising While Black as both a radical embrace and a question (2018a). I want to suggest that the problematics of witnessing and repair that surface in IWB practices operate through the principle of the question in ways that contribute productive nuances to discourses concerning reparations. What could constitute reparations, considering the scope of the damages? How does one reckon with the

immeasurability of the spiritual and generational costs of stolen lives?<sup>99</sup> brooks positions

witnessing as a practice that might help to internalize reparative processes by bringing them into the heart:

How do not-Black people in America who have benefited from this stolen life and labor even begin to make amends? The point of *Viewing Hours* is to deeply witness this question in the context of emotional labor, land, death & decay. I want repair work to begin with the message that decomposition has to happen at the heart level, and we must integrate this process into every aspect of our existence. (2019b)

By teaching people to transform themselves from onlookers to witnesses, brooks unmakes the choreographic elements of regimes of attention as a way of destroying the world of anti-Blackness. Using workshops as training platforms for witnessing, brooks recontextualizes witnessing from a practice that generally operates in Black or majority Black spaces to one that can (and should) be practiced by non-Black people. Drawing on the powerful nexus of elements within witnessing, which include dialogue, re-evaluations of prior judgments and assumptions, communal articulation of values, intersubjective perceptual attunements, and affirmations of self and spirit, brooks positions witnessing as a type of emotional labor that non-Black people can learn to do as a movement toward reparations.

Traditional witnessing, as an attentive practice, already contains within it a presumption that one must be willing to be dis-oriented—to temporarily suspend one’s conceptions of truth in order to receive transmissions of affect from the speaker. Witnessing leverages disorientation as both an expectation and a skill; an effective witness must be able to move away from their own ways of understanding reality in order to respond to whatever is being shared. In brooks’

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<sup>99</sup> Citing just one auction event, brooks writes in their zine for *Viewing Hours*, “If you intend to pay me or other Black people back for the auction that amassed \$300,000.00 in 1849, you would owe us \$5,000,000.00 now. Multiply that 5 million times another 5 million and another and another over and over again. Now think about the grief that accompanied slave labor, family separations, bodily mutilations, lost land. The reparations owed to me and to other Black people are an extraordinary record of endless compensation that has not been accounted for because the sheer wealth of our labor continues to be stolen. I would be counting every day for the rest of my life” (2019b).

workshops, disorientation is a sensitizing practice that heightens the efficacy of witnessing. Underneath the details of dropping one's head backwards into unseen hands, looking for what one cannot see, or dancing towards others back-first, lies a reverberating call to find ways of navigating in the absence of familiar landmarks. Building individual and collective capacities to surrender one's perspective to be changed through relationship with others and to endure sustained states of questioning, all while connecting to one's own body, heart, and spirit are at the core of what IWB practices teach.

IWB practices presume unstable ground. Evoking Christina Sharpe's concept of the "wake," which refers to the ongoing grief process of mourning losses accrued in the aftermath of slavery and in the wake of the literal slave ship, IWB "moves among the wreckage" and in the turbulence of surviving conditions that deny Black being (Brooks 2018a). Within this framing, the ability to survive in turbulence is a requirement of Black existence. In addition to dealing with the disorientations and ruptures that are a condition of everyday life, IWB embraces disorientation as a method for wrecking the world created and perpetuated by oppressive attentive regimes that re-entrench anti-Blackness. In IWB, disorientation serves as a way of working toward the Afropessimist project of destroying the current world that forecloses the possibility of Black humanity by destroying the practices through which reality is constructed. IWB's counter-choreographies of attention heighten multisensoriality, decompose unitary notions of the self, and catalyze intersubjective coordinations that honor context but respect opacity. These maneuvers instantiate experiential critique by loosening the influence of normative orientations toward verticality, objectivity, and individuality. More importantly, in this loosening, they also facilitate otherwise ontologies and intersubjective relationships, remaking



the terrain of possible experiences and actions in institutional spaces. In this way, IWB's disorientations are both destroying and reworlding practices.

The reparations to be found in witnessing are no substitute for monetary reparations, abolition, land-back movements, and other forms of remediation. This bears in mind Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's reminder that metaphorical "decolonizations" which do not involve material repatriation of land and life are incommensurable with decolonization and assist evasions of responsibility and accountability on the part of settlers and their descendants (2012). Similarly, the repair that may be possible through disorientation and witnessing should not be understood as an alternative to material reparations and abolition, but instead a *requirement* therein. IWB's reparative practices point to the internal and relational work that will have to accompany material reparations in order for them to be meaningful and durable.

The repair produced through the dialectic of disorientation, like the repair experienced through witnessing in Black worship spaces, exists in excess (or in the otherwise) of canonical texts and juridical systems. It does work that will not be accomplished through legislation or material transfer of wealth. Instead, the repair to be worked through takes place on sensorial, spiritual, and relational planes simultaneously. As such, this repair remakes the ways in which people encounter each other across differences—or maybe even across realities.

As a counter-choreography of attention that gathers and redistributes attentional resources for the purposes of healing, IWB practices address the losses that cannot be assigned monetary value (though money is still demanded and owed). Financial payments will not bring back the dead, repair wounds to the spirit, or weave together more supportive, equitable, and just social fabrics. Because of their scope, these losses are, in some ways, beyond recuperation.<sup>100</sup> However,

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<sup>100</sup> "Improvising While Black does not recuperate" (brooks 2018).

those losses can still be honored, acknowledged, and perhaps transformed through a metabolizing process that requires collective participation.

The world that does not allow you to see me must end. Hopefully, you will aid in the process of ending that world. Ending the world as we know it would be reparations. Think about how you might do that. This world must decompose until it's gone. Then we can start anew. Thank you for being here to witness this moment, even though this world may not allow you to see me, I am thankful that you are here, from the bottom of my heart. (2019b).

Thus, in the context of IWB, repair remains a question and an ongoing practice. Instead of looking for signs that repair has been performed, I conclude by underscoring the ongoingness of disorientation as a mode of world-destroying and world-remaking that one might work *toward* as an ongoing project of repair. As a critical practice, disorientation is a potent strategy for confronting habits, but entreats practitioners to stay with the turbulence of disruption, rather than immediately replacing old habits with new. It works by continually questioning orienting logics and practices and instigating otherwise modes of relation. If disorientation is indeed a loss of habitual ways of finding oneself and others, it also poses the question: How can we, as scholars, dancers, and people, practice losing those habits skillfully as a practice of care? As brooks mused in a recent conversation, “maybe we'll get there, maybe we won't, but the fact that the invitation is there is beautiful in its playfulness” (2022).

## Chapter 3 | Pluralizing Attention: Practicing Polyattentiveness in Parcon Resilience/Moving Rasa

### Introduction

*Harlem, New York City, 2016. Pedestrians stream out of the 96<sup>th</sup> Street subway station in Manhattan. Two men, dressed warmly, linger near a large bench-shaped structure of roughly hewn granite. Javaka, standing on the stone, grabs Andrew around the neck and pours his body weight onto Andrew's back. Andrew offers support by tilting forward slightly, creating a surface for Javaka to land on. They continue like this, exchanging weight while moving on and off of the rocks. Their movements have a roughhousing quality that is vigorous, yet gentle; lifting and pushing is balanced with softening and yielding. Sometimes, their movements require them to make contact with butts, groins, armpits, and necks. As they dance, people pass by. Some cast sideways glances, but don't reduce their speed. One man, wearing dreadlocks and holding a cup of coffee, has been watching them the whole time. As the two conclude their dance, he nods in acknowledgment.<sup>101</sup>*

*"Let's do one more, huh?" A woman says from offscreen.*

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<sup>101</sup> Description based on *Parcon I-HD* (Suseno 2016).



Figure 6 - Andrew Suseno and Javaka Steptoe practice Parcon in Manhattan/Lenapehoking, New York.  
Video still: Andrew Suseno, 2016.

***Tribeca, New York City 2018.*** *Two women reach hands toward each other making contact at the wrist. Both are seated in motorized wheelchairs. Using this touch point as a fulcrum, Colleen arcs around Ione like a tetherball around its pole. Colleen watches as Ione registers the approach of a third dancer, Andrew, who presses the side of his hip into her shoulder. He rolls forward, suspending himself on the back corner of the chair and she presses a button that sends them scooting forward towards a bench. He slides off, rolling onto the bench seat, parallel with the ground. Moments later, all three are in a different coordination. Colleen is in the middle, holding hands in a counterbalance with Ione, who has left her chair to explore the bench. She shifts levels by leaning into Colleen's support. Meanwhile, Andrew acts like a buttress for Colleen by leaning his weight against her chair. Colleen moves her chair backwards, cutting underneath Andrew's center of gravity, causing him to rotate around the upper edge of the chair. The three dancer bodies plus the body of the chair make a segmented tail that flexes away from the bench.<sup>102</sup>*

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<sup>102</sup> Description based on *Parcon&NVC Class and Jam 2 NYC, NY* (Suseno 2018).



Figure 1 - Ione Lewis, Colleen Roche, and Andrew Suseno practice in Manhattan/Lenapehoking.  
Video still: Andrew Suseno, 2018.

The descriptions above are taken from short video clips of a site-specific, improvisational movement practice that has been in development since 2015. ParconNYC, Parcon Resilience, and Moving Rasa are some of the names that have been used for the practice at different phases of its evolution. Parcon's founder, Indonesian-American dancer and physical therapist Andrew Suseno, often describes the genesis of the practice as emerging from the synthesis of two pre-existing movement forms: parkour and contact improvisation. Suseno<sup>103</sup> became interested in creating new ways of moving by combining these forms after being asked to teach contact improvisation principles at a parkour teachers' conference in New York City. As a practice, Parcon Resilience/Moving Rasa draws from these forms while radically reimagining the possibilities and stakes of each. Parcon retains the touch-based, weight-sharing, decentered

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<sup>103</sup> I refer to Andrew Suseno and other participants by their first names in my italicized descriptions of practices, and by their last names in my non-italicized analysis. This extends a tactic I am using throughout this dissertation to acknowledge the multiple kinds of relationship I have with the people I write about. In practice, I refer to them by first name, but in my analysis, I respect academic conventions by using their last name.

leadership structure of a contact improvisation dance, but transports it from the closed space of the dance studio to the permeable, textured, and unpredictable terrain of urban public spaces. Parcon also draws from parkour's creative navigation of an obstacle-laden environment but diverts the form's emphasis on efficiency and individualism by asking practitioners to listen and respond to the environment as an additional dancing body.

During the initial years of Parcon's development, collaborators were primarily interested in exploring the rich kinetic potential created by the fusion of contact improvisation and parkour. Early videos show members of the ParconNYC collective (Dean Beckwith, Cecilia Fontanesi, Funda Gul, Richard Kim, and Javaka Steptoe) assisting each other in gravity-defying vaults up scaffolding, twisting around railings, and spiraling onto and off of each other's backs in a fluid progression across animate and inanimate surfaces.<sup>104</sup> Members of the ParconNYC collective also shared physical training in contact improvisation and some had additional backgrounds in parkour, martial arts, and somatics.

In 2018, Suseno rebranded Parcon as Parcon Resilience to indicate a pivot from a primarily kinetic focus to a movement practice that would investigate synergies between somatics and social justice while centering the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).<sup>105</sup> While the ParconNYC collective had always intentionally maintained a BIPOC majority among its core collaborators, Parcon Resilience focused more explicitly on confronting multiple types of oppression through Parcon practice. Suseno also connected the term "resilience" to his need to navigate embedded cultures of colonialism and white supremacy

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<sup>104</sup> A short film shows some of the early ParconNYC practices in subway cars, on railings, in post offices, and other urban sites: *#1 Parcon NYC: Subway Stops* (Suseno 2017).

<sup>105</sup> Suseno describes the history of Parcon in an unpublished guidebook manuscript (2021b, 114).

in public and private spaces, as well as in dance and somatic movement communities (Suseno, “History” n.d.). Parcon Resilience resituated the intersubjective and environmental attunements honed within Parcon practice as crucial to the cultivation of resilience, which he defined as:

a practice of recovering agency through personal and collaborative movement, analysis, and reflection in varying contexts and terrains. It is the capacity to be with what is and what could be; and to call upon memory, resources, and relationships to fortify one’s body and one’s community to be with creative dissonance. (Suseno, “Who We Are” n.d.)

During the shift from ParconNYC to Parcon Resilience, Suseno sought to open the practice to a broader community of practitioners of different ages, abilities, class backgrounds, and cultural affiliations. He workshoped core exercises with community organizers, in senior centers, in children’s classes, at university residencies, and at the AXIS Project, a disability service and fitness center. Through his work at the AXIS project, Suseno developed sustained collaborations with Ione Lewis, Colleen Roche, and Jazalee Sirius, Parcon dancers with disabilities who became consistent co-investigators and shaped Parcon’s core concepts and practices (Suseno 2022a, 291). Alongside these projects, Suseno continued to recruit BIPOC collaborators at contact improvisation jams and festivals, assembling a group of participants who met regularly in New York City and gathered several times a year for workshops and intensives.

In a typical practice, two or more movers share weight across bodies, objects, and variable surfaces. In order to stay within the boundaries of wellbeing, participants track the mass, momentum, and structural support of all bodies involved, while simultaneously assessing the terrain for its form, hazards, texture, and ability to bear weight. Parcon further raises the stakes by situating these tasks in public spaces, which make the practice economically and physically accessible, but also adds layers of risk through exposure to non-participants. Participants have had to contend with what Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has described as “objective dangers,” including discarded needles, broken glass, and even feces, and “subjective dangers,” which, in

Parcon, arise from attributes specific to each participant, such as skill level. In Parcon, these subjective dangers also include the ways participants are “seen” differently according to social categories of identity, which are also site-specific. Because Parcon intentionally cultivates cooperation across several indices of difference, practitioners often collaborate with partners whose identity and physical capacities differ markedly from their own. This heightens the possibility of a third kind of danger that I call “intersubjective danger,” in which harm can be inflicted between participants as a result of uneven power dynamics. Sources of intersubjective danger might include racial profiling, policing, and surveillance from sources outside of the practice group, as well as cultural insensitivity, ignorance, bias, or microaggressions from passersby or even other participants. These intersubjective dangers can produce what Mel Chen has termed “representational injuries” (2012, 13).

Physical collaborations within Parcon require an acknowledgement that there are many types of specificity between assembling entities. Parcon practitioners work from the assumption that identities and past experience or “histories of arrival” (Ahmed 2006) inform how participants relate to objects, environments, and others. While Parcon asks participants to attune to and engage with participants’ social positionalities, and to be sensitive to how those and other factors inform how practitioners cooperate with each other, Parcon is not deterministic. That is, Parcon engages with hierarchical social relationships that intersect<sup>106</sup> when any two collaborators meet, but also experiments with them. These forces, like gravity or momentum, can also be played with and resisted. Crucially, when Parcon collaborators push the edges of socially constructed assumptions of how people should move, what kinds of bodies belong in public

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<sup>106</sup> This is in line with Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality that encourages a consideration of how multiple forms of oppression intersect and compound (1989).



space, and which kinds of people and objects should touch each other, they often do so in a public arena, which introduces the possibility that these boundaries will be reinscribed by outside observers. By playing with these social scripts, they institute what Janet O’Shea has articulated as a careful engagement with risk as a response to danger, wherein danger poses objective threats, while risk is experienced subjectively, and thus, differentially (2018, 89). Parcon exercises help attune participants to sources of danger and the ways in which the risks associated with those dangers are site-specific and unevenly distributed among participants. Furthermore, they help participants isolate some sources of danger such that they can be engaged in contained situations and, with support from other collaborators, attenuated.

These plural layers of complexity, escalated by risk, demand an almost virtuosic practice of attention. How can Parcon collaborators manage to support their partners—over variable terrain, across modes of physical and social difference, and within an unpredictable urban environment—while staying within the domain of wellbeing? This chapter proposes that a specialized form of attention I refer to as “polyattentiveness” is one of essential techniques required to meet these challenges.

I use the term polyattentiveness to describe the practice of being receptive and responsive to several types of phenomena simultaneously. I also explore how, in its category-crossing awareness, polyattention subverts logics that classify and separate phenomena within dominant modes of attention. Polyattentiveness happens through the engagement of multiple senses, and plural ways of understanding how one is positioned, including within spatial, social, historical, and corporeal contexts.

In addition to tracking several kinds of phenomena simultaneously, polyattentiveness can also entail perceiving a single thing in multiple ways. Phenomenologically, this has been

theorized through concepts such as “intentionality” (Husserl [1913] 2001) and “aspect seeing” (Wittgenstein 1953), both of which refer to the ways in which our perceptions of things are already laden with meaning. For example, when we hear someone speaking, we may hear-as noise, or hear-as language. When we observe a forest, we may see-as wood, or see-as trees. Thus, polyattentiveness also encourages participants to hold these multiple frames or “aspects” in mind as possible ways of both interpreting and connecting physically with others and objects.

Polyattentiveness does not necessarily require that all phenomena and frames of reference be held in simultaneous willful attention, but they are nonetheless acknowledged as potential ways of attuning that coexist. The participant’s job is to maintain attentional agility, moving between these modes. As longtime collaborator, Colleen Roche, has explained, “[It may not] be possible to attune to all of those directions at once [...] but cycling through those different awarenesses has an impact. Parcon doesn’t call for me to attend to everything. It calls for me to be present wholly” and to consider “the many ways that I can receive information and give information and move information, move histories, and memories” (2022). Accordingly, polyattentiveness describes an attempt to remain aware of the multiple possible aspects of, and multiple ways of drawing meaning from the perceivable environment, even when one is not exercising all options simultaneously.

The term polyattentiveness refers to “many” attentions. By attuning to multiplicity, participants become more aware of experience as relational—that is, unfolding with mutual influence between location, objects, ideas, past experiences, and interactions with others. I choose the term “relational” over “intersubjective” because, while both terms share an assumption that experience is mediated by our status of being-in-the-world-with-others, they bear important differences. “Intersubjectivity,” a term coined by Edmund Husserl, describes a

shared perception between two conscious minds, grounded in the assumption of a shared world (Duranti 2010). “Relationality,” a term more prevalent within Indigenous scholarship and philosophy, operates from a similar assumption of shared ties with others, but does not differentiate between subjects and objects. These terms also contrast structurally. Whereas intersubjectivity involves the possibility of a shared understanding between subjects about an external world, relationality is grounded in the responsibilities (Shea Murphy 2022, 3) that beings have within the relationships in which they are inextricably enmeshed (Firmino-Castillo 2018).

Destabilizing universality, polyattentiveness posits that there are potentially infinite ways to weave perceptions together as experience. Thus, rather than building a shared sense of a common world, polyattentiveness acknowledges that there may be many different worlds within, and ways of “worlding” a shared physical space (Firmino-Castillo 2018; Mignolo and Vazquez 2013). In addition, polyattentiveness’s emphasis on skillful attunement reinforces the idea that durable perspectives and worldviews are formed through practice, and, through practice, can be modified.<sup>107</sup>

In some cases, polyattentiveness develops in response to the demands of Parcon’s kinetic proposals. By situating its practice in a heterogeneous public space environment, Parcon “places” its movement in a setting that stimulates attunement to physical terrain and social context by necessity. Furthermore, participation in the practice reveals that the risks associated with practicing are not universal; they vary widely according to the ways in which movers are perceived within the social and cultural conditions of the practice environment. Because practice

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<sup>107</sup> This parallels Pierre Bourdieu’s idea that one’s *habitus* or comprehensive way of perceiving, conceiving, and acting, is shaped by physical practice, which occurs in the body and amidst social relations with others who are also practicing their worldview into being (1977).

occurs in public urban spaces, participants often must also contend with how they are perceived in the matrices of race, gender, ability, class, sexuality, and other categories of identity.

Parcon facilitators also develop polyattentiveness through training exercises. To prepare practitioners to manage the different kinds of risk associated with these conditions, Parcon pedagogy scaffolds polyattentiveness through exercises that teach participants to attune to multiple elements simultaneously or in close succession. In addition to helping participants track their weight as it moves over different kinds of surfaces, these exercises draw out the ways in which perspectives, movement possibilities, risks, and constraints are site-specific and experienced unevenly among participants, even when they share a physical location. I hold that polyattentiveness is crucial to developing sensitivity to one's relationship to varying degrees of privilege, access, and mobility within the practice space, and cultivates awareness of the ways these might impact participants' agency and safety in the specific context of each practice.

By helping participants build the capacity to attune and respond to multiple types or aspects of phenomena, Parcon's polyattentiveness makes apparent the limitations of dominant modes of attention that are based on a mechanics of narrowing through selection and exclusion. Polyattentiveness troubles hegemonic conceptualizations of attention in several ways: 1) it presumes a moving rather than a still body as the locus of attention; 2) it emphasizes multisensoriality rather than valuing vision over other senses; 3) it includes the impulses and reflexes of the nervous system as part of the process of thinking and knowing; 4) it foregrounds an ontology grounded in interdependence and "inextricable relationality" (Firmino-Castillo 2018, 36) that contrasts with bounded individualism; 5) it makes use of socially constructed categories, but rather than using them to reduce phenomena into compartments, it uses them in an additive way that "thickens" how participants' experiences of moving in their environments.

Likely, many of us exercise some form of polyattentiveness in our daily lives. As Alessandro Duranti and Nicco A. La Mattina (2022) have argued, “fluctuations of attention” are essential to everyday cooperative activities, such as walking together with someone or having a conversation. They describe the ideal cooperator as one who can “manage concurrent involvement in multiple activities,” which, furthermore, have competing “attentional pulls” (92). Polyattentiveness may also evoke comparisons with multitasking, another practice of attention that involves rapid toggling between separate actions. Polyattentiveness supports the performance of multiple tasks, such as trying to dance in physical contact with a human partner while having a conversation about how their different gender identities impact their sense of agency in the practice site. However, whereas multitasking entails jumping between tasks that are conceived of as separate, Parcon’s polyattentiveness requires participants to track multiple distinct phenomena in order to uncover how they might be related, and why they may have been presumed to be separate. More precisely, Parcon asks participants to attune to phenomena that have been separated by the difference-producing logics encoded within Western epistemologies.

Dovetailing with ParconNYC’s transformation from a primarily movement-oriented practice to Parcon Resilience, which has an explicitly antiracist, anticolonial, and accessible mission, polyattentiveness serves both pragmatic and political purposes. In this chapter, I explicate how attention is a central aspect of Parcon movement technique, which dovetails with my larger argument that attention is a whole-bodied practice rather than a primarily cognitive process. I examine how polyattentiveness both emerges in response to the physical demands of sharing weight in an unpredictable environment and is intentionally cultivated by facilitators as one of the technical foundations of the practice. Throughout this analysis, I detail some of the perceptual, physical, ontological, and relational openings that polyattention facilitates. I ask how

using attention as a key strategy for organizing movement interacts with Parcon’s mission to create a radically accessible and anticolonial<sup>108</sup> movement practice. In doing so, I aim to contribute to an emerging conversation within critical dance studies concerning Indigenous, Global South, and anticolonial articulations of dance as a relational, rather than a presentational practice (Firmino-Castillo 2018; Chatterjea 2020; Shea Murphy 2022).

Among the questions that guide my analysis are: How does one ‘do’ polyattentiveness? How do facilitators scaffold polyattention by gradually adding layers to practitioners’ focus? I also ask: What does polyattentiveness ‘do’? What are the material possibilities that it gives access to? What kinds of conversations and collaborations are made available through polyattentiveness that might be inhibited by normative attention? What are its risks and limits? With support from decolonial theory and critical disability theory, I illustrate how Parcon expands notions of access, ability, and agency beyond the narrow parameters of the individual subject. In doing so, it opens up novel possibilities for collaborating with others across imposed separations of race, ability, gender, culture, and age. Polyattention—the capacity to track and respond to phenomena that have been defined as unrelated—is central to these efforts.

As I detailed in Chapter 1, dominant attention is part of a social structure that disables subjects by imposing one way of engaging with the world as a requirement for agency. Parcon’s polyattentiveness makes room for many modes of attending, which recognizes agency in ways that trouble ableist frameworks. Parcon also engages directly with questions of access that include physical disabilities, but also explores how social conditions inform access to and agency

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<sup>108</sup> Throughout this analysis, I use “anticolonial” rather than “decolonial” to describe Parcon’s intervention. I do this to avoid equating attention-based interventions with the material rematriation of lands to Indigenous peoples (Tuck and Yang 2012). Anticolonial describes a recognition of and response to colonialism’s prolonged presence and its enfolding into dominant practices of attention.

within public spaces. Parcon reimagines “ability” as site-specific and contextually defined, exploring capacity as an open-ended question concerning the unique possibilities participants can find through collaborating with objects, others, and environments.

In addition to challenging colonialist and ableist aspects of normative attentive practice, Parcon’s engagement with multiple contexts responds to pedagogies of contact improvisation and Western somatics that coach practitioners to regard social context as irrelevant to practice and instead to focus on “universal” aspects such as weight, gravity, or momentum.<sup>109</sup> When Suseno narrates how he arrived at Parcon, he often refers to his prior training within Laban Movement Analysis, Feldenkrais, and Physiotherapy as forms that negate the social and political context of the moving body (Suseno, “Who We Are,” 2021). As a corrective to both normative techniques of attention in general, and specialized techniques of attention within dance and somatics, Parcon catalyzes a kind of attentive juggling—in which dancers attempt to entrain a simultaneous sensitivity to weight, momentum, surface, objects, and impacts, while also tracking needs, histories, and desires. This mode of attention activates the pluriversal nature of experience as an ontological intervention into colonial universalisms (Blaser 2013; Mignolo and Vazquez 2013; Firmino-Castillo 2016). Attentional plasticity helps participants to consider connections across categories and destabilizes the hierarchical logics by which the categories are founded. Nevertheless, it is more than just a shift in experience; polyattentiveness supports physical

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<sup>109</sup> In its emphasis on relationship, Parcon is conversant with community organizing practices that emphasize comprehensive power analyses as a core component of antiracist work, such as that of the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond. Parcon also participates in a broader effort to reclaim cultural contexts that have been denatured from theorizations of embodied healing within white-dominated institutional somatics, as illustrated within the teaching practices of Alta Starr and Generative Somatics, and Resmaa Menakem’s “Somatic Abolitionism.”

collaborations across difference by sensitizing participants to the ways in which the risks and possibilities for any collaborating body or bodies depend on multiple contexts.

Parcon's commitment to plural attentions calls me to maintain what Claire Jean Kim has outlined as a "multi-optic vision" of the practice in my analysis. In her book, *Dangerous Crossings: Race, Species, and Nature in a Multicultural Age*, Kim writes that a multi-optic vision entails regarding multiple perspectives, "moving from one vantage point to another, inhabiting them in turn, holding them in the mind's eye at once. [...] [T]his method of seeing encourages us to move beyond the seductive simplicity of a single-optic storyline and to grapple with the existence and interconnectedness of multiple group experiences of oppression" (2015, 19). Multi-optic vision, which I expand to include multiple and sometimes synesthetic modes of perception, helps me to navigate the tensions between decolonial theory and critical disability studies. As Shaun Grech has pointed out, decolonial theory has largely glossed over disability, while critical disability studies has sometimes equated oppression of all disabled subjects as a form of colonialism (2015). Through a multi-optic analysis, I will explore how polyattentiveness supports its mission to be an antiracist and anticolonial practice that centers the wellbeing and self-expression of BIPOC people. I will take seriously Parcon's commitment to radical accessibility to movers of all abilities. Along the way, I track where these two aims are in conflict, or where one supersedes or eclipses the other.

## **Methods and Positionality**

My analysis draws on insights gathered during my participation in Parcon intensives in New York (2019, 2022), Los Angeles (2020), Berkeley (2019), and online (2020). Through these practices, I met several recurring participants, who Suseno referred to as "core collaborators."



Maria de los Angeles Ceja, Joanna Fitzick, Leslie Heydon, Nhu Nguyen, and Anne Tangi have all been engaging with the form as participants and facilitators since at least 2019 and have graciously shared their perspectives on the practice with me through Zoom interviews. Finally, I draw many definitions of terms from Parcon Resilience and Moving Rasa handbook manuscripts, which I helped to edit from 2020-2021. These manuscripts are unpublished and reflect narrations of ideas that are continuing to evolve.

Following guidelines that structure Parcon practice, I acknowledge some of the contexts that inform how I relate to Parcon as a scholar and practitioner. I started interacting with Parcon in 2017, during a period in which the form was undergoing significant distillation. As the terms of participation have shifted, I have been asked to adjust how I engage with Parcon as a white Parcon practitioner and academic researcher with “normal” abilities. As Parcon has evolved, my access to the practice narrowed due to the increased focus on serving BIPOC participants in BIPOC-only spaces. During part of this period, I met regularly with other white practitioners to continue experimenting with Parcon, with the aim of exploring how our racial identities as white people inform how we occupy Parcon’s shared spaces.

Another challenge to writing about an emergent movement practice is that it continues to evolve in ways that outpace my writing. As I drafted this document, Parcon was in the midst of another significant evolutionary shift. In the Spring of 2022, Suseno announced a transition from Parcon Resilience to Moving Rasa. This shift in title was motivated by the desire to avoid defining the practice in terms of white-dominated practice. While parkour and contact improvisation constituted the initial inspiration for the form, subsequent development both in person and online in BIPOC affinity groups during the pandemic increasingly called for new practices and framings (Suseno 2022b).

Suseno defines “*rasa*” as the Indonesian word for “taste” or the “discernment of feeling by the heart (Suseno 2022a, 8). In Sanskrit, it has the meaning of “essence”, and, in the context of Indian aesthetics, it refers to “aesthetic savoring” (Sundararajan 2010). Unlike Euro/American aesthetic traditions, which often rely on a dualistic relationship between artist and audience, *rasa* aesthetics present a nondualistic conception of aesthetic appreciation in which the appreciator of art is both independent from, and merges with the work of art, actively savoring the experience. As Kathleen Marie Higgins writes, “*rasa* is not a faculty, as is Western ‘taste’; it is literally the activity of savoring the emotion in its full flavor” (2007, 45). Thus, *rasa* presents an intersubjective and dialogic model for experience, in which both performer and audience share in a unified aesthetic experience through their cultivation of a “kindred heart” (Sundararajan and Raina 2016, 791). However, as Janet O’Shea has synthesized, both performer and audience member experience this immersion without losing a sense of self; that is, they maintain a critical, analytical distance while experiencing absorption into an emotion or tone circulated by the performer (2022, 35-36). Thus, *rasa* presents generative ways to understand what Parcon participants do when they engage with each other across physical and cultural differences. They practice a plasticity in which they can combine into multi-limbed and object-inclusive bodies that navigate variable terrain, while also retaining sensitivity to the ways in which each participant collaborates from a different set of abilities and unique positionality.

In this chapter, I continue to use the term Parcon, because Moving Rasa is still under development and because most of my experiences and the experiences of those whom I interview took place under that name of Parcon Resilience. I analyze three core skills that appear across multiple iterations of the practice, and which co-participants named as most memorable and distinctive. These are “No/Yes/Modify,” “Six Parcon (now Moving Rasa) Lenses,” and

“Extensions.” Part of what I want to argue through this writing is that the physical pursuit of attempting to support different people’s weight, over variable terrain, and in public spaces is itself a pedagogy through practice. Throughout this research, I attempt to stay curious about what the kinesthetic practice can teach participants, in addition to the verbal framing provided by facilitators.

My positionality as both an insider and an outsider of the practice, as well as the rapid pace of Parcon’s transformation, requires an attunement to both the specificity of my own experience and the vast terrain of other possible experiences that I cannot access. This capacity to hold space for what one cannot know is one of the skills demanded of all Parcon participants regardless of their positionality. As I will illustrate, these questions are not only relevant to my work as a researcher, but essential to the practice itself, which undoes the fabricated coherence of objectivity. The practice instead insists that perspective is radically subjective and always produced through historical and present relationships with particular places, people, and forces. I embrace this radical subjectivity and offer my experience as one of many inroads into the questions and possibilities Parcon opens. As you will notice, some of the insights generated are quite personal—perhaps more personal than belong in an academic dissertation. In line with Parcon’s invitation to challenge prescribed compartmentalization of the self through experimentations with vulnerability, I have left these details from my fieldnotes in the text. As you read, I invite you to imagine how you might navigate each Parcon prompt if you were participating in the practices I describe.

## Learning by Doing

*World Trade Center, New York City, 2018. After watching videos of Parcon online, I email Andrew to ask when he is offering the practice. Since no practices are planned for the short window of time I had in New York, Andrew graciously agrees to meet with me one-on-one. We find each other at the World Trade Center around midday. Eagerly, I ask Andrew to tell me about the central elements of the practice. I pepper him with questions, which he evades. Instead, he interviews me. “How will you make your project inclusive of different experiences?” My fieldnotes describe my repeated unsuccessful attempts to shift the focus back to Andrew’s vision for the form.*

*We choose a location—a shallow staircase with several sets of railings—and begin to move. Almost immediately, I am flooded with new information: hanging upside down from one of the railings, I glimpse the cityscape from numerous unfamiliar angles. Giant swaths of blue and white blanket the sky. Above me, crushed cigarette butts lie on the low ceiling of the concrete. People, suspended like bats, hang upside down as they move down the stairs.*

*We take turns exploring the location and witnessing each other. After I move, Andrew asks “what’s coming up” for me emotionally. I answer that I feel self-conscious and hyper-visible to others. Even though I knew more or less what I was getting into before practicing, the experience of breaking out of the speed, rhythm, posture, movements, and levels typical for this space creates more nervousness than I had expected. It also makes me more aware of my gender. Drawing attention to myself by moving differently makes me feel susceptible to being heckled, catcalled, and harassed.*

*Later, we add the element of physical contact to our explorations. I note that it takes time to build trust with a partner, no matter how skilled they are at sharing weight. This trust is aided*

*by an awareness of the physical pathways and movements they tend to use, and the parts of their body that they tend to offer for connection. I am also tracking how the balance of supporting and being supported might interact with our different racial and gender identities. I think to myself that our outward appearance as a straight-cast pair might give us a little more leeway to push the boundaries of public space movement than if we had both been men. Andrew shares that when he practices with other men of color, and particularly his Black collaborators, they are often interrupted by police within the first few minutes.*

This experience highlights how polyattention arises as an outcome of doing Parcon. Although Suseno facilitated our practice, his refusal to define Parcon or lay it out as a series of core skills and exercises encouraged me to learn experientially. The naivete that comes across in my fieldnotes, to me, speaks of the divide between a conceptual understanding and an experiential understanding. While I might have understood conceptually that peer pressure shapes actions, or that people have differential access to public spaces, the physical experience of testing those expectations yielded a very different appreciation of the force behind these codes.

Bringing into relief the difference between conceptual and physical understandings of public space choreographies, Parcon catalyzes a process of inquiry that is grounded in relationship to physical and communal context. This shares some ground with what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson has outlined as “Land as Pedagogy,” a Nishnaabeg framework for bringing about wisdom. She explains that, from a Nishnaabeg standpoint, learning is not about content but about *context*. “Coming into wisdom,” she writes, “takes place in the context of family, community, and relations” (2014, 7). The creation of intelligence, for Simpson, is not compartmentalizable, but occurs through reciprocal relationships between the learner and the learning conditions. Because this knowledge paradigm is located within a particular context,

many versions of “truth” are possible. Context-driven pedagogy “generates a series of collaborative meanings, including dissension, that makes sense within broad and multiple interpretations of Nishnaabeg values and philosophies” (11-12). She writes, “If you want to learn about something, you need to take your body onto the land and do it. Get a practice” (16-17). Neither Suseno nor I are Nishnaabeg. We are not immersed in what Simpson calls a “loving web” of environmental and communal networks (9). We are in a city organized by multiple forms of oppression, and presenting many kinds of danger, which are lived out differently by Manhattan’s three million residents and commuters (Roberts 2013). At the same time, we are activating some aspects of what Simpson describes as “intelligence as consensual engagement” with one’s surroundings (14). We are attempting to establish consensual relations with our surroundings but are often doing so as visitors. This upends dynamics in which pedestrians are “users” or “owners” of their environments by asking us instead to be listeners and consensual collaborators. It also critiques conventions within Euro/American concert dance that prize “empty” spaces as ideal locations to train and create. However, given that collaborators hail from diverse backgrounds, many of which are not indigenous to the practice space, this should not be understood as a decolonizing gesture.

Dancing with Suseno attuned me to the different possibilities and constraints we each navigate when we attempt to improvise with each other in this location. His movement abilities are distinct from mine. With his extensive dance and martial arts training, he is capable of virtuosic acrobatics that seem to defy gravity and always land with minimal impact. However, while he can easily lift me, he has alluded to reasons why he might not immediately volunteer to hold my weight because of what it conveys in a BIPOC-centered practice. As we negotiate

contact and other relationships with each other, we cannot assume anything about each other's capacity or consent.

Dancing with others across numerous forms of difference illustrates how there is not one expected “pedestrian” choreography, but many complex codes for how subjects are expected to move in and occupy spaces and engage with others. As scholars of space and place have demonstrated, these codes are contextual—varying according to space and time of day—and socially inscribed—interacting with pedestrians’ social identities (Massey 1994; 2005; Rowe 2004; Shabazz 2015). Expectations concerning what kinds of bodies and subjects can be in which places, what postures they should take, how quickly they should move, which should touch and with what parts of the body, inform movement in each location (Ahmed 2006; Adeyemi 2019). Thus, while I associated my gender with a sense of constraint (I was aware of particular negative possibilities that I wanted to avoid), my gender in relationship to Suseno’s may have actually given us “cover” under which to push our movement experimentations further. Likewise, while Suseno may have been less vulnerable to catcalling as a man, he was nonetheless vulnerable to surveillance and interruption (or worse) by the police and other actors because of his brown skin. Parcon practice affords people to become aware of the differential risks and possibilities each other face when moving through city spaces as pedestrians. For some participants, their mere presence in some public spaces is already perceived as “out of place.”<sup>110</sup> These risks accrue when participants deviate from expected choreographies, which increases the possibility that they will be perceived as “out of place” and thus subject to negative consequences.

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<sup>110</sup> This is not just a feeling. Studies in human geography and related fields have documented forms of social control that discourage poor people and people of color from using public space, and place restrictions on how spaces can be used. See Mitchell 2003, Soja 2010, Trawalter et. al. 2021, Day 2006.

In some ways, the polyattention that gets entrained through the practice of Parcon is motivated by avoiding getting hurt. Participants track the concrete steps and metal railings, the presence of other moving bodies. They scan for people who might interrupt them. When participants practice together, they contend with the asymmetrical nature of the kinds of danger each participant has to avoid, and the differential demands those sources of harm place on their attention. By practicing in physical and verbal contact with others, they also gain an awareness of how those intersecting factors produce differential experiences of risk.

The polyattentiveness required within Parcon intersects with other forms of “multiple consciousness” that people of marginalized identities have to exercise. Sociologist and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois’s famous concept of “double consciousness” describes the racialized experience of “always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (1897, 194). Extending Du Bois’s double consciousness, historian Darlene Clark Hine suggests that “had Du Bois specifically included the experiences and lives of Black women in his lament, . . . instead of writing ‘one ever feels his twoness,’ he would have mused about how one ever feels her ‘fiveness’: Negro, American, woman, poor, black woman” (1993, 338). Thus, the need to be aware of one’s own subjective experience while also imagining how one is being objectified through stereotypes can be read as a form of coerced polyattentive labor. In a conversation with fellow participant, Leslie Heydon, she described this mode of attention as “preparedness.” “There’s always that second layer of attention” that safeguards against unwanted touch, micro-aggressions, and other harms she might encounter while dancing (2022).

Conversely, one of the privileges that is frequently associated with belonging to a dominant group is the ability to not-have-to-attend-to the ways in which one is marked by



difference. For example, in Peggy McIntosh's definition of white privilege, she explains how whiteness confers the ability to not be worried about being harassed on the basis of race and to not be concerned with how one is representing their race. She noted that, for her, white privilege was difficult to identify because of the ways in which her white racial group was constantly being made "confident, comfortable, and oblivious, while other groups were likely being made unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated" (1989, 11). Members of dominant groups, she argues, are "*taught not to see* systems that confer that dominance" (10 [emphasis added]).

Even as the need to maintain multiple-positionality is a side-effect of social marginalization, scholars have argued that, like disorientation, multiple-positionality might hold generative possibilities precisely because it gives access to an ontology or way of being that is outside of the norm. In his theorization of the performance work of Nina Simone, Malik Gaines argues that the precarious nature of multiply marginalized positionalities evades both universal and dualistic paradigms. Locating his analysis of Simone's performance methodology within the context of Black expressive production, Gaines argues that multiplicity is a source of creative power: "a way to act in excess of the permanent exclusion experienced in any one location." "Multiplicity," Gaines writes, "[transforms] the negativity of alienation into a productive force" (2013, 248-249). Echoing mayfield brooks' use of disorientation, Parcon adopts polyattentiveness, or multiple consciousness, as a tool that is through exclusion from an oppressive system and is thus useful for revealing the instabilities and limitations of that system.

Parcon uses polyattentiveness in precisely this manner: to point to the limitations of a single perspective, or a universal frame through which reality can be understood. Polyattentiveness requires that participants track elements of their sensorial experience, while being aware of how they are being "read" from the outside, either by other participants or by

passersby. For participants that belong to dominant identity groups, this may be a skill that is less practiced. In this way, teaching participants who belong to dominant groups to interrogate how those identities inform their movement constraints and possibilities might be seen as a form of labor redistribution. It asks those participants to “see” the systems that confer dominance, thus foregrounding elements that are often in the background of their attention. At the same time, the utility of this is not just to educate people of majoritarian identities. Polyattentiveness is essential to building caring and sensitive improvisational collaborations between people in different places in a power matrix. While polyattentiveness may not give participants access to each other’s experience, it can help to attune them to the differential risks and constraints that any two partners are navigating. In the next section, I will examine how Parcon exercises directly cultivate polyattention, complementing the knowledge that arises as the result of practice. Facilitated exercises help participants to manage the potential for overwhelm as they attempt to hold multiple threads of attention and movement together simultaneously. This encourages sensitivity to the gaps in their own awareness that may emanate from privilege, and to avoid—as much as possible—the kinds of harm that can be caused by a lack of consideration for the specificity of another person’s experience.

## **Attention as Relation**

*Berkeley, CA 2019. We begin without introducing ourselves. Kimberly Tate, our facilitator, asks us to focus on “arriving” while considering the question, “How do we come into relationship with other people?” The clear administrative choice to maintain a two-thirds majority of BIPOC to white dancers foregrounds racial identity as an important factor within the practice and informs how I experience “arriving” as a white person. I choose a spot at the*

*periphery of the space and lie down. Others in the room move quietly: resting, stretching, and greeting each other.*

*While still in the gym space, Andrew introduces Parcon and the workshop in broad strokes. “Parcon,” he says, “is a practice of being in relationship to everything.” This could include the environment, others, histories, ideas, objects, ancestors, and more...” Parcon is a practice of exploring “how we move our weight around in these relationships.”*

*We travel together to an outdoor space behind the gym on a little patch of pavement adjacent to a plaza. Together, we assess the place for hazards—moving glass and rusty nails off to the side, and taking note of needles, holes, cigarette butts, mud, and other hazardous features. Andrew asks us to choose a feature within the practice site, and to ask, “What relationships are possible with this?” At his invitation, we begin to explore touch-based relationships with our chosen feature.*

*Andrew calls us back together and asks us to think of an ancestor or a teacher who we admire, and to come up with a trait or quality that we associate with them. “How might your ancestor have moved through this space?” Andrew invites us to explore this question by improvising with both the space and trait we had chosen. I choose to move with the intrepidity I associate with my maternal grandmother’s mother, who moved from Pennsylvania to Montana as a young unmarried woman to pursue an opportunity to be a schoolteacher. I never met her because she died when my grandmother was a child, but I often wish I knew more about her and her sisters. As I move into the overgrown field, I feel a sense of delight in moving in large, bold gestures within the expansive green space. This pleasure sits uneasily with my simultaneous feeling of being implicated within violent settler colonial legacies. I reflect on my attraction to “wide open spaces” and the ways in which they are informed by the expansionist fantasies of the*

*“American Dream.” I look down at my feet and think about the myriad other ways my ancestors and their movements across the continent have impacted conditions in the present. Around me, other participants are addressing the prompt in their own ways. Some are moving in large bounding steps, while others are rocking themselves in a huddle. Several people are smiling. One person is crying and being comforted by another.*

*We don’t introduce ourselves until the very end of practice. Instead of saying our names, Andrew asks us to share how we are related to others. We go around the circle. In addition to being “Andrew” or Kimberly” or “Nhu” or “Zena,” we are children, siblings, relatives, descendants, and students of other people. “In the individualistic culture of the U.S., we don’t talk about where we come from.” Andrew says that it is important to him to decenter individualism, and to introduce ourselves to each other and our practice site through movement first. He connects this to the forced assimilation of Native and immigrant populations into white American culture, the repression of indigenous, Black, and immigrant knowledge, and white historical amnesia as processes by which one’s relationship to ancestry and contexts are denatured. He repeats, “Parcon is a way of practicing relationships to many different things and asking, ‘How do we move our weight around in these relationships?’”*

Parcon’s opening actions, like brooks’ introductory choreographies, referred implicitly to the practice of checking one’s social identity at the door, a frequent requirement within other Euro/American contemporary dance and somatics practices. Nhu Nguyen and Maria de los Angeles Ceja, who were both introduced to Parcon during this intensive, shared that the invitation to engage simultaneously with ancestors, personal memories, environment, and other participants elicited an expanded sense of self and agency that was not accessible within other dance forms that encouraged compartmentalization. Parcon sometimes refers to this as “being in

your fullness” (Suseno 2021b, 8). Parcon compels participants to expand their capacity to notice the mutual entanglement of different sensations and types of contexts. At the same time, Parcon does not stop at the mere noticing of entanglement, but instead continues to imagine and enact movement as the thread that can connect people, places, histories, objects, and ideas. In this light, Parcon coheres around an ethic of relationality, and devises numerous ways to practice that ethic into being.

In order to explore how polyattentiveness supports Parcon’s anticolonial and radically accessible mission, I consider how dominant attention perpetuates both colonial and disabling logics through a denial of relationships. My reading of Parcon’s relational ethics is informed by analyses of colonialism by Dwayne Donald, Frantz Fanon, María Regina Firmino-Castillo, Édouard Glissant, Walter D. Mignolo, Sylvia Wynter.<sup>111</sup> These scholars have connected Western epistemologies of rationality and objectivity to the denial of relationships, especially those connecting the knowing subject to the bodily, environmental, and social contexts that allow knowledge to take shape (Firmino-Castillo 2018). The denial of relationships is also a political maneuver that justifies the removal of groups of people from the lands to which they belong (Donald 2020). I invoke these theories to tease out two general aspects of colonialism that surface repeatedly within their analyses. These are: 1) the denial of relationships, particularly between persons and land, and 2) the imposition of an ontological and epistemological system that assumes that the world is a universal, rationally knowable whole that can be divided into hierarchical categories measured in their degree of difference from the “ideal” settler subject.

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<sup>111</sup> Each of these writers respond to different colonial contexts in the Americas. In each of these contexts, colonization has taken unique forms. Furthermore, the US, where this research takes place, is the product of multiple colonialisms (French, Spanish, and English). At the same time, key themes shared by these different analyses provide helpful ways to think about how dominant attention participates in the colonial strategy of relational denial and how polyattentiveness might contribute to acknowledgment of those relationships.

This difference is used to apportion subjectivity and “humanity” on unequal terms, and to control access to resources, which includes the right to access public space.

As Amiskwaciwiyniwak and Papachase Cree educational scholar Dwayne Donald has argued, colonialism operated and continues to operate through “an extended process of denying relationships” (2020). Among the relationships that are denied within settler colonialism are the connectedness of mind, body, and spirit; connections between people, animals, and land; and between people, mythologies, and language. Colonial ideology instigates what Donald calls a “relational psychosis” in which settler colonizers and their descendants ignore Indigenous presence to resolve the cognitive dissonance that arises from their status as foreigners and illegitimate occupants. For Donald, colonialism is not limited to a particular historical era, but extends into the present through the ongoing practice of denying relationality, which allows occupiers—cast as “individuals”—to ignore the ways in which they are implicated by colonial histories.

Writing in the Guatemalan context, critical dance studies scholar María Regina Firmino-Castillo describes the imposition of Eurocentric ontologies and epistemologies as one of the ways that colonialism continues in the present. She outlines three ontological tenets associated with “genocidal coloniality” that deny agency and subjectivity to some humans, most animals, and all matter. These tenets are: 1) some persons are things; 2) matter is inert; and 3) some humans are independent from the ecological matrix (2018, 32). In addition to narrowing the limits of who gets to have agency, and reducing some beings to disposable objects, this ontology represses acknowledgment of our “inextricable relationality”—relational ties that are always already present between ourselves and other beings and entities with whom we exchange mutual influence (36). While, for Donald, the extended denial of relationships allows colonizers and

their descendants to continue occupying native land without acknowledging their own illegitimacy, Firmino-Castillo focuses on the encompassing ecological effects of relational denial. Not acknowledging inextricable relational ties causes harm in those relationships, leading to genocidal and ecocidal destruction.

One of the practices that supports the colonial denial of relationality is the imposition of a Western epistemological framing understands the world by separating it into “compartments” both conceptually and spatially. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon describes the colonial world as “a world divided into compartments. [...] If we examine closely this system of compartments, we will at least be able to reveal the lines of force it implies” (1963, 36-37). Expanding upon this, Sylvia Wynter illustrates how the Western epistemological system of what she calls “knowledge-of-categories” is not so much a denial of relationality, but the imposition of a series of constructed hierarchical relationships between people and things. Wynter unmakes the universality of Western humanity by illustrating how the human reflects Judeo-Christian and Islamic ideas about the nonhomogeneity of Man. This framework imposes a single way to behave humanly, to perceive accurately, and to come into knowledge, while delegitimizing plural alternative possibilities and practices (1995a, 21). Wynter characterizes this religiously inflected epistemology as premised on a “knowledge-of-categories” mode of cognition that was mapped onto the world during the colonial era. This system constructed cultural differences as innate rather than “geopolitically and socioenvironmentally determined” (35). This difference-producing mode of cognizing was extended through evolutionary discourses that justified the idea of humanity as nonhomogenous (characterized by differences) and located those differences in a linear progression toward white/Eurocentric modernity (Blaser 2020, 549).

By imposing one epistemological system over other potential ways of understanding the world, Wynter argues that colonizers missed an opportunity to reimagine their own humanity through “co-specificity,”<sup>112</sup> or by attuning to the ways in which subjects come to know themselves through their relationships with others. Wynter draws our attention to the ways in which Western constructions of universal humanity are profoundly relational, referring to racialized others as a foil for the production of the human-as-European (1995a). Thus, what is unique about Western epistemologies is not a lack of relationship, but a lack of *acknowledgement* of those connections. Paralleling Ashon Crawley’s theorization of the “aversive choreography” that is required to produce Western objectivity (2017, 112), Wynter points to the active denial of interdependence that undergirds objectivity and rationalism. But what Wynter’s and Crawley’s analyses enable is a consideration of how turning away from something or someone also constitutes a mode of relation.

Scholars working at the intersection of colonialism and disability have pointed out that the two are interrelated processes (Snyder and Mitchell 2006). While some take issue with the metaphorization of “colonization,” and particularly its use by critical disability scholars to equate the oppression of disabled and colonized subjects, they nonetheless highlight how colonization was and continues to be an ongoing disabling event (Grech and Soldatic 2015). By introducing disease, causing poverty and starvation, subjecting people to hazardous labor, and attempting to sever ties between Indigenous people and land, the colonizing process produced broadscale disablement that included the disablement of the earth through resource extraction (Jaffee and John 2018). Alongside these forms of material violence, the empire dominated and disabled people through the invention of categories of “otherness,” which instituted the

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<sup>112</sup> “Co-specificity” is a term that Nandita Sharma uses to describe Wynter’s description of the encounter (2015).



“European/capitalist/military/Christian/patriarchal/white/heterosexual/ableist male” (Grech 2015, 8) as the norm and obsessively measured deviations from this norm through multiple entangled hierarchical classifications. As Adria L. Imada has argued, “Disability functioned as a flexible and capacious concept, and a useful weapon during the removal of unfit colonial Others” (2017) and justified violent domination under the auspices of “charity” and “healing” (Grech 2015, 12).

It should not be surprising that attention gets constructed during the colonial period as an activity of mentally discerning between rational “reality” and the chaos of one’s chaotic bodily sensations. Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century “crisis of perception” that Jonathan Crary discusses in *Suspensions of Perception* (2001), colonial encounters instigated their own “crises of perception,” giving rise to a new version of attention that would serve as a mitigating tool. In these scenarios of cross-cultural encounter, different ways of “making sense” collided, producing irreconcilable conflicts. In response to this cognitive dissonance, European colonizers imposed a single system of ordering what they conceived of as the universe, employing hierarchically constructed categories as a falsely universal world order that justified the domination of the Western European ethno-class (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013).

Sylvia Wynter describes one such collision of realities. In her 1995 essay “The Pope Must Have been Drunk, The King of Castile a Madman: Culture as Actuality, and the Caribbean Rethinking Modernity,” Wynter quotes the response of the Cenù Indians upon receiving news in 1512 that Pope Alexander VI had divided the world between the Spanish and Portuguese colonizers. In the Cenù perspective, both the giver (the Pope) and the recipient (the King of Castile) must have been drunk or mad, because the lands were not theirs to give or receive. In conversation with Friedrich Nietzsche and Frantz Fanon, Wynter argues that reality, or more accurately termed, “world perceptions” are always produced relative to specific local cultures.

Wynter argues that realities are unstable and processual, unfolding in relationship to one's location and social enmeshments. Therefore, she argues:

[T]he [Euro/Western] human subject is enabled to experience himself/herself as a fixed and stable subject only by *repressing the relativity both of his/her mode of being and his/her related mode of cognizing*; while because it already 'costs him some trouble to admit to himself that the insect and the bird perceive a world different from his own,' [...] such a subject must, as the condition of very being, perceive its world perception as the only possible one. (1995b [emphasis added])

In Wynter's formulation, the Western conceptualization of the human is possible only through the repression of other genres of being, which through their existence, reveal how reality is constructed in relationship to specific geographic and social contexts.

The consolidation of plural attentions into a singular dominant technique was a way to repress contradicting perspectives and "world perceptions"—particularly those emanating from people indigenous to the Global South. Recalling some European definitions of attention articulated during the colonial era, it is possible to see the same repression of contradictory realities that Wynter highlights in "The Pope Must Have Been Drunk." For example, French rationalist philosopher Nicholas Malebranche defined attention as a mental activity that organizes one's confused and imperfect" perceptions of things (1674, 411-12). In a similar vein, Scottish philosopher Henry Home cautioned that, without careful selective attention, perceptions and sensations impede rational thought. There are resonances between the colonial maneuver of denying relationships, and the emergence of definitions of attention that hinge on repressing the influence of one's bodily, environmental, and social context. This is true especially when considered alongside of the parallel processes of objectification and association of non-white peoples with bodiliness and their lands of origin.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> I am referring here to the ideology that situates the Western individual Man as unrelated from his context and able to travel freely over land, cast as property. Colonial and Enlightenment discourses created this image of the

The narrowing of attention—from a field of multifarious practices to a compulsory discipline—perpetuates colonial logics and power dynamics and sustains disabling processes. As Alexander Weheliye reminds us, “In the context of the secular human, black subjects, along with indigenous populations, the colonized, the insane, the poor, the disabled, and so on serve as limit cases by which Man can demarcate himself as universal human” (2014, 24). Attention, naturalized as upright posture, visual dominance, and the ability to disengage from phenomena according to a binary framework of relevant/irrelevant, designates specific abilities as requirements for agency—essential for participation in normative social structures and institutions. This is a stabilizing device in the aftermath of a cultural collision that threatens to throw European world perceptions into crisis. At the same time, it also instantiates a cultivated mistrust of knowledges that emanate from non-dominant subjectivities and knowledge practices.

Parcon provides novel ways of thinking about attention as a theme in conjunction with Indigenous and decolonial articulations of relationality. It unearths how attention, within dominant Western conceptualizations, is a practice through which relationships are both inhibited and created. Attention is a practice by which categories are imposed and enforced, helping to carve the Western universal whole into its categories. If, as I have been arguing, attention entails a selection about what “matters,” then attention has potential as a site of political critique that reimagines how things matter—that is, how they inform the kinds of interactions subjects have with land, objects, ideas, and each other. Examining attention as a set of plural practices allows for a consideration of how attention shifts, widens, and intersects with other modes of attention, creating a complex weave that does not attempt to produce the stabilized

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individual unfettered by context by simultaneously objectifying non-white subjectivities as mere bodies (Firmino-Castillo 2018, 33).

version of reality promoted by Western rational “truth.” Instead, participants notice the emplacement of their own perceptions, and their situatedness within historical and environmental contexts.

In discourse and practice, Parcon responds to the colonial denial of relationships by insisting on the importance of context; positing that “life is movement” but that “movement does not exist in a vacuum. It always emerges in the context of relationships” (Suseno 2021b, 5). In general, context may include relationships with the physical terrain, concepts, cosmologies, personal and ancestral histories, legacies of oppression, and more. More specifically, Parcon facilitators use framing language in handbooks and discussions to locate participants in the context of colonization as a process that has affected and implicated each participant differently. As participants move, facilitators ask them to meditate on how their various personal contexts—for example, their identities, their ancestry, their lived experience—might inform their movements and collaborations with others, and to conceive of their danced exchanges as the meeting of multiple contexts.

Parcon’s attention to context is one of the aspects that distinguishes it from the attention that contact improvisation teachers cultivate among practitioners.<sup>114</sup> As critical dance studies scholars and dance artists have argued<sup>115</sup> these approaches have tended to inhibit a recognition of

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<sup>114</sup> There are a number of reasons to contextualize Parcon as a response to dominant discourses and practices of contact improvisation and somatics. At the same time, it is important to mark this relationship to CI as one of a number of intersecting contexts that bring Parcon’s attentional specificity into relief. Besides the reference to CI practice in Parcon’s name, the two modalities are connected via crossover between practitioners, as well as through the curation of Parcon intensives within regional CI jams. Suseno is active in CI communities, advocating for modifications that help practitioners acknowledge their social and ancestral contexts within CI spaces. For example, at the WCCI jam, he created an ancestral altar that people could add to and visit in between dances. Suseno also regularly organizes BIPOC jams and affinity group work that operate within the context of larger regional jams or freestanding events.

<sup>115</sup> See Fred Holland and Ishmael Houston-Jones ([1983] 2014), Cynthia J. Novack’s *Sharing the Dance* (1990), mayfield brooks’ “IWB = Improvising While Black: writings, INterventions, interruptions, questions” (2016), Keith Hennessy’s “Questioning Contact Improvisation” (2018), Doran George’s *The Natural Body in Somatics Dance*

participants' social contexts both in the language teachers use and in the types of sensations they ask participants to track. Steve Paxton, one of the originators of the form, has explained that contact improvisation requires an active inhibition of social context and social difference in order to limit the number of variables that dancers have to track while engaging in potentially dangerous or disorienting movement.

it had to be a fairly simple model, because the users (the students and I) were actually functioning human beings with more possible neuronal connections than there are particles in the universe. I could not cope with that, of course, nor with the other evident human complexities. In terms of the safety of the body in interaction with another body, though, I saw I could ask the students to concentrate on their movement and how it feels, and then suggest concentrating on the sensations of their weight, momentum, friction, the touch of their partner, the sensation of the floor under their body, and to learn to maintain their peripheral vision of the space. (2003, 179)

The quote above suggests that practitioners' "safety" is predicated on their capacity to *ignore* social and cultural context—an assumption that is being refuted by BIPOC, queer, nonbinary, and women/femme practitioners who have been harmed by CI facilitators' refusal to actively mitigate power differentials that inform CI practice spaces (Rea 2018; Hennessy 2018; brooks 2016). There are other examples of CI's inhibition of social context. For example, in Nancy Stark Smith's "Underscore," which I discussed in the Introduction, Smith suggests compositional abstraction as a frame that might enable dancers to circumvent the stickiness of their social relationships with others. For example, when dancers feel "attraction" to or "repulsion" from other dancers, they are coached to interpret these dynamics as spatial, rather than social (Smith and Koteen 2008). Within both of these examples, attunement to social context is cast as a pitfall that impedes practitioners from accessing physical movement possibilities.

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*Training* (2020), and Royona Mitra, "Unmaking Contact: Choreographic Touch at the Intersections of Race, Caste, and Gender" (2021).

In contrast with CI's exclusive attentional parameters, Parcon integrates social context within its safety parameters and approaches consent between all collaborating bodies as contextually and relationally defined. In Parcon, social context, like gravity, is a force to be navigated. Rather than assuming a single context (such as one's physical location) for movement, Parcon activates engagement with diverse types of contexts to *add*, rather than reduce, complexity within participants' attentional fields. This moves in friction with normative definitions of attention that hinge on the capacity of the attending subject to intentionally disengage with the majority of perceivable stimuli as "distraction" in order to use one's perceptual and kinetic abilities toward productive ends. Instead, polyattentiveness constantly asks: What is relevant? Why is it relevant? What is being ignored? Why is it being ignored? What are the material effects of ignoring one's relationship to spatial, social, historical context? What physical possibilities emerge when we dance as a practice of creating relationships?

### **Framing Ability and Possibility through Consent: "No/Yes/Modify"**

**Berkeley, CA, June 28, 2019.** *As we are exploring our various sites, Andrew proposes the consent paradigm of "No/Yes/Modify"<sup>116</sup> as a tool that might help us find nuance in our relationships with the terrain. As we move, we are invited to listen for a "no" that we might feel anywhere in our bodies. Andrew asks us to stay curious about what is behind our aversions. Is the feature too hot, rough, or taboo to touch? Are there aspects of the environment that we do not even consider engaging with? Are there areas that elude our focus entirely? Kimberly*

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<sup>116</sup> Suseno credits the exercise, "No/Yes/Modify", to Daniel Mang, who uses this as a way of articulating nuanced consent outside of the binary of "Yes/No." "No/Yes/Modify" allows practitioners to find shared parameters of consent (Suseno 2021b, 50).

*clarifies that the sense of “no” is not a category that we should impose on objects; rather, it is a particular way of relating to those objects. A “no” means that this action, with this part of my body, on this surface, in this context, is off limits; however, there are many other relationships that might be possible. When we feel a “no,” Andrew proposes that we “modify” something about how we are relating to that feature in order to find a “yes.” Sitting on the ground, Andrew demonstrates this principle with a metal sewer grate, which has become scorching hot with the heat of the midday summer sun. He places his face near the metal. “That’s a ‘no’ for my face,” he said. He repositions. “Maybe I can touch this with my shoulder, which is covered by my shirt.” From here, Andrew rolls over the grate and onto his feet, using the smooth surface of the metal to facilitate a series of slides and spins.*

*As we work to establish the “edges” that will delimit our movement practice, Andrew asks us to extend the same lens of consent to our environment, exercising care to avoid permanently altering its shape. For example, we might lean on a chain link fence, but only to the extent that it can support our weight without warping. “No/Yes/Modify” helps us develop a nuanced understanding of the “zone of consent” for that particular exploration, such that we can experiment while prioritizing wellbeing for ourselves, the environment, and any additional bodies involved.*



Figure 7 - Kimberly Tate explores Parcon/Moving Rasa Lenses in Berkeley, CA.  
Photo: JoJo Lamboy, 2019.

Participants often note that, in addition to foregrounding consent as a fundamental term of engagement with each other, “No/Yes/Modify” facilitates connectivity with aspects of their environment that they may not otherwise have considered as potential collaborators. First, it asks them to attempt to notice aspects of their surroundings that they may habitually overlook. “No/Yes/Modify” highlights attention as a practice by which relationships can be ignored or investigated by prompting participants to ask, “What places or features do I not even perceive because they are already relegated to the background of my awareness?” Second, because it intentionally interrupts binaristic “yes/no” or “attraction/repulsion” formulations, the practice asks them to focus instead on the “how” of engaging with a particular feature. This practice interrupts dominant attention’s reliance on relevant/irrelevant and other binaries that dictate whether or not the attending person will choose to engage. Instead, of a categorical yes/no, participants modify the choreographic details of their engagement in order to change the terms of



relation until they are mutually consensual. They may interact at a distance, from a different posture, through a physical barrier, or with a different body part. Whereas the simple consent paradigm of “yes/no” might have encouraged us to imagine ourselves as either in or outside of relationship to those aspects, the inclusion of “modify” proposes that we choose a different way of relating instead of moving on to a different feature of the site. Thus, “No/Yes/Modify” helps participants to both be more curious about, and participate thoughtfully within, what María Regina Firmino-Castillo calls our “inextricable relationality” with a complex world that consists of mutually influential beings and entities (2018, 36). If we are already in relationship to those beings and entities, the more useful question, then, is: How might we act within those relationships?

A crucial aspect of “No/Yes/Modify” —one that distinguishes it from dominant attention—is the integration of kinesthetic and nervous system responses as clues that help participants decide *how* to be in relationship with the person or entity in question. This contrasts with dominant attention’s emphasis on visibility and its binaristic classification of perceptual phenomena (subject/object, relevant/irrelevant, and interesting/uninteresting). Instead, as we forge experimental connections with different surfaces, body parts, and textures, we are prompted to notice: Does this connection trigger a defensive tightening of our musculature? What is happening with our focus? Are we staring out into space? Is our breath flowing in a relaxed and easy way or are we holding it? Multisensory and kinesthetic information contributes crucial navigational input. Tracking these clues in our own experience and in our observations of others can be helpful for clarifying “soft” and “hard” boundaries and for locating the edges at which point we need to de-escalate or exit from an improvisation before it results in a fall, injury, or interpersonal harm.

“No/Yes/Modify” offers a way of negotiating overlapping terrains of consent that recognizes that “dynamics of consent are particular to each person” (Suseno 2021b, 52). A touch on the back may feel supporting to one person and threatening to another. A person may feel comfortable being touched by some participants and not others. In this way, Parcon administers a corrective to the principle of contact improvisation that assumes that touch can flow seamlessly from one surface to another, without accounting for the potential for social or bodily harm that could be potentially generated by this intimate exchange (Mitra 2021, 9-10). Foregrounding nuanced, relational consent acknowledges that “not everyone can improvise freely without the fear of *how* power might enact on and harm our bodies in and through our CI partner’s relational social positionings” (10). Through its recognition of the cultural differences and power dynamics that inform how different participants will engage with others and objects, “No/Yes/Modify” cultivates a mode of attention in which participants avoid making assumptions about which actions and modes of contact are viable between two partners. Articulated through the phenomenological concept of aspect seeing (Wittgenstein 1973), participants are coached to inhibit the contact improvisation practice of seeing people and terrain as surfaces and instead perceive surfaces as connected agential beings.

In addition to establishing parameters of consensual practice, “No/Yes/Modify” supports accessibility by making modification and accommodation an integral part of the improvisation. By foregrounding agency as an open-ended and interdependent exploration, “No/Yes/Modify” activates a key principle within social and political/relational models of disability, which hold that disability is site-specific; people are not inherently disabled, but are made so by architectural, environmental, and societal barriers (Campbell and Oliver 1996). Building on this idea, Alison Kafer in her book *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013), has advanced a political/relational

model of disability which similarly moves away from the medical model of disability's pathologizing of individual bodies. The political/relational model of disability acknowledges that the meanings of illness and disability are unstable, and that multiple understandings exist, and are often mediated through a false binary of disabled and able-bodied. Contrasting with the dominant view that disability is a problem that affects individual people and can be overcome through strength of character and resolve, Kafer analyzes how "disability is experienced in and through relationships; it does not occur in isolation" (8).

"No/Yes/Modify" asks participants to experiment with agency as both constrained and enabled by numerous environmental, social, and relational forces. In this way, it inverts the political/relational model of disability by situating abilities as changeable, site-specific, and relational, fluctuating from day to day and according to environmental and other contexts. Maria de los Angeles Ceja described how Parcon allows her to describe her abilities in dialogue with the environment rather than according to fixed expectations:

It's like you're just seeing what you're able to do that day. Like, are you able to play around with a bench? Are you able to, like roll down the hill or, or try to swing your hips or allow the momentum of gravity to like, to let your hips fall on the ground and just, you know, versus actively trying to make something happen. You're just kind of figuring out what you're able to do that day. And it might not be big or anything like that. But I think the goodness comes from the fact that you're like, slowly trying to create a new possibility. (2022)

Leslie Heydon pointed out that the experimentation with her own capacity through exercises like "No/Yes/Modify" is not necessarily always a happy experience. Sometimes it means coming up against her own limitations or recognizing a lack of possibility. As a dancer who experiences chronic pain, she shared, "Sometimes it's a drag. Sometimes I find it really emotionally painful. Sometimes I need to confront the grief of 'Oh, my body can't do that anymore.' [...] And then there's also a place where sometimes it's like, "Oh! But I can actually still do *this*." (Heydon

2022). Joanna Fitzick, a longtime Parcon collaborator who is in her seventies, described a similar principle of curiosity with regards to her own ability.

What I'm confronting right now [...] is that I don't know what my body can do right now. It changes. It's like being pregnant, your body is just changing, and you don't quite know what it's up to. And I don't dance often enough to really be able to keep track of what my body is up to. So, every time I try to dance, it's a whole new education: 'Oh that knee doesn't do that anymore. Oh, well, that arm doesn't want to do that.'" (2022)

Fitzick contrasted this sense of curiosity and experimentation she feels when practicing Parcon with assumptions other people make about her abilities from the outside. Laughing, she related an anecdote in which, during a Parcon practice at a local playground near a senior citizens' center, observers intervened when they saw her crawling on the ground.

I had crawled under a piece of playground equipment. It was it was it was a tight crawl, but I was ok. And like eight girls and I had crawled under there. I was having a good time. And I heard something going on. After I came out, the rest of the group told me that the people at the senior citizens' center were wanting to call 911 because they thought I was trapped under the equipment. And it was just such a stereotype and [...] it was just wrong. (2022)

Parcon participants hold "ability" open in their awareness as a question. Rather than attempting specific movements, they explore possible ways of connecting with the environment, objects, and others. This mode of open-ended curiosity contrasts with assumptions that people make from the outside concerning who should be testing the edges of their abilities.<sup>117</sup>

Indeed, the ability to break (or bend) some of the boundaries imposed by unspoken social contracts is one of the aspects that several Parcon participants mentioned as a reason to practice. They described an enhanced sense of agency that accompanied these transgressions. Anne Tangi described how the presence of other Parcon collaborators enabled her to experiment with non-

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<sup>117</sup> I am paraphrasing Janet O'Shea's research on risk and vulnerability as socially distributed. In O'Shea's description, those who are perceived as vulnerable (for example, the elderly) are discouraged from risk-taking, while those who are perceived as invulnerable are celebrated (2018, 91).

normative ways of relating to the features of public spaces. “I just remember physically taking certain risks that I wasn’t doing on my own” (Tangi 2022). Similarly, Colleen Roche described Parcon as “a practice of stretching edges” (Roche 2022). Whether climbing a wall with the support of other bodies, crawling instead of walking across an intersection, or exploring movements that feel vulnerable, the practice of “No/Yes/Modify” helps participants establish both fixed and flexible parameters.

Longtime collaborator and facilitator Nhu Nguyen, who uses they/them pronouns, shared with me how “No/Yes/Modify” establishes boundaries and parameters for practice, but also helps to expand their sense of agency by questioning the necessity of some boundaries.

I think, for me, the biggest shift or the door that opened up all of these other possibilities was the “No/Yes/Maybe” framework. And it can be as simple as, okay, physical touch with the hot concrete, right? I will not put my face on it, but my hands are fine, or my feet are fine. So, finding different ways to identify or recognize our own edges, both internally, socially, and physically, and then figuring out ways to turn the “No” to a “Yes.” Right? And often, that means adjusting the edges that are constructed. [...] Going through the process of adjusting those edges, gives me the capacity to then say, “Oh, this ‘No,’ is actually a ‘Maybe’ and then from the ‘Maybe,’ if I keep exploring and shifting myself and shifting the way that I am engaging to this object or structure, it might even lead to some ‘Yeses,’” And so, for me, that was [one of] the biggest turning points that made me really interested in the work, because then, when the pandemic hit, we were confronted by all of the boundaries, a lot of them are fear based. Because we don’t know what’s happening. And also, because we haven’t been in this situation before, right? And then the “No/Yes/Maybe” offered opportunities for me and the people that I work with, to reframe how we can engage in movement practice and movement research. (2022)

Nguyen draws a distinction between boundaries that have been imposed externally (for example, separations between persons/places/things) and boundaries that they create for self-preservation.

While consent—and the ability to uphold boundaries that mitigate the possibility of harm—is one of the principal motivations behind “No/Yes/Modify”, it can also be used as a practice that renders other boundaries more elastic. In Nguyen’s words, “there are certain edges that you have to create for yourself, and then there are certain edges that you kind of have to shift or shed”

(2022). Thus, one of the ways participants access an expanded sense of agency is through the capacity to investigate edges—both personal and societal—and to be able to push, bend, dissolve, or sometimes fortify those edges.

In many of the stories Parcon participants shared about past practices, outside attention, whether from police, security guards, or passersby, was a key source of constraint they contended with.<sup>118</sup> Attention, or better, surveillance, is a key mechanism for enforcing racialized, gendered, ageist, and ableist expectations about which bodies should be moving, how they should move, who they should move with, and where they should be moving. While outside attention can constrain participants' sense of agency, their own skillful attentional interventions (for example, attention in the form of supportive witnessing) can help to mitigate the impacts of this constraining attention. Nguyen described how participants can help expand the zone of consensual possibility by attending to hazards so that the exploring participant can engage with other things. This might include interacting with interrupters or monitoring bags and belongings.

When met with unwanted outside attention, supporting participants sometimes create diversions that deviate observers' focus away from the person actively exploring. They might also voluntarily interact with passersby so that the other person can feel safe dropping their guard a little more or explore their interests without scanning for danger or explaining what they are doing. As Nguyen explained, sometimes people come up to Parcon participants with the attitude "Okay, this is not normal. I don't know if this is supposed to be here. They watch you in a very particular way. And then the collective can [say], 'Hey, you're actually watching a movement

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<sup>118</sup> Typically, Parcon Resilience/Moving Rasa invites outsiders to be curious about what practitioners are doing. In some instances, the facilitator will choose a place that is intentionally secluded so as to minimize interruptions. When people do come to watch, and even when they interrupt the practice, practitioners generally respond with an explanation and an invitation to join if the person seems genuinely curious. When passersby are not supportive, the group takes measures to shield each other by taking turns monitoring the situation or interacting with the interrupter. When necessary, they modify the practice (e.g., shifting from moving to talking), or they move locations.

practice called Parcon Resilience. And we do all of these things... So, if you're gonna watch, here are some of the ways you can engage” (2022).

While “No/Yes/Modify” is usually presented as a warmup practice that helps delimit the field of experimentation for collaborators who collaborate across numerous forms of difference, it sets an important precedent for the ways in which agency and ability are embodied and conceived of by practitioners. In this section, I have analyzed “No/Yes/Modify” as both an exercise and a specific way of attuning to movement possibilities that occur between collaborating bodies, objects, and terrain. “No/Yes/Modify” differs from the dominant practice of categorizing phenomena into relevant/irrelevant by urging collaborators to attend to the *how* of relationship, rather than whether or not to be in relationship. Again, evoking the concept of “inextricable relationality” (Firmino-Castillo 2018, 36), “No/Yes/Modify” acknowledges that we are already related to our surroundings, but have choice in terms of *how* we engage and respond to those aspects. “No/Yes/Modify” acknowledges the potential for harms to occur that stem from social hierarchies and power differentials. In this way, it disrupts universalisms within the forms it references—notably contact improvisation—which homogenize bodies as interchangeable surfaces available for touch. Colonial, racial, and other traumatic histories are among the relationships participants have to navigate. Accordingly, by prioritizing kinesthetic and nervous system information as indicators of a “yes” or a “no” takes steps towards making Parcon a trauma-informed practice, while also subverting dominant attention’s emphasis on the visual. Finally, “No/Yes/Modify” builds accessibility into the DNA of the practice by situating modification as the norm and positing ability and capacity as changing in relationship to the environment and situation. “No/Yes/Modify’s” experimentation with boundaries and edges lends itself to a meditation on the different forces that constrain agency for collaborators. At the same

time, it also affords opportunities for expanding agency by collaboratively stretching those boundaries. Throughout the practice, attention surfaces as a source of constraint, which is often connected to racialized, gendered, ageist, and ableist expectations concerning how people should move and relate to each other. Parcon meets this limiting attention in two ways: through keeping watch for partners who are experimenting with breaking social choreographies, and through drawing attention to themselves through diversion and conversation.

### **Adopting and Layering “Lenses”**

**September 4, 2019. New York City.** *Five of us, clad in sweatpants and kneepads, are arranged in different positions: some are standing, one is seated in her motorized wheelchair, while another leans against a bench. We are in a little brick plaza near the Brooklyn Bridge/City Hall subway station in lower Manhattan. At 5:30pm, most of the people around us are funneling into and out of the subway.*

*We begin working with the Parcon Lens, “Place.” Andrew suggests that we start by “orienting” to our practice site with a partner. We can make specific requests of our partner to help us feel more confident deviating from pedestrian movement codes. “Can you watch my back?” “Can you create a diversion so that I can explore this more deeply without worrying about pedestrians watching me?” In our sweatpants and kneepads, we already stand out among the commuters. As we move, I am again surprised at the resistance I feel around breaking the movement conventions of the environment we are in. What I want to do is lie down on the earth, but instead, I kneel and begin with slow gestures: touching the bricks, putting a little of my weight into my hands, looking around, grateful that my partner was nearby. When we take a break, Andrew tells us that we are dancing above the remains of 15,000 people, mostly Africans,*



*enslaved and not.*<sup>119</sup> *He remarked that the bricks we were standing on were political; they covered over history and made way for new construction.*

*We return to our “Place” explorations, this time working with different partners. Both my partner and I begin by placing our hands on the cold bricks in acknowledgment. As I lay my hands down, my attention was drawn to the squishy dark earth between bricks. The gaps are filled with little weed sprouts and moss, reaching out as if in defiance of the groomed city surface. Solid ground? Perhaps not. The idea that land is inert and object-like wobbles somewhere in my awareness as an assumption that is actively unraveling as we move. Instead, here is this vital stuff pressing into available spaces, poking up from pasts that were supposedly covered over. I wonder to myself how the presence of the human remains underneath us might also be a condition of possibility for this plant growth.*

*Andrew invites us to begin to explore the Lens of “Touch” as a mode of relating to the site and our partner. My partner and I begin dancing near each other without making physical contact, tracking the closing spatial gap between us by listening and watching in our peripheral vision. I feel small, almost accidental brushes on my back as we graze past each other. Perhaps it was the season (Fall) or the opening gestures we made to honor the dead, or the weeds emerging from the burial site. As we dance, I immediately connect the light, almost imperceptible contact with the ancestral—links to the past that are not always obvious but are nonetheless present. Continuing, we gradually begin to share more of our weight with each other, roving over benches and up against trees like a four-legged creature with two mouths. Every now and then, we intersperse our conversation with requests: “Could we move more quickly? Could you give me more (or less) pressure? Can we rest?”*

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<sup>119</sup> Our practice occurred near the African Burial Ground National Monument.

*We pause again and receive a new directive based on the “Connect” Lens: Andrew asks us to talk with our partner about the emotions we have felt in the past 24 hours. (We start back-to-back...) I share that I had recently had an unplanned discussion with my mother about where we want to be buried. (Rolling sideways,) I tell my partner about the discomfort and surprise I felt. (Holding hands and leaning away from each other,) I say that when the surprise wore off, I felt relief and gratitude for the accidental exchange. It was comforting, somehow, to know that when the time came, I would be able to understand and carry out her wishes. (Sitting down leaning our heads together,) my partner shares that she had also talked about last wishes with her brother in the past 24 hours. (Lightly brushing each other’s backs,) she frames her conversation as a type of care that can be exchanged between people: helping both those who pass away first and those who live on. (Leaning against each other and a tree,) we remark at the strangeness of having such similar conversations. (Pushing our backs into each other, carefully, but with increasing force,) we wonder aloud if perhaps it is the energy of the fall season that is making us think of getting organized, assessing the work that has to be done before the winter comes. As we shift into a more vigorous exchange of pressure, we agree that we both feel the energy to do work, make arrangements, and take care of loose ends.*

Parcon participants attempt communication through multiple formats and in multiple physical directions simultaneously. For example, they may move in physical contact while having a verbal conversation with the same partner. They might explore ideas in their imaginations while moving in dialogue with the terrain. Sometimes, they attempt to move with another person over environmental features, while sustaining a conversation about an additional topic. The juxtaposition of these kinds of tasks—moving and talking, communicating with subjects and land, or collaborating with bodies and objects—yield more than the sum of their

parts. As tasks overlap, they produce meanings and movement possibilities that might not have occurred if they were undertaken as separate processes. In the example above, a movement that adjusted to an uneven patch of pavement suddenly became fodder for reflection about death and regeneration. A partner's touch on one's back issued a reminder of family support. Attention and movement were like threads, weaving connections across the artificial dualities of mind/body, subject/object, and culture/nature.

As one might imagine, it can be difficult to juggle multiple simultaneous themes and modes of dialogue. In general, participants work up to this level of synthesis by first exploring potential relationships with environment, objects, and others through a system called the "Six Parcon Lenses."<sup>120</sup> The Lenses, which include Body, Touch, Mobilize, Place, Connect, and Imagine, are first explored singly and then layered with increasing complexity, either by adding physical tasks or dimensions of attentive focus. In this section, I explore how the Lenses help participants cultivate multiple simultaneous attentions to aspects of experience that have been conceived of as separate or opposed within Western classifications, and how this might be read as an anticolonial practice. Alongside this analysis, I trace how Parcon's emphasis on moving one's attention, rather than moving one's physical body, enhances the form's accessibility to movers negotiating physical constraints.

In many Parcon practices, facilitators introduce Lenses individually, and then gradually layer them to create complexity. While participants cycle through or layer Lenses, facilitators clarify that all Lenses are potentially relevant, but that we activate them with our attention. When introducing the Lenses, facilitators explain that the Lenses are not objective or neutral, but dimensions of one's experience that are also inflected by cultural and historical contexts. Lenses

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<sup>120</sup> The Lenses are now called "Moving Rasa Lenses," but the practice is fundamentally the same (Nguyen 2022).

can be understood as objects, but practically speaking, a lens is an object that gives access to aspects of phenomena that might not otherwise be perceivable. The Lenses do not contain phenomena but shift the way the observer orients to those phenomena. In Parcon, Lenses provide a way of narrowing one's attention in order to manifest further complexity.

Lenses, in this context, do not have stable definitions, nor are they primarily optical devices. Parcon facilitators encourage using the Lenses in ways that expand them beyond their common meanings. In the guidebook, Suseno explains:

In Parcon Resilience we play with ways of observing, naming, experiencing, and playing with movement relationships. The Parcon Lenses! Body, Touch, Mobilize, Place, Connect and Imagine. Each of these words are stretched beyond their conventional uses and I hope to re-define them together as categories for investigating our movement experience of living. (Suseno 2021b, 12)

For example, in Parcon pedagogy, Touch is a mode of relationship that extends across sensory divisions. Parcon situates all of the senses as touch, asking participants to consider the ways in which light waves, sound waves, and olfactory particles produce sensation by coming into contact with sense organs (Suseno 2021b, 20). By prioritizing Touch as common to all senses, Parcon's polyattention contrasts with Eurocentric models that have prioritized vision as the most reliable sense because of its capacity to provide sensory input at an "objective" distance. This has resonance within a colonial history in which the Western cult of the visual has been used to discredit other modes of producing knowledge about the world. Attuning *to* and *through* the Touch Lens has relational implications. Parcon participants are "touched" by what they see, hear, and smell, and "touching" others by the information they give off, which eliminates the possibility of being an independent observer. Instead, it casts observers—whether witnesses, voyeurs, or surveillance mechanisms—as exerting influence upon and being influenced by Parcon actions. It also opens up collaborative possibilities by situating participants as *already* in

the midst of touch-based relationships, fomenting an awareness of those “relational ties [that] are always and already present, but not always acknowledged” (Firmino-Castillo 2018, 36).

At first glance, Lenses might seem to mimic reductive categories imposed by Western epistemologies (for example, differentiating Body from Place). However, practicing with the Lenses differs fundamentally from the process of separating phenomena into categories. Because Lenses are used in additive arrangements, they are generally used to produce increasing specificity rather than making comparisons by reducing elements to a common trait. For example, in the practice described above, we began exploring sensory relationships with Place, which we layered with the historical context that Suseno shared. We then adopted Touch as a parameter, followed by Connect. As we shared aspects of our history with our partners, we continued moving in response to the sensorial, historical, and even imaginary associations with the place, while maintaining a touch-based connection with our partners, tracking the ways in which our weight moved over bodily and environmental surfaces. Our movement interactions reflected a braiding of attentional concerns such that the boundaries between discrete Lenses became porous. Used singly, Lenses are tools for attending to an aspect of experience in more detail; layering them juxtaposes and synthesizes those details rather than distributing them in separate repositories. Participants often use verbal and kinetic conversations—sometimes integrated, and sometimes occurring as separate processes—to weave together these different aspects by incorporating them as stimuli that guides an ongoing dialogue. In doing so, they generate versions of what Anurima Banerji, building on Alfred Gell, has theorized as the “distributed body,” which contests ideas of the modern, liberal subject, which is constituted through its separation from place and objects (Banerji 2012; Gell 1998).<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Banerji analyzes instances of the “distributed body” in order to recognize local knowledges that have been subjugated. In *Parcon Resilience/Moving Rasa*, the articulation of distributed bodies is complicated by the fact that

The additive nature of the Lenses evokes what Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez have articulated as “decolonial aestheSis.” Decolonial aestheSis, Mignolo and Vazquez write, “starts from the consciousness that the modern/colonial project has implied not only control of the economy, the political, and knowledge, but also control over the senses and perception” (2013). AestheSis provides a “re-valuation” of that which has been devalued and obscured within the modern-colonial order and unveils the complicity of aesthetics with colonialism by imposing a single way of perceiving and valuing phenomena among many possible alternatives. AestheSis is about widening rather than narrowing one’s focus; it engages multiple coexisting modes of perceiving and relating to the world, without emphasizing any of them as dominant.

The Parcon Lenses supply participants with a specific practice by which one might go about cultivating the plural attentions that Mignolo and Vazquez describe. Mignolo proposes that decolonial aestheSis is about recognizing the existence of multiple, simultaneous, coexisting options for valuing the sensible. Mignolo writes, “by saying that the decolonial is an option and that decolonial aestheSis is an option, we mean that there are other options. In fact, we assume that there isn’t anything but options [...] There is nothing beyond coexisting options” (2013). To insist on the coexistence of options—and moreover, to affirm the legitimacy of those multiple options—aligns with an anticolonial way of relating to others. Lenses, in their mediating capacity, are unlikely to lead participants to true aestheSis, because they propose an overarching structure that frames participants’ attention. They do, however, recognize aestheSis as a horizon and rehearse specific ways to move toward it.

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participants are often fashioning these distributed bodies as visitors rather than community members, although participants’ relationships to the sites they practice in varies significantly across practices.

Parcon facilitators use the six Lenses to trouble the Western epistemological construct of knowledge-of-categories (Wynter 1995a, 21), while encouraging participants to recognize the plural ways one might relate to perceivable phenomena. Parcon's approach does not deny the existence of categories or attempt to move beyond them, but instead develops strategies for noticing how categories are part of what becomes entangled when practitioners move together. Race, for example, is one of the categories that often informs how participants investigate movement possibilities through the Lens of Place. In past practices, Parcon prompts have asked me to consider, "How does my racial identity inform my movement decisions in this Place? How have I learned ways of relating to Place as a white person? How might my partner be relating differently to Place?" We have also explored dimensions of race, intersecting with class and ability by asking, "Who was this Place made for? What types of Mobilities does it accommodate and facilitate?" Thus, Parcon balances an emphasis on destabilizing colonially inflected categories of mind/body, human/nature, subject/object, while also taking opportunities to acknowledge the ways in which other categories such as race, class, gender, and ability are among the contextual structures we are navigating—and we are all navigating them differently.

By foregrounding multiple possibilities for attunement, the Parcon Lenses move towards aestheSis as the foundation for a mode of relationality that does not rely on a shared perspective. For example, in the Lens explorations described in the above passage, I was asked to explore Place in relationship to various aspects of my identity alongside my partner, who was doing the same. Identity markers were acknowledged as relevant to our dancing but could not predict or explain the details of our interaction. The layers generated a kind of excess that could be sorted back into categories. The mode of relationality scaffolded by Lens explorations is structurally similar to what decolonial philosopher Édouard Glissant has described in *Poetics of Relation* as

feeling in solidarity with others without needing to render them transparent through comparison to known categories (1997, 193). Affirming their right to opacity means recognizing the “irreducible singularity” and noncomparable nature of subjective experience. “Opacities,” Glissant reminds us, “can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not the nature of the components” (190). In general, Parcon Lenses are used as tools for creating and observing a textured weave, by noticing and moving in response to many different aspects of one’s experience. Through moving and speaking, participants weave these reflections together in dialogue with the details gathered by another dancing subject, without necessarily knowing how that other person is making meaning out of relationships using their own Lenses.

The Lenses also have importance as an accessibility practice inasmuch as they deemphasize ability as linked to physicality; they affirm a range of approaches to fulfilling each prompt that may or may not require movement. Colleen Roche, a Parcon facilitator and longtime participant who uses a wheelchair, described how, in her view, Parcon opens up access to people with physical disabilities because it does not rely on steps:

There isn’t, in my experience, a focus on physical technicality, but we’re called to notice our physical selves and how we are in relationship with others and the environment. [...] The open invitation—to be with others and be with your own body and however that looks and feels—is really broad and it’s inviting. I don’t need to be able to do 5 positions with my hands and 25 positions with my feet. If all I’m arriving with is a hand that’s only kind of working, I can imagine my hand in connection with my environment, with my soul. (2022)

Instead, she described the practice of working with Lenses as calling her to be present with those bodies she is moving with, which include the ground, the environment, and other people. Paying attention to these different aspects always informs how she moves, but there are no predetermined movement objectives.



By emphasizing the movement of attention rather than the material body, the Parcon Lenses expand access to people with diverse mobilities. Furthermore, practicing Parcon in public spaces makes it impossible to ignore how racialized, classed, and gendered power dynamics also serve as impediments to movement, impacting who gets to occupy public space and how they are expected to behave in those spaces. This comes to the fore in a story Nhu Nguyen shared about a Parcon practice they facilitated in San Diego. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Nguyen met with a group of predominantly BIPOC collaborators to practice in a park. Nguyen shared that, often, the ideal practice sites are located in affluent areas that tend to be populated by predominantly white residents. For collaborators of color, and especially for Black collaborators, occupying majority-white spaces can increase risk and constraints even before participants attempt to deviate from pedestrian movement codes. In Nguyen's words:

In the beginning, we were kind of surveilled... there were cop cars driving by and just like, parking there and witnessing until [we felt] this hyper-awareness. 'Perhaps this is not okay.' Especially during a pandemic, there was a lot of 'okay, this feels, super risky, socially.' And then there's this kind of paralyzing [feeling], that comes from historical trauma, and we were also in a very tenuous situation, at the time, that shut down our way...or our ability to engage in movement. (2022)

Nguyen describes how the Lenses gave them a way to continue their experimentation while mitigating the risk of interruption or violence:

So, we're having to camouflage, right? Dancing in a way that maybe is not so perceivable as dancing. Yeah. I mean, like, how can I be very pedestrian without the intention of being pedestrian? The Parcon Resilience Lenses allowed us to kind of shift some of that. So right now, I am pedestrian with my Body Lens, but my connection is different or my attention to witnessing or my attention to ancestry is very non-pedestrian, but it is invisible. (2022)

The difference between how movement feels to the mover, and how it appears to an external observer came up repeatedly within conversations with my fellow participants. Participants shared that, while the quality of their attention impacted their movement trajectories, they were

aware that the connection between experience and action was not necessarily legible to outside observers. In scenarios like the one Nguyen described above, this illegibility enabled the practice to continue while conferring some protection to participants in moments of vulnerability. The Lenses—which acknowledge that there are multiple coexisting factors that organize experience, and that attention helps determine which factors take precedent—enable attention to move even when the conditions restrict physical mobility. In Nguyen’s description, this continuity helped to preserve a sense of agency even when they faced a limit.

While the shift in emphasis from kinetic to attention-based explorations enhances access for some participants, it does not automatically make Parcon more accessible. In some practices, participants voiced that the amount of intricacy involved in working with attention-based prompts, often delivered verbally, made them feel overwhelmed and disengaged, sometimes eliciting feelings of embarrassment or inadequacy (Fitzick 2022). Differences in class, language, and access to higher education also surfaced in group discussions in which participants found some prompts to be inaccessible due to their “intellectual” language and framing. The long duration of practice and the expectation that participants stay continuously engaged also posed accessibility problems. Even when we were physically at rest, sustaining attention was exhausting. Some participants struggled with maintaining focus throughout our all-day practices and extended processing conversations. In a 2022 intensive in New York City, I noticed how participants subtly resisted the intensive schedule by arriving hours late to the practice or sleeping during discussions. Throughout this particular practice, we discussed how some of us were contending with what we felt as pressure to perform for our facilitator and for each other by continuing to stay “in” even when we were exhausted or needed to use the bathroom. In group discussions, we grappled with why it was so difficult to deviate from prescribed activities when

the practice was intended to accommodate a range of needs and experiences.<sup>122</sup> Thus, shifting emphasis to the movement of attention rather than physical action widened accessibility to the practice in some ways, and constrained it in others.

Another limiting factor of the Six Lenses lies in the emergence of unofficial lenses that sometimes constrain the practice. One of these is race. Racial narratives in Parcon tend to refer to a BIPOC/white binary in which BIPOC people are held together in part through the shared experience of harms incurred by whiteness. This racial lens sometimes trumps other power dynamics, including ability and class. It is also a great deal more “fixed” in its applications than the other official Lenses—that is, it is less open to interpretation and experimentation. Whereas the official Lenses accept a range of possible associations, the lens of race relies on stereotypes that further reduce subjects and relations between them to binaries.<sup>123</sup>

This dynamic is further reinforced in practice by the use of affinity groups that separate BIPOC and white collaborators without any additional indices of affinity. This reifies a racial binary and has posed problems for collaborators who identify as multiracial. In a 2019 practice in which I was present, a multi-racial participant voiced that there was no place for them. They stated that they knew they would be welcome in the BIPOC group, but that it would require disengaging from their white/European ancestry. In another conversation, a participant shared that, even though they participate in Parcon’s BIPOC affinity groups, they feel hesitant to voice opinions that deviate from the perspective that race is the single most important factor in a

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<sup>122</sup> Some of the difficulty participants experienced when their needs conflicted with intensive schedules and prompts were associated with their desire to support Suseno as facilitator rather than feeling coerced. Others shared that they stayed because of a sense of accountability to fellow participants. There are many kinds of pressure that inform whether or not participants feel they are able to take care of their individual needs.

<sup>123</sup> An example of an exercise that reinforces stereotypes is one in which participants are guided to use the Lenses to explore a scenario in which a “rich white dictator” who owns and surveils a space, versus a “loving group of people in your same intersectional demographic” that owns and protects the same space (Suseno 2022a, 141).

Parcon interaction, and that white people are a constant source of frustration for BIPOC participants. The emphasis on race as a mode of oppression that trumps all others—especially in a practice that attempts to engage the many kinds of context—obfuscates the complexity of multilayered power dynamics. The imposition of race, and specifically, a BIPOC/white binary in which the presence of white people is always already violent, has closed down opportunities to examine oppression from a more nuanced perspective.<sup>124</sup>

In conclusion, positing attention as a domain in which movement can continue, whether or not practitioners are physically moving through space, highlights the non-equivalence between experience and outward appearance. This maneuver has the potential to expand access and agency for practitioners with diverse mobilities while offering a way to continue practicing within social conditions that restrict movement. In addition, by emphasizing attention as a plural set of perceptual practices, the Parcon Lenses activate a version of decolonial aestheSis in which “many different options can coexist” and can be recognized for their “distinctive locations, their particular horizons, their commonalities, and their tensions” (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013). They have the potential to disrupt colonial binaries including mind/body and subject/object by exploring the potentially infinite options that exist for experiencing “Body,” “Place,” “Touch,” “Mobilize,” “Connect,” and “Imagine” through senses that include and extend beyond the Western framework of the five senses. This unsettles the ableist notion that there is a fixed set of perceptual and kinetic abilities that constitutes “able-bodiedness” and the colonial concept that there is a single universe that houses and orders these options. However, there are also instances in which the imposition of unofficial lenses—primarily through contextualizing language in

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<sup>124</sup> In recent years, Suseno has taken steps towards engaging race in more specific affinity groups, such as one he holds for Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI).

conversations, handbooks, and prompts—can constrain the diversity of options that are exercisable, and the modes of relationality that the practice can support.

## **Incorporating “Extensions”**

*July 2019, Berkeley. Today we are working with bō, staff-like weapons that are common to multiple Asian martial arts systems. We explore how it feels to interact with the bō in different ways: balancing it against our bodies, leaning our weight into it like a cane, using it as an antenna. Working with partners, we explore dynamics of yielding, pushing, reaching, and pulling while staying in contact with both the bō and another person. Next to me, two dancers exchange moves in call and response. One makes fast flourishes of footwork with one hand on the staff. They use the staff to move each other through space. They trade possible imaginations of what the staff might be, relating to it as if it were a cane, a person, a horse, an appendage.*

*Neither my partner nor I have had much previous experience working with bō. Our initial explorations are awkward and fumbling. As we try to keep contact through the staff, we lose track of each other. When we focus on our contact with each other, we end up dropping the bō. Andrew comes over and asks us to try again, but this time to prioritize our contact with each other, and just to add the fact that we also happen to be holding the staff. Taking our weight out of the bō and focusing on the contact points between our two masses reduces the complexity of the task. As we become more attuned to each other’s movement patterns, we are gradually able to shift our weight, together, into the staff.*



Figure 8 - Parcon intensive participants work with “Extensions” in Berkeley, CA.  
Photo: JoJo Lamboy, 2019.

*April 2020, Zoom.* Three weeks into the pandemic, we gather on Zoom for a three-day Parcon “mini-immersion.” In the main room we are exploring the “minds” of different objects in our homes as an animist somatic practice. Andrew instructs us to choose an object that we have a positive association with and to have a dance with it, exploring possible relations with that object. He invites us to move the object to different places on our bodies and to observe how the location of the object influences how we move. “Allow the object to make some of the decisions.”

*My eyes land on a palm-sized beach rock given to me by my grandmother. It was hand-painted to look like a rabbit. As I hold its weight in my hand, I am surprised by its heaviness. I notice how it speeds up the arc of my arm when I swing it. I place it on my neck and feel its chill. Lying down, I put it on top of my pelvis. Pleasantly, it presses me a little further into the floor. As I continue experimenting, I notice how this stone connects me to my grandmother. There’s a little of her sensibility in it. I can see traces of her hand moving the brush across its surface. She gave*

*up painting many years ago because her hands shake too much to control the brush. At Andrew's prompting, we repeat the same exercise with different objects. It's hard to stay focused on a single object because there are so many objects that are influencing me: the mirror draws my focus, the furniture demands navigational adjustments, the smell of eggs cooking in the next room draws my thoughts toward lunch.*



Figure 9 - Exploring “Extensions” during Parcon Resilience virtual intensive.  
Photo: Zena Bibler, 2020.

Parcon Resilience/Moving Rasa invites collaborators to engage with objects as more than inert matter. They are signifiers, implements, and sometimes beings that have a mind of their own. As signifiers, objects are indexed with cultural references, meaning, and memory. As implements, objects expand participants' physical reach and affect their center of gravity. As entities in their own right, objects have histories and balance points and possibly even desires. In practice, objects are frequently referred to as “extensions” because of the ways they can be used to amplify modes of expression, ways of making contact, and possible movement trajectories.

Suseno defines extension as “any object we connect with that alters the expression or reception of our body, others, or the place” (Suseno 2021b, 116). Extension describes both the material object being incorporated and the process of incorporation. This incorporation happens through the way the participant attends *to* and *through* that object.

In this section, I examine extension as a mode of attention that helps to incorporate objects as part of the body that dances in a Parcon Resilience/Moving Rasa collaboration. Extending attention *to* and *through* objects troubles individualist notions of agency and activates animist principles that recognize subjectivity in other kinds of matter. I also explore how extensions intervene in prevailing understandings of ability and disability by generalizing “assemblage” as a model for embodiment that is typically associated with disabled people. These interventions are not just ideological. They remake the material possibilities for collaborators working together across numerous forms of difference, which include differences in mobility.

When working with objects in Parcon, humans are not the only source of agency. In addition to asking “How can I move with this object?” participants might also ask, “How is this object moving me?”<sup>125</sup> For example, when I held the *bō*, I assumed responsibility for it as part of my body, taking care not to hit anyone with it as I navigated the practice space. I also attended *through* the staff, incorporating it into my bodily schema not only by how it changed my appearance, but I could “see” the terrain through it. The staff was my connection to the ground and provided possibilities for interacting with the ground that were not accessible without the

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<sup>125</sup> In her 2001 book, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*, Jane Bennett makes a case for this kind of attention, which notices how things have agency through their capacity to produce effects in human and other bodies. Enchantment is a prescription for the ills incurred by “demystification,” which attempts to make things transparent through the imposition of a rational order. In *Vibrant Matter*, she extends this argument through the concept of “thing-power,” or, “): “the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience” (2010, xvi).



staff. Moving with three legs instead of one, with an antenna, with the staff balanced on my head, I experienced a bodily plasticity that incorporated objects—that is, I included them in the matter I understood as “my body.” The degree to which they were incorporated was measured in terms of how I experienced the objects, and how I was able to wield the objects to experience and do things in the space.

Thus, extension flows in multiple directions. In the case of the stone my grandmother painted, I was asked to consider how holding onto the stone changed the rhythm and weight of my movement. It exerted pull on my thoughts and linked me to another person and other moments in space and time. It also had a history that preceded the moment my grandmother collected it from the beach. The texture underneath the paint suggested the movement of sediment. Thousands of years ago, it likely had been part of a larger rock, which was deposited by the Laurentide ice sheet advancing and retreating (U.S. Dept of the Interior 1976). Its tenure in the Atlantic Ocean had tumbled its rough edges smooth. More recently, it traveled 3000 miles by plane from Brooklyn to Los Angeles.

Working with extensions asks participants to listen *to* and listen *through* objects, examining their unique qualities and their connective capacities. For example, facilitators coach participants to consider how the object has its own “body,” while also extending the “body” of the participant: “What are its parts? How do they coordinate together with one another and then through you? How does your joining with this extension change what the object can be used for? How does what you can do change?” (Suseno 2021b, 17). This is a corporeal practice with political implications. In its framing, Parcon recognizes animism as a principle common to multiple indigenous religions, including those that preceded the arrival of Dharmic and Abrahamic religions in Indonesia (Suseno’s ancestral home) and the United States/Turtle Island

(Suseno 2022a, 73). In this context, listening to objects is resonant as a mode of attention that resists the subject/object binary, which casts subjects as “actors” and objects as “inert” or “lifeless” matter. By attuning to objects against the grain of this hierarchical relationship, participants decenter the bounded individual as the seat of agency. By attuning to the ways in which subjects are created through combination with objects, and how objects exert influence on subjects, we experience the inherent instability of the binary.

Extensions also intervene in bounded individualism by proposing that bodies are fluid in concept and practice, with the capacity to assemble and combine into myriad forms. They exercise what scholars across disciplines have theorized as “assemblage,” a way of understanding agency as comprised of multiple forces and actors. An ‘assemblage’ is a concept adapted from Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari. “Assemblage” describes an ontological network in which components take on fluid roles in the creation of a whole (1987). The assemblage model horizontalizes relations between subjects and objects and instead foregrounds how they are involved in relationships that make each other visible in certain ways (Bennett 2010). By focusing on complex networks of entities, assemblage theory reiterates ideas that have been prevalent within Indigenous ontologies and scholarship for many decades.<sup>126</sup> While there is no single “Indigenous” ontology, there are repeated and consistent references to agency as something that emerges out of a particular set of circumstances, that is, out of a mesh of relations between involved entities, which include place (Deloria and Wildcat 2001; TallBear 2019; Hokowhitu 2020; Rosiek, Snyder; and Pratt 2020).

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<sup>126</sup> Alessandra Beneticty-Kokken has also suggested that Deleuze and Guattari may have been inspired by Haitian Vodun practices in the development of their theories (2015, 297).

For the purposes of this chapter, I continue to work with the term “assemblage” because it is a term that has been taken up by critical disability studies to contend specifically with the Eurocentric construction of the independent individual subject, and to theorize disability in generative terms rather than as a lack of ability. This allows for an understanding of bodies as ensembles of organs, processes, passions, activities, and behaviors, differentiated by thresholds of power or intensity (Shildrick and Price 2002). Assemblage theories of embodiment also critique the notion of body-as-individual and instead describe “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts” (Bennett 2010, 23). Kelly Fritsch highlights how “disabled people are entangled in multiple assemblages: the human-machine assemblages of wheelchairs, ventilators, or walkers; the human-animal assemblages such as assistive animals like guide dogs; or disabled-abled assemblages of the disabled person and care attendant” (Fritsch 2010, 3). However, disabled embodiments are not unique in their reliance on others and objects, but they provide “an opening to push how we understand embodiment in general as relational” (Shildrick 2009, 25). By asking all participants, regardless of their use of mobility devices, to engage in actions of extension with objects, others, and ideas, Parcon facilitators propose movement improvisation as an activity that reveals how one is already in the midst of complex assemblages. Furthermore, by extending their attention to and through objects, they may more skillfully navigate processes of what disability scholar Margrit Shildrick has called “becoming-in-the-world-with-others” (Shildrick and Price 2002, 5), that is, combining with others in networks of interdependent relationships.

Just as “No/Yes/Modify” institutes modification and accommodation as the baseline for interactions between moving entities, extensions normalize the use of mobility objects. This maneuver de-emphasizes able-bodiedness—imagined as the capacity to move *without* the use of

assistive objects—and activates a permutation of what Julie Avril Minich has described as “disability-as-method.” Critiquing a tendency within disability scholarship to objectify disabled people, Minich proposes that disability studies could shift its engagement with disability from an object of study to a methodology—a way of perceiving and doing that yields unique insights (2016). In response, Jina B. Kim has extended the idea of disability as methodology in her article, “Toward a Crip-of-Color Critique: Thinking with Minich’s ‘Enabling Whom?’” (2017). In Kim’s definition, a crip-of-color critique “reads for relations of social, material, and prosthetic support—that is, the various means through which lives are enriched, enabled, and made possible. In so doing, it honors vulnerability, disability, and inter/dependency, instead of viewing such conditions as evidence of political failure or weakness” (2017). While both of these interventions are geared towards academic research, their emphasis on disability as a mode of perceiving and doing is resonant with Parcon’s use of extensions. Through extensions, practitioners explore how assembling with others and objects, an activity that is often considered to be particular to people with physical disabilities, can broaden possibilities for all movers.

Extensions expand the range and complexity of potential movement outcomes. As Colleen Roche described it, “If I was partnering with you, for example, and if something that I did with my upper body made you make a big arc with your arms or legs in a way that physically I can’t do, my experience of you doing that amplifies the sense of movement inside of me” (2022). Extensions also highlight how the specific configuration of living entities and materials shapes movement possibilities. Roche continued, “What shows up collectively between us would be different if it were two people standing, if it were two people sitting, and every configuration that you could bring” (2022). Thus, working with extensions can highlight the particularity of movements that are made possible by different combinations of people, positions, and objects,

rather than measuring them as adaptations from a specific movement goal. This suggests that moving with objects requires *different* abilities and modes of body awareness, which is important because it supports a reimagining of disability as a set of unique abilities, rather than as a deficiency (Sobchack 2005).

One of the caveats of Minich’s “disability as method” is that the insights produced through disability as a method must be used primarily to benefit disabled people, rather than to produce knowledge for general gain. Parcon practices do not always contain a quorum of disabled dancers. However, in my reading, working with extensions can facilitate more nuanced and skillful collaborations between collaborators of mixed abilities, which might constitute a benefit to disabled practitioners. By asking collaborators who do not ordinarily use mobility aids to practice tracking the location of supportive objects and transferring weight in and out of those extensions, Parcon may prepare those collaborators to work more skillfully with collaborators for whom mobility devices are part of their sense of “Body.” As Joanna Fitzick shared, she had to overcome an initial fear of touching another collaborator’s wheelchair before she was able to share weight with that collaborator (2022). Roche also observed that collaborators without mobility devices are often scared to touch her chair (2022), perhaps because they are not sure how it will respond (rolling, tipping, etc.), or because they perceive Roche as more vulnerable than other participants. By including an array of objects in movement explorations, participants learn how to test objects for support and to experiment with possibilities inside of a mutual zone of consent. Furthermore, by framing objects as extensions of one’s body, nondisabled participants perform a shift in aspect-seeing (Wittgenstein 1973) that helps extend principles of consent to objects. Rather than seeing a walker as an object, for example, extensions introduce

the possibility that a walker may figure as part of another collaborator's body, and hence, merits the same sensitivity of address.

Counterintuitively, extensions can also facilitate relationships by maintaining physical separation. For example, during a pandemic, a six-foot string or dowel might help participants measure what constitutes a "safe" distance. Outside of pandemic circumstances, an object might provide a means of connection between two bodies who do not consent to touch skin-to-skin. Objects extend the collaborative possibilities between two people by expanding bodily surfaces and providing surfaces that may feel safer (physically, immunologically, psychologically) as substrates for connection. As Roche explained to me, extensions can facilitate connection when there is an element of unfamiliarity or fear between partners. She provided the example of a person who is new to Parcon who has never danced with a person in a wheelchair. Working with an object as an intermedium enables a tactile connection between two people that may not be ready to touch and share weight. Extensions, she explained, are also useful when there is a socially inscribed power dynamic between two people or a history of racialized or gender-based violence that could potentially be triggered by a touch-based interaction. "These extensions allow for us to set our No/Yes/Maybe boundaries and to begin to grow trust with another person." She continued, "if you're scared to death of my chair, but we're both hanging on to the end of a stick, what comes out may be very different" (Roche 2022). Even though extensions maintain distance between partners, Roche noted that they require her to sharpen her attention to the object and the conditions around the object in order to maintain communication with the other person. "It's different than leaning on your shoulder. I really need to attune myself to my hand holding the stick, to visual cues, feeling the movement through the stick" (2022).

“It could also just be a stick,” Roche said at the end of a long discussion of all of the roles a stick could play in Parcon practice. “It could also just be a stick. We don’t need to overanalyze it” (2022). This remark, which was said half-jokingly, alludes to an important dimension of extension. Even though extensions can be used to expand participants’ movement possibilities, a stick can also be its own entity. It can have its own center of gravity, history, and perhaps desires. When Roche discusses all of the collaborative options a stick may afford, she illustrates an important component of polyattention. In addition to tracking multiple tasks or concerns, polyattention asks that collaborators hold open a range of possible perceptions of a single thing: stick as arm, stick as link, stick as being. Even as they create assemblages that incorporate objects into their sense of “Body,” they remain responsive to other possible ways of engaging those objects. This keeps things fluid and unstable—subject to continued negotiation.

Working with extensions can open up ways of experiencing “Body” and agency outside of the Eurocentric bounded individual. However, what does it mean to leverage assemblage and animism as practices that could be adopted by participants of many different identities and backgrounds? Extensions introduce problematics that surface in both decolonial and critical disability scholarship. Within both of these areas, scholars are concerned with the implication of adopting disability and/or decolonization as a lens or metaphor, which can draw focus away from material changes. Extensions were developed with input from disabled collaborators and reflect a flexible notion of embodiment that can potentially include objects and other living beings. This unstable and combinatory experience of bodiliness might be exciting for normatively-abled practitioners because of its apparent novelty. However, if accessibility and inclusion is the goal, it is important to track how a more flexible understanding of “Body” tangibly benefits collaborators with disabilities. I am reminded of one practice in which the only wheelchair user

among us dropped out of a multi-day intensive because the location and the larger dance festival in which the Parcon intensive took place were not accessible, causing both physical exclusion and emotional harm. This highlights how practices cannot be accessible without accounting for the ways in which the material conditions support or restrict the participation of diverse dancers.

Critical disability scholars, such as Tobin Siebers, have pointed out a similar problem in the theoretical domain in which posthumanists and other scholars of the body have glorified or romanticized disability for its metaphorical advantage, treating disability as “marvelous” and disregarding the “hard simple realism of the body” (2008, 67). Similarly, scholars including Eve Tuck, K. Wayne Yang, and Shaun Grech have taken issue with the metaphorization of decolonization, arguing that the discursive appropriation of decolonization to do other kinds of work obfuscates the actual project of rematriating indigenous land (Tuck and Yang 2012; Grech 2015). I side with these scholars and the warnings they issue against the use of false equivalencies to support progressive thought experiments. At the same time, I want to make a case for the ways attention troubles distinctions between the conceptual and the material, or between the perceptual and the kinetic. Changing how we attend, and specifically attempting to dismantle the colonialist and ableist influences on dominant practices of attention, is not enough on its own. It may, however, open up an important pathway through which we could create more skillful and inclusive ways of coordinating materially across difference. Working with attention as part of the toolkit that we hone within Parcon might still enhance public space access and increased agency for people of varying abilities and identities. It might also help to uncover a frequently unconsidered dimension of inclusion. Building a more inclusive attentive practice is not a substitute for ensuring that the material conditions support all movers who wish to participate. At the same time, we must also interrogate what gets excluded within dominant



practices of attention in order to make dance practices inclusive and equitable. As Parcon teaches us, the meaning of our actions varies depending on context. It also matters who is doing the work, where they are doing it, and why.

## **Conclusion: What Failure Teaches**

*Zoom, 2020. We gather on Zoom for a three-day intensive hosted by an initiative called “Livable Futures” at the Ohio State University. It’s early in the COVID-19 pandemic and we are still in the phase of washing groceries and tracking hospital capacities. This is the largest Parcon gathering I’ve attended, with 30+ participants hailing from numerous international locations. Some have never done Parcon before. Shifting from an in-person to a remote gathering, we are tackling a new theme: how to find an increased sense of agency in relationship to our surroundings and digital devices. We retain Parcon Resilience’s core focus on building a BIPOC-centered movement practice invested in challenging oppressive social norms.*

*Care is taken to prepare participants: core members of the Parcon Resilience collective give intro sessions to new participants, adapting the Lenses and “No/Yes/Modify” to our home spaces. Others send emails sharing resources about antiracism and white supremacy culture and request that all participants, and white people especially, read these in advance of the intensive. Organizers share contact information for seasoned Parcon collaborators who will be available to help other participants process emotional content that may surface within the practice (white people are encouraged to contact a white support person; BIPOC people are directed to several BIPOC contacts). Andrew asks some of the white participants to help with administrative tasks as a way of supporting a BIPOC-centered space without centering themselves. In our first meeting, a white participant shares in the chat that they will be paraphrasing everything that is*

*shared in the chat for access purposes (the live captioning functionality was not available yet). As the workshop continues, this causes conflict because it “buries” messages from other participants using the chat. We agree that we will maintain a separate Google doc with descriptions of the exercises and prompts to enable people with different internet speeds and information processing styles to follow what we are doing.*

*The intensive consists of large group movement explorations interspersed with small group experiences in Zoom breakout rooms, which are often organized according to white/BIPOC affinity. I learn that the people in my small group also want to focus on disability as a second mode of affinity. We take most of our 90-minute session to establish protocols for how we will communicate with each other, down to the details of how we will communicate agreement or harm. We create an itemized plan for how we are going to converse with each other. Stacking in the chat? Hand signals? Raising hands? One person asks us to use “I” statements and to avoid responding to a prior comment with words like “same,” or “that has happened to me too” because that implies that you understand someone else’s experience, which is impossible. One person asks if it’s ok to “twinkle” (to wiggle fingers in appreciation). Another asks if we can have a gesture to show if one person is crossing another person’s boundary. The “X” gesture is forbidden, but we all agree that we can hold our hands up in order to ask for the discussion to slow down and proceed more carefully. This extended negotiation of protocol means that we have very little time to engage with the movement exploration Andrew assigned.*

*The next day, my group members share that part of centering accessibility, for them, means avoiding rushing to complete all given exercises. Together, we spend time journaling in response to Andrew’s prompt: “I am disconnected from my body because...” I make a list and realize that, although I have come up with a list of negative bodily sensations I am currently*

*feeling, I don't feel disconnected from my body at all. It's difficult for me to embrace the prompt or find myself inside of it. We let go of the prompt and take turns moving and witnessing each other. I watch my collaborators explore different possible ways of experiencing their home spaces. The experience of watching them informs my own decisions when it's my turn to be witnessed. I pick up one person's idea of inverting. I touch several soft things in my house just because it feels nice. Although we're all in separate spaces, I feel a strange kind of ensemble being built.*

*On the last day, the facilitators ask us to work with our affinity groups to integrate what has happened over the past three days. We are supposed to come up with a "nugget" that we will offer to the large group as a way to conclude the intensive. One person in my group says that they don't think integration is really possible because there is so much happening at once, and none of the problems concerning trauma, viral contagion, systemic racism, and white supremacy, have immediate solutions. "Maybe we don't have to look for quick answers," someone says, "we can let the questions breathe." Another shares that doing Parcon in a virtual space is the ultimate access experiment. The virtual format has afforded more access to the practices, but also presents new problems concerning sensitivity and overstimulation. It pushes us to re-think what accessibility would entail in a virtual space. We all share that we have had to push past what feels like "healthy" amounts of screen time in order to be together. Our attention and our nerves feel frayed.*

*We keep reaching for something to share with the larger group, but none of us feel like we have the physical or emotional capacity. Some express confusion about what the prompt was and what would be meaningful to share. Another proposes that we improvise our response—sharing from the heart, spontaneously. It feels like we are performing "No/Yes/Modify" on the*

*prompt itself, finding a way that we can share something without overriding our needs and capacities.*

*Zoom dumps us back into the main room. Andrew asks our group to go first. One of my group members shares some of the themes we spoke about: letting complex questions “float” rather than immediately looking for answers; the difficulty of understanding what each other’s intentions are in a virtual space; accessibility on Zoom, and more. They trail off and another of our group members speaks up. They say that one of the hallmarks of whiteness in racially mixed spaces is to take up too much space. Responding to the fact that one of the other BIPOC affinity groups was consistently voicing that they needed more time with each other to do their own processing, this participant offers to cede the rest of our time to the BIPOC affinity groups.*

*This is interpreted by some of our BIPOC collaborators as a cop out. They tell us that our actions are performative, giving lip service to allyship while failing to put any “skin in the game.” One group declines to share their offering, saying that our group’s refusal to share is creating a dynamic in which we are acting as voyeurs, asking the BIPOC group to dance for us without offering a reciprocal trade. Another person says they think we all had different expectations coming in, and that these expectations differed based on the skin we were in. The BIPOC participants want to mobilize towards concrete action. It is implied that the white participants are just here for our own edification.*

I left the intensive feeling like our offering had caused significant harm to the BIPOC participants. I also felt for my white collaborator, who attempted to share something that addressed both their whiteness and their commitment to accessibility as a disabled person, but had it go terribly wrong. A few weeks after the intensive, Suseno sent a recap email with a link to a blog post that described how, after the intensive, BIPOC practitioners would be meeting

without white participants: “as a collective we learned that in order to do this we need to do more work on our own in BIPOC-only intensive spaces separate from White folks.” This shift would afford “more time to POC only projects to give time for us to explore our relationships within our multiplicity without diversion from white people calling for us to be a monolith” (Suseno, “POC Centered” 2020). This seemed to solidify the rupture.

Years later, I spoke with Nhu Nguyen about what they thought had transpired, from the perspective of someone who had spent their time in a BIPOC affinity group. They reasoned that the Zoom format and the number of people involved made everything accelerate. Not to mention, many participants were in a state of trauma related to lost work, sick and dying family members, and the pervasive sense of fear associated with the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic. Online, there was less time to pause and ask questions in order to understand each other. It was hard to read each other’s energy, they said, “you can’t quite read that like very subtle shifts and subtle, you know, anxiety or tension that’s coming up as when you’re doing it in person. It’s still there all the time, but not all the time, but like when there's overload that happens, it's a little bit easier to notice that and then pause” (2022). They also suggested that multiple layers of instruction (for example adhering to “No/Yes/Modify” and community guidelines, in addition to Lenses explorations *and* a specific movement prompt) are intended to create a space in which participants can explore questions about sensitive topics. For Nguyen, the accumulating layers of information sometimes make the container too tight. Rather than helping people avoid getting triggered and misunderstanding each other, they can actually “make the field too narrow” (2022).

I want to dwell for a moment on this instance of rupture because it provides an example of what can happen in Parcon when polyattentiveness is not present. It may help shed light on how polyattentiveness is essential to Parcon’s contributions to the field of experimental dance

and somatics as a radically accessible, antiracist, and anticolonial movement practice in which participants are supported in working together across numerous kinds of difference.

On Zoom, we were multitasking: listening to the instruction, typing in the chat, muting and unmuting, answering messages, and in some cases, taking notes on the Google Doc. We were using the Lenses to observe the details of our individual locations, and to connect to objects in those places to have a more playful relationship with our homes and devices. Although we were juggling multiple simultaneous tasks, this did not result in the same kind of multidirectional and multi-modal dialogue with other participants that had been able to cultivate during in-person practices. The intensive may have helped us to experience expanded agency and possibility and our homes, but, at least in my experience, working on Zoom made it much more difficult to achieve the same complexity of relationship with each other.

When we conversed with our fellow participants, we were able to engage only with visual and aural information, and regarded them in rectangular boxes of equal dimensions, spatially organized by Zoom. As Nguyen said, there were few opportunities to read body language or variances in vocal tone. We could not, as we could in other practices, track shifts in our partners' breathing or other subtle nervous system responses to a live interpersonal exchange. Only one person could speak at a time, and as we listened to each other singly, we missed information that could indicate a shift in energy, like one person moving backwards to take space from the group.

Furthermore, my small group had adopted disability access as a theme and was trying to develop protocols for enhancing access on a platform with which we were inexperienced. To my knowledge, we were the only group focusing on disability access, and other groups were not aware that we had selected it as our complementary focus. In an in-person Parcon experience, we

might have had more opportunities to discover which Lenses and frames other participants were exploring. However, on Zoom, we had to raise our hands to speak and then mute/unmute our microphones. Only one person could speak at a time, and the option was either to be silent or speak to the whole group, which was divided across different “pages,” and featured many “camera-off” participants. Without minimizing the harms caused by our group’s failure to offer something that was considered meaningful to the larger group, I felt that the real cause of this rupture was misattunement. We missed each other, and in doing so, caused harm.

Alessandro Duranti and Nicco M. La Mattina’s theorization of “intersubjective attunement” as a condition for cooperation helps to clarify how the virtual format of the Zoom intensive made it difficult, if not impossible, to perform polyattentiveness. For Duranti and La Mattina, “intersubjective attunement” has five properties: sensorial access, distributed intentionality, fluctuation of attention, improvisation, and negotiable role ascription (2022, 85). Unlike intersubjectivity, which is ever-present, intersubjective attunement is a process of noticing and responding to others improvisationally and, as such, always includes the possibility for “breach, failure, or inadequate completion” (85). The Zoom intensive reduced our sensory access to each other and to a shared sense of place. It also hampered lateral communication by sectioning us off in hermetically sealed rooms in which we could not trade off ideas and impulses. It curtailed the scope of our attention and fractured it across administrative and technological tasks that competed with the prompts. And, perhaps most crucially, it did not allow for improvisational actions of repair that might have addressed smaller gaps in our communication and enabled us to course correct (93).

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed sensitizes us to the importance of material “facings” and lines of focus in the creation of a sense of collectivity. She writes, “The very act of

attention—of attending to or facing this or that direction, or toward this or that object—produces ‘a sense’ of a collective or social group” (2006, 119). “The collective,” she continues, “takes shape through the repetition of the act of ‘facing.’ The direction of one’s attention puts one in line with others” (120). When we practice moving our attention together, we “make sense” of the world collaboratively, even as we populate that world with our different perspectives. In a scenario in which we could not track each other’s facings, contexts, or processes of arriving at ideas and perspectives, we increased the possibility that our goals and frames of interpretation would not overlap. Just as the “No/Yes/Modify” practice generally helps participants establish an overlapping zone of consent, it seems that there must be at least some agreement about the lenses that are framing our dialogues with each other, or else a redoubled commitment to respecting what we cannot know about how another person’s sense of a shared experience.

Parcon Resilience/Moving Rasa, like Improvising While Black, is a high-risk practice. Parcon is antiracist, anti-oppressive, disability inclusive movement practice. It seeks to expand participants’ sense of agency while also challenging colonial logics that inform how participants relate to their bodies, to land, and to each other. To do this, Parcon asks participants to be sensitive to many different factors. We track how our weight is moving, how another person’s weight is moving, and how objects are moving—all in dialogue with the variable terrain that hosts our practice. In addition, Parcon asks that we consider the contexts (historical, social, emotional) that create and constrain possibilities for our movement. Often, Parcon asks us to do all of this while we converse with others on topics that can be upsetting to discuss due to the ways they reference violent power dynamics and implicate us within them. Given the diversity in age, race, ability, and cultural experience among participants, we are almost guaranteed to have different experiences of discussion topics—to miss many aspects of those topics, and maybe to



cause or experience harm as we wade into them. As Colleen Roche said, it is not possible to pay attention to all of these things at once. The Lenses help us to manage our focus while still engaging with complexity, but the sheer magnitude of what Parcon wants to accomplish can be overwhelming and perhaps even set up to fail.

When I asked my fellow participants about their experiences of the practice, they all shared instances of overwhelm or breakdown. These included being confronted by things they could not do physically, abilities they had lost to age or illness, feeling stupid for not understanding the prompts, getting “triggered” or “triggering” other people, and, often, being made aware of aspects that had escaped their attention. And yet all of them were still invested in the practice. By way of conclusion, I want to contemplate how Parcon participants interact with failure as a condition of possibility and a potential outcome of the practice.

First, failure is part of the landscape that participants contend with. By establishing the enduring effects of colonialism as a condition of possibility for the practice, the practice acknowledges that massive failures that have already occurred. Parcon handbooks hail participants to perceive themselves as “disheveled, broken, and not enough,” with minds that have “been conditioned to be on high watch to make sure [their] behavior and perceptions fits the confines of [their] identities” (Suseno 2021b 8; Suseno 2022a, 10). Thus, failure is part of the contextual framing that participants are invited into—participants have failed within a system that sets them up to fail. As Janet O’Shea has highlighted, within a neoliberal economy, failure is ascribed to individuals in gendered, racialized, and class-marked ways (2019, 109). The consequences of systemic exclusions are then attributed, within American public discourse, to individual faults. Furthermore, these failures can be used to confirm an already allegedly inferior status (O’Shea 2019, 108; Young 1980). The consequences of failure are also meted out

unevenly through practices (like racial profiling and policing) that target poor people and people of color (Harris 1999). This bumps up against another dimension of failure that Parcon activates, namely, failure as a mode of resistance. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam recuperates failure as a counterhegemonic action in which women and queer people refuse to meet standards imposed by the neoliberal heteropatriarchy. Failure, in his estimation, affords an escape from the “punishing norms that discipline behavior” (2011, 3). Parcon, in some ways, is a practice of failure—that is, of failing to perform expected public space choreographies. However, the situatedness of practice continually reminds participants of the uneven consequences that participants face as a result of their failure to adhere to those choreographies.

Another dimension of failure to be addressed is the failure to dismantle historic legacies of exclusion and marginalization. In the same section of the Parcon Resilience and Moving Rasa Handbooks, Suseno describes how societal conditioning creates limits that “pressure not only how I inhabit my body but also how I inhabit place, time, knowledge and relationships” (Suseno 2021b, 8; Suseno 2022a, 10). This is especially true, within Parcon’s framing, for white participants like me, who are asked to acknowledge our complicity in upholding white supremacy as a foregone conclusion. In light of the Zoom intensive’s spectacular misattunement, failure seems built-in to the exchange.<sup>127</sup>

In contrast with these more deterministic “set-ups,” in which the failure of both marginalized subjects in public spaces and white participants within Parcon spaces is all but given, there is also a facet of failure that is indeterminate and potentially generative. In live

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<sup>127</sup> Fellow white collaborator and former social worker, Joanna Fitzick, agreed that this sometimes happens in Parcon. She told me she did not mind playing the role of “older white woman” if it meant that collaborators of color could work out racialized traumas through interacting with her: “I can be something for people to work out their feelings toward white women [...] I don’t object to that [...] Yeah, I mean, work your stuff. That’s okay” (2022).

performance, the potential for failure (for example, flubbing lines, falling instead of landing a jump, missing a prop cue) is part of what distinguishes it from a recording. The specter of failure produces the heightened attunement of both performer and audience. Failure also indicates that the performer is attempting something that they have not yet mastered, or that does not have precedent. Failure is a stop on the way to something new—essential to creativity, trial-and-error, and other modes of learning-by-doing.

Perhaps the question that remains is: What is the goal? What is at stake in terms of the risks participants are willing to take on? As motivations for their practice, participants have cited individual healing; experiences of connecting with others from whom they have been taught to separate; and an expanded sense of agency that requires “more dimensions of ourselves present in the interaction” (Heydon 2022). Many participants shared that Parcon is unusual because it allows people to dance with others who they might not ordinarily touch or even meet. Connection, in this sense, is both the risk and the reward. Failure offers a means to explore how we might build better and more consensual connections with less instances of harm by becoming more sensitive to the roles we play within a society that divides us by categories.

By assembling across numerous kinds of difference Parcon performs what Andrew Hewitt has called a “social choreography,” opening temporary spheres of practice in which “social possibilities are both rehearsed and performed” (2005, 4). Parcon, however, differs from Hewitt’s proscenium examples by situating these performances in public space, which makes them vulnerable to interruption and correction. Polyattention, within Parcon practice, is an essential safety practice. It helps participants to attune to the dominant “social kinesthetics” that, as Randy Martin has argued, sort populations by race, allocate gendered divisions to public and private spaces, render “nature” into manageable, malleable terrain, differentiate reason from

belief, and institute the vertical human form as the center of the universe (2022, 24). It is precisely the choreographic awareness of these existing social kinesthetics—which provide rules for how bodies should move, relate, and assemble—that enables their disruption (35).

Polyattentiveness is a crucial strategy for appraising the existing social kinesthetics that participants must navigate. Understanding how these pieces intersect and relate enables some variables to be isolated such that they can be explored in more detail and played with in controlled scenarios. At the same time, polyattentiveness also supports its own social kinesthetics: What if we moved with an acknowledgment that there are many factors that connect us, but that we may never be able to perceive or account for?

*We start moving again. There are pauses and starts in both words and motion as we respond to each other's proposals. Sometimes a physical sensation diverts the thread of the stories we are sharing about our families. We wonder aloud if our ancestors—mine from Germany and Scotland, hers from Japan and the Philippines—might have crossed paths. We also talk about how they might have benefitted and suffered at each other's hands. The dialogue is happening in many places at once and incorporates both tension and cooperation. I don't merge with my partner; often I miscalculate her trajectory, and she mine. We slip and fall and sometimes feel constrained by the gazes of passersby. We reflect on the things we want to do but feel unable to. We both move to avoid crushing the little plant sprouts between the bricks. I marvel at the fact that I still don't know my partner's last name or what she does for work, or who she lives with, but instead, how she and her family have planned to care for their dead. Instead, I feel that the back of her neck is soft. Instead, I am underneath as she climbs up my spine like a ramp while talking about how difficult it was when she first moved to New York. Instead, I listen to the list of things that are not yet possible, but are still worth trying for...*

## Chapter 4 | More-Than-Humanizing Attention: Collaborative Subversions of Anthropocentrism in iLANDing Laboratories

### Introduction

“Spatial Behavior of White Footed Deer Mice”

Move through the space as a mouse would by observing protective canopy overhead. Move from canopy to canopy, avoiding areas with too much open space. (Hernandez et al. 2017)

Dear Reader: wherever you are, I invite you take a moment to either perform this action or imagine yourself performing this action in your location. What would it be like to do this at your home? Or in your place of work? Perhaps in a nearby park? What would it be like to perform these actions on public transportation? What do you think you might discover about shelter? How has each space been constructed to furnish or withhold shelter? Who is being sheltered and who is left exposed?

The instruction, to “Move from canopy to canopy, avoiding areas with too much open space” is deceptively simple. However, if we imagine ourselves ducking under various shelters and avoiding open spaces, we might also notice aspects of their surroundings that we do not generally take into account. We might find ourselves following novel movement trajectories in pathways that zigzag from cover to cover, rather than taking a straight line. The shifts in (a) the way the performer attunes to aspects of the perceivable environment and b) the way the performer moves in or through that environment are mutually informing. A change in trajectory precipitates a change in physical perspective, determining which kinds of stimuli are perceivable. Likewise, a change in what is relevant or important re-maps movement trajectories accordingly. The score also lends itself to ethical reflection upon relations between different beings in the

site's ecological matrix. To build a choreographic score based on the movement habits and attentive concerns of a field mouse is to contemplate what that mouse might care about, and why.

The above score was inspired during a 2013 residency called “Through Body, Through Earth, Through Speech” that took place in Flushing Meadows Corona Park, the site of the 1939 and 1964 World’s Fairs in Queens, New York. Sponsored by the Interdisciplinary Laboratory for Art Nature and Dance (iLAND for short), the residency brought together artists, dancers, and an evolutionary biologist and urban ecologist to examine questions of difference, biodiversity, proximity, and intervention through what they called a “cross-pollination” of artistic practice and scientific method. Collaborators Julio Hernandez, Huong Ngo, Phuong Nguyen, Solgil Oh, Sable Elyse Smith, Or Zubalsky, and Jason Munshi-South grappled with the notion of “use,” and more specifically, how space is designated as “useful” to politicians, corporations, city planners, people, animals, and other entities. They inquired: How is a space built to be used? How does this contrast with the actual uses multispecies “users” find for the space? (Nguyen 2013).



Figure 10 - Uses and “misuses” of public space in Queens, NY.  
Image: Fantastic Futures, 2013.

During the period of their investigation, the Flushing Meadows Corona Park was at the center of a conflict between communities of New Yorkers who used the site as a park, and a conglomeration of allied commercial and governmental actors that sought to appropriate acres of the state-owned parkland into sports stadiums, parking lots, and a 1.4 million square foot shopping mall under the auspices of “economic development” (Hum et al. 2013). This context heightened the contrast between the top-down imposition of capitalist value systems that motivated the development project, and plural, hyper-local, and ground-level ways in which multispecies communities drew value from the park environment.<sup>128</sup>

Residency collaborators wanted to study how non-authoritative users “mis-used” the space, appropriating it from the purposes prescribed by commercial and municipal powers. “The

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<sup>128</sup> This differentiation between top-down and ground-up parallels Michel de Certeau’s description of the strategic and the tactical (2011).

neighborhood has claimed this former ash dump and made it for their own. Whenever we visit, we constantly observe people using the park, not as intended, but as they need/desire it” (Ngo 2013). For example, they noted that a fountain that no longer moved water was converted to a skateboarding area; they compared this to the ways dust and rust provided substrates that sustained a multitude of organisms, even as it held no value to the dominant users of the park. In order to study the numerous different uses the parkland held to its inhabitants, collaborators modified their habitual ways of regarding the park by “[shifting their] perspectives to that of a mouse, a rat, a child, or a tree” (2013). These ways of valuing the parkland were not reflected in development plans, and yet, were part of the park’s identity and sense of place. Attuning to the multiple ways the space held value suggested a dissenting question: What kind of ‘public’ will development projects serve? If, as proponents of the development project characterized it, the parkland was “under-utilized” (“Triple Threat” 2013), whose definitions of ‘useful’ count?

“Through Body, Through Earth, Through Speech” foreshadows many of the themes and questions I will explore in this chapter. In the broadest sense, I consider how choreographies of attention play a role in ecological power dynamics involving human and more-than-human entities. I examine multiple projects sponsored by iLAND between 2006 and 2015 in order to analyze how project collaborators use choreographic scores to bring to the fore relationships between movement, attention, and ecological value. I illustrate how, iLANDing scores subvert dominant modes of attention that position “the human” at the center of both action and value by sensitizing participants to alternative and sometimes conflicting value systems that are lived out by multispecies actors in an ecological web. Throughout my analysis, I track the unique knowledge-producing potential of multiple, environmentally situated, moving and sensing



bodies, and the ways in which the knowledge that emanates from their experiences complicates top-down efforts at environmental management.

This chapter explores how the sensory and corporeal practices of dominant attention bolster an anthropocentric mode of relating to one's environment and the more-than-human others that inhabit it. I use the term "more-than-human" to refer to the many kinds of living and non-living matter that has been differentiated from ideas of "the human" as constituted in the West. I use "more-than-human" rather than nonhuman or "other-than-human" to point to that which exceeds the frame of the human. If attention has historically been conceptualized in Western paradigms as a practice of selective engagement with phenomena, "more-than-human" acknowledges the kinds of matter and life that are left out of those selections, whether discursively or by virtue of the limitations of human perception.<sup>129</sup> "More-than-human" also points to the ways in which humans are always entangled with other entities, through what they eat and drink, the bacteria in their guts that digest food, and the trees that produce the oxygen they breathe. The maximalism of "more" gestures to the limitations of humans as a species and concepts of "the human" while recognizing "the human" as a socially constructed category that merits scrutiny. In this way, I position my analysis in dialogue with posthumanism, while avoiding any pretense of moving "beyond" the human as a mode of subjectivity, other than to affirm that there is always so much that is already "beyond."<sup>130</sup> One problem associated with the term "more-than-human" is that it groups both living and non-living matter together. By using a single term to refer to the more-than-human, I do not wish to suggest that our ethical

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<sup>129</sup> Ed Yong's *An Immense World* describes some of the specific ways more-than-human animals perceive, and how those differ from the general sensory abilities of humans (2022).

<sup>130</sup> I will discuss critiques of posthumanism later in this text.

responsibilities towards all of these entities are equivalent. Instead, I propose that choreographing experimental attentions can help us to notice the anthropocentric limitations of typical attention. I share with iLANDing collaborators the hope that this practice might make humans more sensitive to the entanglements of beings, materials, and ideas and lead us toward more care-based ways of navigating those interdependencies.

I critique anthropocentrism as a concept and connect it to the discursive and material preposition of “on” in which the human is imagined to be both separate from and in a dominating position with respect to land and more-than-human others. After deciphering the ways in which anthropocentrism is reproduced by key practices of dominant attention, I analyze the strategies by which iLANDing, an interdisciplinary embodied research method that uses the moving body—a “particularly calibrated tool” for investigating urban ecologies (Monson 2022)—can disrupt anthropocentric habits and create alternative modes of ecological and ethical relationship. I argue that choreographic scores offer generative ways to restructure what and how phenomena become valuable to human collaborators in the perceivable environment. Choreographic scores are unique in that they require investigators to inhabit multiple alternative prepositions—discursive and material modes of relating with the more-than-human—which are obscured within anthropocentric praxis.

The iLAND community, which includes laboratory and residency collaborators, participants, and members of the public, uses dance scores to entrain participants into ecological—rather than anthropocentric—practices of attention. In doing so, they reveal links between dominant attention and extractive environmental practices, demonstrating how the ways in which humans practice attuning to the world bears physical and material consequences for human and nonhuman beings. Expanding upon my analysis of attention as a choreographic

practice, I describe how normative attention assists in constructing “the human”<sup>131</sup> as the key arbiter of value within multispecies ecosystems.

I then explore how iLANDing collaborators use dancing as a practice through which normative postures, perspectives, and modes of navigating one’s surroundings might be subverted and remade in ways that take into account the concerns of more-than-human actors. iLANDing collaborators are not the first to link a breakdown in ecological relationality within dominant Western culture to a failure of attention. However, they offer a unique way of “re-choreographing” attention away from individualistic and extractivist models and toward a more relational paradigm. This enables more ecologically responsible actions based on collaborators’ sensitization to multiple coexisting ways of valuing a shared environment.

After giving a brief overview of iLAND as an organization, I structure the itinerary of this chapter around a series of questions. *What are the body practices through which anthropocentrism materializes and becomes naturalized as habit?* I begin by considering how anthropocentrism is produced and reinforced by dominant practices of attention. In this section, I define anthropocentrism and point to some of the problems that arise when invoking “human” as a category. As I have discussed in other chapters, “the human” has been used as a framework to assert both the dominance of one species over others, as well as the hierarchical ordering of people in which some groups are cast as nonhuman or partially human according to racialized, colonialist, gendered, and ableist logics. Resituating anthropocentrism as entangled with

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<sup>131</sup> I will differentiate “the human” as a limited Western construction of individual subjectivity from humans as a species by referring to the former in quotation. By examining dominant Western attention as a corporeal practice that produces a particular way of valuing and relating to the environment, I recognize the ways in which these practices are not so much linked to a particular species but are informed by and perpetuating of Eurocentric taxonomies that organize living beings according to schemas of difference that benefit some humans and oppress others.

Eurocentric attitudes toward the body, land, and various discursively constructed others, I explore how anthropocentrism, which is also tied up with racism, imperialism, and economic exploitation, is encoded within dominant attention.

*How are iLANDing scores used to study and activate alternatives to anthropocentric value systems?* In the next section, I explore how aspects of the iLANDing method—specifically the interdisciplinary creation of choreographic scores—support a contemplation of interrelationships between attention, movement, and value. I argue that interdisciplinarity and choreographic scoring are effective approaches for researching and restructuring the processes which perceivable phenomena hold value to the perceiver. Drawing on anthropologist Charles Goodwin’s concept of “professional vision” (1994) and ecological psychologist J.J. Gibson’s “affordances” (1969; [1979] 1986), I explore how iLANDing collaborators use scores as tools for distilling and exchanging value systems across professions and species, while simultaneously providing a means of observing how those value systems are entangled with ways of moving in the research environment. In addition to revealing the interplay between attention, movement, and value, I propose that the iLANDing method constitutes a unique practice of “perspective taking” that can enhance ethical sensitivities to the needs of human and nonhuman others.

*What are some of the specific strategies by which anthropocentric values are identified, studied, and challenged in iLANDing practices?* In the last section, I provide a close reading of choreographic scores and practice logs generated through different residencies and laboratories between 2006-2015, I identify several key strategies that collaborators employ: 1) activating alternative prepositions; 2) looking for what is ignored within anthropocentric attention; 3) biomimicry: perceiving and moving in the manner of other-than-human animal species; and 4) reflexive anthropocentrism: attuning to the impact humans have on the ecologies they inhabit.

As with other chapters in this dissertation, which have explored attention's racialized, ableist, and colonial influences, I investigate the tangible outcomes that might arise from a shift in perspective. *Does deviation from anthropocentric attention result in more ecologically responsible action? How do we know that it does?* Just as witnessing will not undo racism; and polyattentiveness will not decolonize public spaces and make them universally accessible; iLAND's multispecies attentions will not bring down carbon emissions, restore extinct species, or reforest land. However, if one takes seriously my proposal that attention is a set of choreographic practices that are embedded with their own politics and ethics, then perspectival shifts are part of more comprehensive structural change. As I will illustrate, what iLAND scores do is to lead those of us socialized into anthropocentric attention towards a recognition of more-than-human "beingness." This "beingness" is denied within dominant practices and conceptualizations of attention that envision more-than-human entities primarily as property, or do not attune to them at all.<sup>132</sup> Movement in general, and choreographic scoring in particular, are uniquely situated to provide insights into how humans could reorganize their own attention according to an ethics of care. I propose that using movement as a diagnostic for understanding what a more-than-human entity needs might lead to better ways of caring *for* more-than-human others by understanding first what those others care *about*.

The data for this chapter has been gathered through archival, interview-based, and autoethnographic data. I review textual and multimedia documentation from past iLANDing projects, many of which are available on project-specific blogs. Many blogs document the

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<sup>132</sup> I borrow the term and meaning of "beingness" from Maneesha Deckha (2021), who proposes the term as an alternative to two existing frameworks for understanding the legal status of animals, "property" and "person." Beingness evades anthropocentric valuations that afford rights to some animals based on their proximity to humanness, and instead offers a more animal-centric model.

projects as they were unfolding over multiple days, weeks, or months, featuring photos, videos, and journal-like process reflections. In addition to project blogs written during the same period in which the projects occurred, I analyze scores that were produced for a 2017 publication, *A Field Guide to iLANDing*. These scores distill some of the key practices that collaborators devised within their research projects, but rather than describing findings, they document procedure, which enables the repetitions of that procedure in future sites by future researchers. As one such future researcher, I test out several of the scores and reflect on their utility as a tool for reorganizing my own attention. I amplify my understanding of the insights generated through each practice through interviews with project organizers. Finally, I draw from autoethnographic observations on my own experience as an iLANDing laboratory organizer in a 2015 lab called “Use Values: Re/Imagining Urban Waste,” in which I collaborated with visual artist Katarina Jerinic and urban designer and waste systems specialist Juliette Spertus.

## **iLAND in Context**

iLAND, founded and directed by New York and Illinois-based choreographer, Jennifer Monson, self-describes as a “dance research organization that investigates the power of dance, in collaboration with other fields, to illuminate our kinetic understanding of the world” (Monson, n.d.). Since 2006, iLAND has supported interdisciplinary collaborations, particularly between artists and scientists, through multi-month residencies, short-term laboratories, and symposia and retreats. In many of these gatherings, collaborative teams design research projects that engage a specific theme and site from different disciplines, with an emphasis on methodology exchange. “iLANDing,” used as a verb, describes an approach to researching urban ecologies through an interdisciplinary cross-pollination of methods of inquiry drawn from dance, science, and art.

Monson's trajectory as an artist and activist informs the aesthetic and political framing of iLAND's mission. Monson moved to New York City from Southern California in 1983, where she immersed herself in dance improvisation practices including contact improvisation and Open Movement at PS122, as well as a range of somatic practices like Skinner Releasing, Body Mind Centering, Alexander Technique, and Klein/Mahler Technique. Studying these techniques instilled in Monson a belief in the capacity of dancing to "define new ways of being a body" through improvisatory investigations of form, meaning, desire and power (iLAND 2017, 10). Along with these influences, Monson cites her participation in LGBTQ activism, political protests, and club dance in New York City in the mid-1980s and 1990s as central to her understanding of improvisation and her acquisition of specialized perceptual training in "listening, observing, negotiating, and responding" (12).

Between 2000 and 2006 Monson developed BIRD BRAIN, a multi-sited research and performance project that studied navigational strategies used by whales and birds, focusing specifically on the relationship between the animals' sensory perception and movement. By studying the sensory capacities and practices of the migrating animals, Monson honed in on overlaps between human and nonhuman perceptual practices and developed a parallel interest in archaic modes of human navigation that made use of stars, ocean salinity, tidal levels, and other modes of tracking environmental patterns. For Monson, emulating how migratory animals coordinated with each other to traverse long distances presented ways to both connect with those animals and to recover embodied navigational skills that had been "lost" to humans living within contemporary Western societies (13).

Monson and collaborators have elaborated a research methodology that combines principles from scientific experimental design and experimental dance practice. iLANDing

researchers investigate ecological phenomena through scientifically and somatically inspired data-gathering practices. From iLAND's perspective, choreographic scores are useful tools for interdisciplinary exchange because they are compatible with both improvisational dance and scientific research. While not all iLANDing projects create choreographic scores, they are one of the main tools collaborators use to outline their hybrid experimental procedures as well as to document research findings.

In the majority of iLAND literature, “dance” operates as a general category and is not defined with regard to genre, technique, cultural enmeshment, or aesthetic. However, both the geographic location of iLAND in New York City, and the cultural ties to somatics and the New York City experimental dance scene that many iLAND practitioners hold in common, exert significant impact how dance is conceived of and deployed within iLAND projects. Many of the artistic influences named by Monson and collaborators can be connected with what historian Daniel Belgrad has described as a “culture of feedback” that animated U.S. American cultural production from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. Inspired by the emergence of cybernetics and systems ecology in the 1950s, which rose in popularity in tandem with the environmental movement of the 1960s, the culture of feedback adopted the concept of feedback loops observed in nature as the basis for numerous cultural forms including visual art, dance, music, and literature. Both an aesthetic and a political movement, the culture of feedback developed praxes of “ecological thinking” as a way to change society for the better by embracing empathy, emulation, and relationality as correctives to scientific objectivity and environmental extractivism (2019, 5).

While ecological thinking may have represented a paradigm shift among primarily white left-of-center artists, environmentalists, and intellectuals, many of its principles have roots in



longstanding Indigenous ecological praxis. As Belgrad narrates, proponents of ecological thinking were inspired by and sometimes impersonated Native American knowledge. At the same time, ecological thinking was not simply an outcome of one-way appropriation; Indigenous intellectuals including John Mohawk (Seneca) and Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) also embraced the mainstream turn toward ecological thinking as an opportunity to advocate for the cultural values they sought to preserve.<sup>133</sup>

Proponents of the culture of feedback highlighted attentiveness as a distinguishing factor between Indigenous and Eurocentric relations with the world. They decried the disciplinary entrapment of sustained monofocus and, conversely, associated indigeneity with a holistic and environmentally situated attentiveness, which allowed them to perceive interconnections that Westerners frequently missed. In his book *The Tracker*, naturalist and survivalist Tom Brown Jr. describes a lesson with a likely fictional Apache Elder, “Stalking Wolf”:

Where our schools were forcing us to pay total attention, Stalking Wolf was teaching us intermittent attention, a constant refocusing between minute detail and the ...whole pattern of the woods...The more we learned to *let our attention wander and come to rest on the thing at hand just often enough to catch the disturbances* the better we became as trackers and as observers of the woods. (1978, 25, 27 [emphasis added])

Experimental composers including Pauline Oliveiros, Terry Riley, and Brian Eno, and poets including Gary Snyder also embraced this flexible and intermittent attention, which enabled the perceiver to take in decentralized feedback from the environment (Belgrad 2019, 74).

Within the arena of contemporary dance and somatics, the culture of feedback manifested in the adoption of flexible attention as a framework for organizing movement. These values are

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<sup>133</sup> For more about the influence of Indigenous philosophies and practices on U.S. American culture, see Belgrad’s chapter “Crying Indian” in *The Culture of Feedback* (2019, 59-79). For an analysis of the influence of Indigenous philosophies and practices on climate science, see “Weaving Indigenous protocols and sustainability science” (Whyte, Brewer II, and Johnson 2016), and “Kyle Whyte on the Colonial Genesis of Climate Change” (White 2020).

evident within experimental approaches to dance and choreography as exemplified by contact improvisation and the work of Simone Forti, Nancy Stark Smith, and Deborah Hay. In her analysis of contact improvisation, Cynthia Novack describes how practitioners cultivated a “responsive body,” which is “mindful, feeling-filled, and physical,” rather than the raw material for the expression of an inner self or soul (1990, 188). These approaches reconceptualize dance/movement as an exercise of “systemic intelligence” (Belgrad 2019, 16) in which the performer’s attentional agility helps them contend with indeterminacy and unpredictability. Moving away from a conceptualization of the dancing body as object-to-be-viewed, many dancers of this era reconceived of the body as “physical material” for the dancer to investigate and “staged the dancer’s experience of moving as its subject” (George 2020, 103). Within this framework, the dancer’s job was to process internal and external experience, responding to and generating further feedback through the activity of dancing.

The belief that movement is a form of thinking, particularly through the ways in which it dialogues with internal and external sensation, is one of the founding assumptions that informs iLAND’s use of dancing as a mode of knowing. Additionally, iLAND—in its embrace of decentered organizational structures, its promotion of a systems-based understanding of choreography, and its foregrounding of a sensitive, empathetic, responsive dancing body as an organism within a multispecies ecological web—carries forward many interests of the culture of feedback. As with other aesthetic manifestations of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century’s “culture of feedback,” iLAND continues to weave an ambiguous relationship with Indigenous ecological praxis and worldviews, seldom directly engaging Indigenous people or ideas as sources, while also fixating on recovering what has been lost through the disciplinization of attention in modern Western society.

## **Whose “human” is at the center of anthropocentrism?**

This chapter investigates how the interdisciplinary development of choreographic scores might offer a way to perceive beyond the narrow parameters of anthropocentric attention, and thus develop a more ethical ecological praxis. Before wading further into this inquiry, it is necessary to define and complicate some terms. “Anthropocentrism,” or “human-centeredness” is a belief that is embedded within Western religions and philosophies that conceives of “the human” as the primary and exclusive holder of moral standing. Understood through the lens of attention, anthropocentrism is a practice in which humans and their needs are more likely to be noticed and responded to than those of other entities. Comprising a set of beliefs, a mode of attuning to the world, and a wide array of material practices, anthropocentrism manifests as “human exceptionalism” (Catton and Dunlap 1978), which is both bound up with patriarchy and white supremacy, and foundational to Western philosophy and ethics. More than just a theoretical perspective, anthropocentric logics have material implications; they are used to justify individual, corporate, and state projects that exploit natural resources for financial gain, as well as conservation initiatives focused on the preservation of “natural resources.”

Any system that privileges some forms of being over others is of course problematic. However, there are specific several issues that arise through the use of anthropocentrism as a descriptive term that must be grappled with. The first problem is that the term groups all people together as a species without reckoning with the vastly unequal environmental impacts that different groups have on metrics such as carbon emissions (Hayward 1997). According to geographer Neil Smith, the staging of the conflict between “Man” and “Nature” obfuscates the capitalist and colonialist production of nature as an entity that is paradoxically outside of the

human realm while occupying a key role as raw material for uneven development ([1984] 2008). Thus, to refer to anthropocentrism as an unmarked and undifferentiated phenomenon obscures the ways in which some persons, nations, and corporations bear greater responsibility for, but suffer less of the impact of environmental devastation. As Potowatomi philosopher and environmental justice scholar Kyle Whyte has argued, colonialism and environmental crisis are so intertwined as to be nearly interchangeable. Colonialism “inflicts environmental change, dangerous environmental change, on colonized people in order to set up an economy that generations down the road will be extremely disruptive to the climate system at a global scale” (2020).

The second problem with the term anthropocentrism is that it invokes the contested category of “the human” without accounting for the ways in which “humanity” has been used to confer the status and rights of personhood unequally. As discussed in the previous chapter, European ideations of “the human” have been imposed as universal and overrepresented among many other ontological possibilities (Wynter 2003). This maneuver, which situates European Man as the model for an entire species constructs a concept of humanity that is “fractured and relational” because of the way in which it also instantiates a hierarchy that confers partial inclusion and exclusion into the category of humanity (Jackson 2020, 46). Ontologically speaking, the failure to reckon with fractured humanity obfuscates what critical dance studies scholar María Regina Firmino-Castillo describes as three tenets of “genocidal coloniality.” These three tenets hold that: 1) some persons are things; 2) that matter is inert; and 3) that some persons are independent from an ecological matrix (Firmino-Castillo 2018, 32). Due to culturally constructed and exclusive nature of the category of “the human,” Zakiyyah Iman Jackson warns that effective critiques of anthropocentrism would need to be reframed as critiques of Western

liberal humanism (2020, 15). This critique would account for the ways in which the categories of “race” and “species” have been used to define each other, but, paradoxically, are not always distinct. In particular, Jackson argues that racism precedes and undergirds speciesism, showing how the category of “the animal” has often crossed species lines and has been applied to human beings that are denied full participation within Eurocentric “humanity” (22). Scholars have exposed other “synergistic taxonomies” (Kim 2015, 18) that operate in tandem with species hierarchies, including nature/culture, animal/man, non-white/white (Kim 2015; Ko 2019), disabled/non-disabled (Taylor 2017), and female/male (Adams 2015). These analyses unearth how the human/animal binary creates a liminal space in which the most marginalized humans and the most human-like animals are located.

As Doran George has argued in their historical analysis of Western somatics, the transcendence of “animality” and the “natural,” which the normative subject achieves by way of modernization (which includes Western concert dance training), is sometimes experienced as a loss. George explains how somatics practitioners aimed at recovering “natural” corporeal capacities by looking beyond the “modern West” to a “timeless, savage nobility still evident in children, animals, and vaguely defined primitive societies” (2020, 3-4). This maneuver problematically reinstates racialized hierarchies. George likens the pursuit of the natural body to a quest to uncover a pre-cultural corporeality by drawing upon non-Western cultures that had been associated, through a Western discursive frame, with timeless nature. I name these dynamics in order to acknowledge some of the baggage that is stowed within iLAND’s efforts to decenter the human within urban ecosystems. Taking cues from Indigenous, critical race, critical animal, and critical disability studies scholarship, it is crucial to critically consider *whose* conceptualization of “human” is being decentered.

While the lenses of racialization and coloniality are not overt within most iLANDing projects they are implicit within “anthropocentrism” as an ethical paradigm and set of practices. iLANDing collaborators span a wide range of professional disciplines and are diverse in terms of gender and sexual identities. However, the majority of collaborators are white and come from middle class backgrounds. This demographic informs how “the human” is invoked within choreographic scores, often pointing to a Western ideal to which many collaborators have at least partial access through their racial and economic positionalities. For this reason, I intentionally retain the term “anthropocentrism,” with all of its baggage, to recognize the entanglement of racial, economic, colonial, and patriarchal histories.

The complexities set in motion by an effort to move beyond “the human” at the center of anthropocentrism suggest the need for what Claire Jean Kim has termed a “multi-optic vision.” Multi-optic seeing entails seeing from within various perspectives, moving from one vantage point to another, inhabiting them in turn, holding them in the mind’s eye at once [...] this method of seeing encourages us to move beyond the seductive simplicity of a single-optic storyline and to grapple with the existence and interconnectedness of multiple group experiences of oppression (2015, 19). This is in line with Kyle Whyte’s call to consider repairing relationships between groups of people in addition to relationships between people and animals (2019). Later in this chapter, I will discuss how iLAND encourages multisensory and multi-directional practices of attention by working across multiple environmental, disciplinary, and species-specific perspectives. I extend the concept of “multi-optic vision” to include the multiple senses and the ways in which attention to perceptual stimuli is intimately linked with specific ways of relating to one’s environment(s). At the same time, I will track places wherein iLANDing scores reinscribe the normative Western subject as the universal “human” to be decentered, which

inhibits a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which different forms of oppression, including those between groups of people, are linked within nature-culture ecosystems. In addition to enriching my scholarly analysis, I undertake this work as an iLAND collaborator because I recognize in the iLANDing community a longstanding commitment to multi-optic vision and recognize opportunities for cultivating further awareness of how racialization and other modes of oppression are active as environmental forces that impact iLAND's research sites and working methods.

### **Anthropocentrism as a Problem of Attention**

What are the body practices and modes of attention through which anthropocentrism materializes and becomes naturalized as habit? Choreographic elements of dominant attention—perceiving from a vertical posture, prioritizing visual focus while inhibiting engagement with other sensations and training the capacity to ignore categories of phenomena classified as “distraction”—help to naturalize anthropocentrism as a value system that prioritizes human needs over those of other species. In what follows, I trace how anthropocentric perspectives are made possible through a choreography of attention that maintains a separation between “the human” and the more-than-human, which facilitates the exploitation of the latter by the former. There are four choreographic elements that are linked with conceptual perspectives: 1) the pursuit of objectivity through the practices of visual dominance and physical distance; 2) the orientation of being “on” land and the physical practice of verticality; 3) cultivated disengagement from land and the more-than-human; and 4) a unidirectional flow of attention in which “the human” observes but is not assumed to be observed by more-than-human entities.

In *The Lie of the Land*, Paul Carter describes the connection between vertical posture, notions of progress, and conceptualizations of land as flat within colonial philosophies toward the environment: “the opening of the woods, the clearing of the ground, these historical activities are cognate with the process of intellectual enlightenment, the ideology of progress. [...] in order to stand erect, man must, it seems, stamp the earth flat, turning it into a passive planisphere” (1996, 9). Dominant practices of attention both participated in the conceptual flattening and enable the material flattening of complex terrain. They accomplish this by privileging a distanced perspective that renders the land available to be modified as an object.

Within Western ideologies, the association between knowledge, subjectivity, and vertical posture is bolstered by corporeal practices that create distance between the attending subject and the world around them. Susan Foster has provided a historical analysis of how body cultures that cultivated vertical posture helped to separate the Western subject from its surroundings and instead orient them in the abstract space of the  $x$  and  $y$  axis. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, she writes, “[the] body was slowly being drawn away from a communion with nature and society and towards a presentation of the self as a singular entity to be observed by others” (2011, 95). Increasingly, verticality was associated with an idea of the moral individual as self-supporting and independent, who was capable of rational thought in part because he drew himself away from social and environmental context. Vertical posture positions the eyes, considered to be the important and trustworthy sensory organs, at a maximum distance from the ground. This enabled an “objective” view of land by rendering it as two-dimensional, from an elevated view.<sup>134</sup> The perspective of “objectivity” was made possible through a physical removal that enabled one to

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<sup>134</sup> See Susan L. Foster’s chapter, “Kinesthesia” in *Choreographing Empathy* (2011) for a historical analysis of how the Western body was mapped in Euclidean space in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.



regard other entities as “objects” rather than as processes, subjects, and living beings. Land was cast as inert “matter”—even though it includes a lively array of moving water, soil, rocks, micro-organisms, plants, fungi, and animals. The objectification of a complex, multi-organism, vibrant ecosystem into flat land justified its exploitation. It is notable that objectification and “fixing” was a key strategy by which “the human” was afforded full or partial humanity within dominant classifications. The reduction of land to “object” status helped to define humans as unique in their possession of subjectivity (Massey 1994, 2005). This supported an ethical framework in which “the human” was situated as the originator of moral action, vested with the responsibility to install ecological order.

This physical and discursive distancing of the self from its environment, aided by visual dominance and vertical postures, are closely related with the next choreographic element: the orientation of being “on” land rather than “in,” “among,” or “with.” As Carter and Foster have shown, the tangible flattening of the ground that occurred through cartographic and choreographic practices rendered it smooth so that people could glide over it rather than becoming entangled.<sup>135</sup> This practice remade a complex environment into a settler colonial *tabula rasa* while also enabling the settler subject to imagine himself as free to move, while other species and marginalized human subjects were anchored in place.

While this two-lettered preposition may seem like a minor detail, it is discursively powerful and has profound implications for the ways in which “the human” is considered to be obligated to other entities. Dominant practices of attention contribute to the feeling that one is “on” land. They obscure other simultaneous realities that include being pulled towards the center

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<sup>135</sup> As scholars have argued, this strategy also clears space for writing, visual art, theater, and choreography (Foster 2011, Bench 2008) by creating arenas places “where the ambiguities of the world have been exorcised. It assumes the withdrawal and the distance of a subject in relation to an area of activities” (de Certeau 2011, 134).

of the earth, touching objects and floors, breathing air and other particles that has been shared by others, drinking and urinating water that was part of polar ice caps, digesting with the aid of trillions of bacteria. In doing so, they inhibit both an awareness and a sense of accountability to what is shared and what is connected.



Figure 11 - Ink sketch of young George Washington surveying the area around the Popes Creek plantation.  
Image: National Park Service, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1956.

The choreographic relations catalyzed by the physical and conceptual orientation of “being-on” are present even within ecological conservation projects. For example, The Footprint Network, an award winning nonprofit environmental sustainability organization, argues for a methodology called “Ecological Footprint accounting” as a strategy for measuring the impacts that countries, municipalities, businesses, and individuals have on the planet by measuring the “demand on and supply of nature.” It tallies “all the productive areas for which a population or product competes” and the “ecological assets,” a person or product requires. The Ecological

Footprint, according to the Network's website "tracks the use of productive surface areas," and attempts to use them efficiently to balance an ecological budget.

The call to consider one's "carbon footprint" evokes the action of creating an impression on flat earth and stages "the human" "on" its "productive surface areas" ("Ecological Footprint" n.d.). Through the image of the footprint, which is echoed in conservationist language such as "leave no trace," implies a kind of mark that "the human" makes on nature. This reiterates dichotomous relations between "man" and "nature" by reinforcing the idea that the two are separate, in part because "the human" moves and has the agency to exploit static natural resources (including land, plants, animals, and other matter), either sustainably or unsustainably. The preposition of being "on" land, is one of the hallmarks of anthropocentrism, instantiating a choreographic relation that produces ethical limits. As is evident from the language of "demand and supply," "productive surface areas," and ecological "assets," the flatness of the earth is central to its fungibility within a capitalist value system. Flattening the earth renders it more useful as an abstract site of production rather than a complex field of interdependent materials and living beings.

The third way in which dominant attention is used to bolster anthropocentrism lies in the alignment between selective focus and the requirement to ignore entire categories of stimuli. If, as I have argued in Chapter 1, the capacity to disregard many kinds of phenomena is an important aspect of modern Western definitions of agency, so too is the capacity to disengage oneself from relations and responsibilities within a larger ecological matrix. British moral philosopher Mary Midgley has pointed out that, inherent to the logics of sustainability, is a kind of "species egoism" (1996, 42), in which "the human" uses other animals and nonhuman entities. This, she explains, is possible only through conscious acts of exclusion wherein the nonhuman

and the non-rational are devalued. In Western culture since the Renaissance, “there has been a deliberate effort to exclude from concern everything nonhuman and many of the supposedly nonrational aspects of human life as well. ... it has usually taken the form of a ‘humanism’ that excludes nonhuman nature” (48). This “[exclusion] from concern” parallels the parameters by which the nonhuman is relegated to the outside of the dominant attentional frame through the imposition of classificatory systems that diminish its attentional value.<sup>136</sup> Other descriptors of this attentional exclusion include “plant blindness” (Wandersee and Schussler 1999) and “nature deficit disorder” (Louv 2019).<sup>137</sup> Acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton has argued that members of Western societies are educated into states of “controlled impairment” (Tippett n.d.) in which “the human” is taught not to listen to the world around them. He explained, “we tend to think of listening as focusing our attention on what is important and filtering out everything else. How are we going to know what sounds are important before we’ve even heard those sounds?” (Knight 2015).

One of the means whereby more-than-human nature is excluded from concern within dominant attentional frames is through a denial of movement. As feminist philosopher and political theorist Jane Bennett has argued, Western knowledge systems are predicated on the “thingification” of all that does not pertain to “the human” and define all that is not human as

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<sup>136</sup> For a discussion of how attention is socially and environmentally constituted, see Jason C. Throop and Alessandro Duranti’s 2015 article “Attention, ritual glitches, and attentional pull: the president and the queen.”

<sup>137</sup> “Plant blindness,” a term coined by botanists James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler, does not actually refer to a visual impairment, but failure to “see, notice, or focus attention on plants in one’s daily life.” Wandersee and Schussler argue that children in the United States exhibit a lack of interest in plants due to a “misguided anthropocentric ranking of plants as inferior to animals and thus, as unworthy of consideration (1999, 82). Other biologists have pointed out that a lack of attention to plants vis-à-vis animal species has led to a disparity in funding for plant conservation projects (Balding and Williams 2016). Similarly, “nature deficit disorder” is not a medical disorder, but a pattern of behavior in which children spend less of their time outdoors. Louv also associates “nature deficit disorder” with a sensory narrowing and reduction in the richness of human experience (2008, 3).

“inert ‘matter’” (2001, 7). Ironically, classifying the more-than-human as “matter,” enables a perspective that it does *not* “matter”—that is, it is less important. If the classification of the more-than-human as “matter” removes it from concern by refusing its vitality and mobility, then practices that attend to the ways in which the more-than-human move open up a pathway towards “re-enchanting” or re-attaching affective ties between the disenchanting modern subject and the environment.

In the first chapter, I discussed how the trained capacity to narrow one’s attentional focus to exclude entire categories of phenomena and to inhibit one’s responsiveness to multisensory stimuli have served racist projects and have been used to produce categories of disability. In similar ways, a cultivated desensitization to multisensory information aids in exploitative relations between “the human” and the more-than-human by disengaging “the human” from its ecological context. Like the preposition of “on-ness,” the practice of perceptual disengagement from the more-than-human environment is aided by supporting physical interventions. Infrastructural conveniences such as running water, factory farms, grocery stores, and waste removal services are part of a physical system that facilitates an anthropocentric relation in which “the human” is shaper of, but not accountable to, the more-than-human.

A final choreographic element of anthropocentric attention is a dynamic in which attention is assumed to flow in one direction; “the human” perceives nature strategically but is not generally portrayed as being perceived by nature.<sup>138</sup> As feminist and critical race scholars have demonstrated, asymmetrical flows of attention—as manifest through more specific practices such as racialized spectacle (Hartman 1997) and gendered gazes (Mulvey 1989,

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<sup>138</sup> Moments when animals are thought to be observing humans are often considered noteworthy. See “Humpbacks whales ‘watch’ whale watchers in amazing video from Monterey Bay” (ABC7 San Francisco 2019).

Massey 1994)—reflect a range of socially constructed power dynamics. The question of who is subject to display, and who gets to look and/or touch belies these unequal arrangements (Young 1980, Sarukkai 2009).<sup>139</sup> This creates an attentional asymmetry between “the human” and “the animal” in which (a) “the human” is considered the major performer of attention; (b) the ways in which “the human” attends to animals often reflects consumption-driven or exploitative relations in which “animals” are conceived of as available for viewing or being studied (for example, in laboratory situations or zoos). Often, the kind of attention “animals” receive does not benefit them.<sup>140</sup> At worst, these negative attentions result in death or injury; and even in scenarios where the animals are protected, they may incur physical harm and emotional distress.<sup>141</sup>

### **The iLANDing Method: Interdisciplinarity, Choreographic Scoring, and Attentional Value**

How does the iLANDing method help participants to contemplate relationships between attention, movement, and value? How do iLANDing collaborators use choreographic scores to activate modes of relation with more-than-human beings? In this section, I explore how interdisciplinarity and embrace of choreographic scoring help to catalyze reflection upon

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<sup>139</sup> Exploiting non-normative bodies for entertainment and research is, of course, not limited to animals. For an analysis on how race, disability, and animality interact in “human zoos” and freak shows, see Robert Bogdan’s “Race, Showmen, Disability, and the Freak Show” (2014).

<sup>140</sup> For a cultural studies analysis of viewing and ownership in human attitudes toward animals, see Desmond (2001).

<sup>141</sup> Scientific studies have found that when humans view images of puppies and kittens, they experience decreased levels of stress and enhances their ability to subsequently pay attention to and execute complex visual recall and motor tasks (Nittono, Fukushima, Yano, and Moriya 2012). There is salient evidence of the detrimental effects that the human gaze upon animals can have negative implications for their wellbeing. For example, in a study on black capuchins held captive in a zoo, the capuchins exhibited elevated stress hormones and stress behaviors when experiencing “visual contact” by zoo visitors (Sherwen et. al. 2015).

relationships between attention, movement, and value.<sup>142</sup> I argue that interdisciplinarity breaks a singular notion of attention into multiple attentive practices and modes of valuing the perceivable world. I discuss how the choreographic score is used as a vehicle for distilling and translating modes of attention across disciplinary and species lines. Finally, I propose that the choreographic score uses movement as a tool for contemplating how humans assign value to aspects of their environment. Together, these elements unmask the anthropocentrism that is naturalized within dominant attention and generate ways of navigating urban ecologies according to alternative value systems. Through interdisciplinary ecological attunements, documented through choreographic scores, participants in iLANDing projects heighten their awareness of their enmeshment within a field of interdependent relations, within which their actions have implications for the survival of others.

Anthropologist and semiotician Charles Goodwin used the term “professional vision” in 1994 to describe the emergence of “socially organized ways of seeing and understanding events that are answerable to the distinctive interests of a particular social group” (1994, 606).<sup>143</sup> Goodwin used the concept of professional vision to describe perception as a socially embedded activity—perspectival rather than objective—and situated within particular communities of practice. An archaeologist and a farmer, he argued, will see different phenomena in the same patch of dirt in large part because what they see arises through an interplay between the

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<sup>142</sup> Scientific studies have also approached the questions of how and to what animals pay attention through the lens of movement. In widely used definition gleaned from his study of pigeon behavior, George S. Reynolds stated that “an organism *attends* to an aspect of the environment if independent variation or independent elimination of that aspect brings about variation in the organism’s behavior (1961, 203).” In other words, for Reynolds, action in response to a specific kind of stimulus provides a kind of proof that attention to that stimulus is present.

<sup>143</sup> Professional vision, for Goodwin, comes about through three practices: 1) *coding*, in which phenomena are transformed into objects of knowledge; 2) *highlighting*, which foregrounds or marks as salient some kinds of phenomena in a complex perceptual field; and 3) *producing and articulating material representations*.

discursive practices and specific activities each person is using to engage the dirt.<sup>144</sup> Linking the multiple ways of perceiving a single phenomenon to the practices that a person uses to engage with that phenomenon, Goodwin asserts that different communities of perceivers will utilize different “specific activities” to study the same phenomenon.

Goodwin’s concern with the cultural and discipline-specific nature of perception aligns with the ecological model of perception put forward by psychologist James J. Gibson. This model foregrounds the ways in which perception, or making meaning from one’s environment, is informed by both the perceptual environment and the way the perceiving organism moves within their environment. According to Gibson, perceiving organisms notice and move towards or away from specific kinds of stimuli based on what those kinds of stimuli “afford” to the perceiving organism. “The affordances of the environment,” Gibson writes, “are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill” ([1979] 1986, 119). Affordances are subjectively defined, rather than being abstractly measurable, countering rational perspectives that hold that there is one “objective” reality. Neither physical, nor phenomenal, they are created with reference to the perceiving body and its needs in a particular environmental context (126).

In iLANDing projects, scores provide a mechanism for distilling the “specific activities” that account for different perspectives in a multispecies world. Goodwin’s framework of “professional vision” lends a quality of specialization to the way more-than-human entities perceive and enables a consideration of how more-than-human beings possess environmental “expertise.” Gibson’s term “affordances,” sensitizes this analysis to the stakes of attention—that

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<sup>144</sup> Goodwin does not use the term “attention” in his definitions; however, it resonates within the examples he uses to illustrate the discursive: dividing the domain of scrutiny, highlighting a figure against a background, applying specific interpretive coding schemes. Relevant to this study, Goodwin links the discursive to “specific activities” (1994, 606) in which the discursive is deployed, which include the bodily actions that help to account for differences in the perception and interpretation of the same phenomena.



is, that it allows us to understand how attention is encoded with value systems that are intimately connected to the factors different actors need to access or avoid in order to survive. In both of these models, attention is laden with both meaning and value, which is determined by the perceiver's lived experience, professional training, and unique ways of moving through the environment. Studying the nexus of attention, movement, and value enables a consideration of how dancing might constitute a meaningful activity for constructing an ecological ethic that can engage multiple, sometimes conflicting value systems by tracking how multispecies moving bodies attune to and move within their surroundings.

A 2007 iLANDing residency, titled "The City from a Plant's Perspective: Mapping NYC as Native Flora," explored what different types of "professional" perceivers might notice in the literal and figurative patch of dirt. Collaborators Lise Brenner (choreographer), Ulrich Lorimer (botanist), and Katrina Simon (landscape architect and visual artist) examined each of their working disciplines through the "hierarchies of observation" they promoted (Brenner, Lorimer, and Simon 2008, 18). Their core research questions were concerned with the multiple ways one might attend to and value the world around them: "the world is many multiples of layers, and the question is, which one are you trying to see?" (4). In particular, they noted how scientific disciplines tended to look for aspects of difference when examining phenomena in the world around them. The choreographer, working from a background in Western concert dance, looked for "found dances" (10) in her environment, tracking "movement through time and space, representation, value judgements [and] juxtaposition" (18). Simon, the designer, reflected that adopting choreographic concerns as her observational priorities shifted the way she understood what was happening in the site and, more specifically, made her aware of how the movements of different ecological actors are interdependently organized:

My main recollections when I think of the first visits to Floyd Bennett Field are noticing things that I don't normally pay attention to...the apparently simple idea of 'movement' suddenly made me perceive an extraordinary array of complex movement in what I would normally have considered in static, analytical terms. It gave me a sense of how layered and ingenious ecological processes are, and how contingent. (13)

By linking their disciplines to hierarchies of observation, collaborators studied the structures that inform how pedestrians might typically engage perceptually within Floyd Bennett Field, their research site. By tracking how their disciplines created hierarchies of observation, they uncovered multiple options for valuing aspects of the perceivable world rather than assuming that there was a single objective reality to be observed.

This recognition of multiple ways of noticing one's environment lent itself to a consideration of how more-than-human actors also develop their own specialized hierarchies of perception. In a co-authored essay the collaborators published after the residency, they asked, "What happens when you take a city with one of the costliest per-square-footage rates in the world and re-assign the value system to privilege weeds?" (2). While the correlation between disciplinary and species-based differences is never named explicitly, I propose that by engaging experience as a practice with a number of different possible specializations, this project opens up space to contemplate how more-than-human species possess valuable expertise about their environments by virtue of the particular ways they move within those environments.

After recognizing their own professional and cultural hierarchies of observation, Brenner, Lorimer, and Simon attempted to interrupt them via a choreographic score that, they hoped, would give them better access to a plant's perspective.

"20 Paces Score"

As a group, determine a designated landmark or endpoint.

Walk twenty paces. Stop. Close your eyes.

With your eyes closed, shift your point of view (look right, look up, lie down, open your eyes, etc.). Pay attention to what you notice first (anything you see, smell, taste, feel, as long as it's the first thing).

Note it down in whatever recording mechanism you choose (write, draw, make a gesture, etc).

Continue in your original direction for another twenty paces.

Repeat the third and fourth instructions.

Repeat the first three instructions six times, or until you reach the designated landmark or endpoint. (Brenner, Lorimer, and Simon 2017)

In this score, the collaborators use a scientific practice of sampling data at regular intervals, which creates a rhythmic interruption in their trajectory. Next, they call for a change in posture that will necessarily shift what the performer can see. This is done with eyes closed, which subverts performers' tendency to orient visually, and asks the performer to observe from a relatively still or "rooted" perspective. When the performer opens their eyes, they allow their attention to be drawn *by* their surroundings, creating a scenario in which the environment *draws* attention, rather than being merely the object of attention.

"20 Paces Score" provides an example of how an abstraction can be used to both interrupt the performer's habitual mode of engaging their environment and can create opportunities to re-engage in a different way. Borrowing a term from geographer Derek McCormack, scores constitute "lived abstractions"—technologies for elucidating experience's multiplicity by bringing people into a range of possible relations with the perceivable and the thinkable. As McCormack points out, abstraction is often critiqued as a Western epistemological process through which the rational mind distances itself from both the body and the chaotic world of sensation in order to pursue objective knowledge from a distance (2014, 165-66). Abstraction removes subjects from their lived, embodied, and emotional experience; underpins modes of bodily discipline and regulation; and enables the channeling of thought and action to

productive ends. As I have argued in Chapter 1, normative attention foments abstraction by inhibiting the attending subject's engagement with their local context and asks them to perform generalized attention (maintaining visual focus, restraining responsivity to other stimuli, engaging with stimuli as dictated by a source of authority) regardless of the subject's intrinsic interest. While the iLANDing score above also bears abstract principles, such as walking a predetermined number of steps that bear no relation to the time and space of practice, their abstractions cause the opposite effect: resituating the performer in relationship to their local context.

In her theorization of choreographic scores, critical dance studies scholar Alison D'Amato has described how scores are unusual in their "dual capacity to codify, generalize, and apply constraint (on the one hand) and to accommodate particularity, idiosyncrasy, and innovation (on the other)" (2015, 2). Scores can be used to produce what D'Amato calls "iterative difference"—or variations that ensue from repetition. "20 Paces Score" implements the capacity of scores to produce iterative differences that complicate a singular notion of the research "site" and instead reveal its many dimensions. First, the score asks the performer to move through the instructions in repetitive cycles: moving, closing eyes, reorienting, observing, and recording. As the process repeats, it uncovers variations within a space that might, through anthropocentric lenses, have appeared to be a simple lawn. Furthermore, when the score is enacted by an ensemble of different performer-researchers, it uncovers differences in the ways those performer-researchers relate to their surroundings. The score's contemplative dimension ("Pay attention to what you notice first") asks the participants to notice their own noticing, reflecting on the mechanisms that draw, divert, or prescribe attention, which may include environmental factors, personal sensitivities, or disciplinary training. Thus, in terms of strategy,

“20 Paces Score” uses the score as a counter-abstraction that can actually work against the abstraction of the Western perceiving subject from its context. This choreographic motif—of abstracting oneself from one’s habitual relations with the environment in order to re-engage according to an alternative set of values—repeats across many iLANDing projects.

## **Strategies For Reorganizing Value**

What are some of the specific strategies by which anthropocentric values are identified, studied, and challenged within iLANDing practices? Thus far, I have given a broad overview of how interdisciplinarity and the tool of the choreographic score help to highlight attention as a set of learned practices that vary according to discipline, species, and, more broadly, the attending body’s way of moving within their environment. I have suggested that scores can be used as a tool for isolating a particular set of attentive habits or prescribing an alternative attentive procedure. In this section, I conduct close readings of several different types of procedural strategies iLANDing projects use to counter the anthropocentrism of dominant practices of attention: 1) activating alternative prepositions; 2) looking for what is ignored within anthropocentric practices of attention; 3) biomimicry: adopting the navigational practices of nonhuman animal species; and 4) reflexive anthropocentrism: attuning to the impact “the human” has on the environments they inhabit.

### **Activating Alternative Prepositions**

Anthropocentrism is expressed through the positioning of “the human” as “on” land, which is substantiated in part by an upright posture and prioritizing of vision as a mode of engaging with the world. If being-on is a preposition that is often taken for granted within Western paradigms, then dancing and, specifically, movement activities that take the attending

body off its vertical axis, might grant unique possibilities for interrupting an anthropocentric habit of attention. In a 2022 interview, Jennifer Monson, shared:

When you are walking through the world or riding your bike through the world, you see the world in a repetitive pattern, right? But when you're [dancing], your time is changing, your elevation is changing, your consciousness is changing, so that brings you into a more complex and integrated relationship with where you are. And that's really what I was researching the whole time. (2022)

Monson points out how dancing is a unique way to engage with one's environment because it requires the mover to frequently shift perspectives—from above, to below, to amidst, to among, to between. In particular, the genres of dancing that Monson names as influential to her own practice (contact improvisation, Skinner Releasing, and Body Mind Centering) encourage inversions, lying on the ground, rolling, and other postures that deviate from the vertical norm. Within many iLANDing projects, the emphasis is less on how the dancing *appears* to an audience, but how the change of posture enables new elements to be perceived; it shifts the relationship between background and foreground; it brings new elements into proximity that might have been out of reach within a vertical posture. Thus, dancing embraces new prepositions, for deviating from the practice of placing oneself literally and figuratively “on” land and instead moving *in* and *with* a place and the other bodies—living and otherwise—that constitute it.

If a preposition is a word that indicates a relationship between the subject and the other words in a statement, iLAND scores offer choreographic rearrangements of those relations via the activation of alternative prepositions. The *Field Guide to iLANDing*, which houses 75 scores created during iLAND projects between 2002-2015, proposes several ways to navigate the scores listed on its pages. Rather than being organized chronologically, scores are organized by prepositions: before, in, around, of, with, between, and through. This list of prepositions, notably,

does not include “on.” Instead, scores provide directives for a number of different modes of relating to elements of one’s surroundings such that “the human” actor is part of, rather than separate from, what is happening.

“Before” scores focus on processes of arriving and orienting. They consider how “the human” actor has traveled to the practice space and the assumptions and methods that guide their perceptual engagement with it. They provide detailed instructions for attuning to the site and to other collaborators. For example, in “Orientation Score,” which Monson developed in her BIRD BRAIN project, the instructions are: “Stand with your feet on the ground and close your eyes. Notice any variations in the surface beneath your feet and how your body adjusts its weight to these differences” or “What kind of light is falling on your face?” or “Listen to a nearby sound [...] Then listen to the farthest away sound that you can hear and listen to that sound fully for several minutes. Then imagine the space between the nearby sound and the faraway sound.” Or “Turn to face your home (this can be defined in any way you would like [...]) Open your eyes again and notice the various trajectories that each person brings to this place where you are gathered.” (2017, 26-27). Another score, “Weather Sensing: Warm-up” asks participants to notice the tastes in their own mouth, then taste the air, tracking the “subtle ways the taste changes over time.” It guides the participant to “Explore your mouth’s capacity to seek information and initiate movement” (28). This score progresses through the five common senses, suggesting activities for “gathering scents” from one’s own clothing, plants, and other materials; to feel various textures; to listen to sounds close and distant, and to see through closed and open eyelids.

“Before” scores warm up “the human” performers’ multisensorial perceptual systems, encouraging them to resensitize to modes of perceiving that may be underused within dominant

modes of attention that prioritize the visual. For example, in the “Weather Sensing: Warm-up” score, the performer is directed to “notice any vibrations in your body that you can hear through skin and bones.” Suggested within this directive is the resonance between the sonic stimulus, which travels as a wave into the listener’s ear, provoking a counter movement—a tympanic vibration, a chain reaction of bones in the inner ear, and wave-like motions of microscopic hairs in the cochlear fluids—which are translated to sound. The score suggests that vibrations felt in other places such as the skin and bones might constitute a form of listening. Ultimately, this score asks the performer to start noticing the ways in which they are—through the act of perceiving—already *participating* within, moving within, and *being moved by* aspects of the environment. This attunement provides a relational basis for future explorations by situating “the human” participant as already somewhere within a complex set of events. As a “before” score, the attunement also invokes a sense of being “within,” which is fundamentally different than being “on.”

As orienting devices, “before” scores warm up different ways of using the senses to calibrate one’s relationship to the perceivable world. In these attunements, the interpreter of the score activates perceptual systems that may be underutilized within dominant modes of attention. In an interview, longtime iLANDing collaborator, marine ecologist, and dancer, Carolyn Hall described the opening exercises she led for participants in her iLANDing workshops as “[giving] permission to hear everything you’re hearing, but then helping to focus on how it’s affecting you. I’m helping people learn how to hear more specifically, or to feel things on their skin more specifically.” This way of being, she said is different; “when you open those channels, suddenly



the world is more rich and varied [...] because [in everyday life] we<sup>145</sup> use some senses much more than others, and we usually use them in a very directed way. What happened if we opened all the senses and let things be a little more exploratory?” (2022). Hall describes a simultaneous opening of the senses beyond the narrowing visual focus of dominant attention which enables the performer to pick up on elements that they would not have previously observed.

Scores in the “around” section provide directives for navigating or “getting around” according to nonhuman logics. For example, in a “Coyote Walk” score, participants divide into two groups and attempt to pass through a predetermined area without being seen by the other group (55). A “Latent Potential” score, instructs the performer to wait until it rains, and then choose a green area to observe, scanning while moving slowly along the ground for mushrooms and other “emergent fruiting bodies.” After visualizing the underground “mycelial network” that connects aboveground mushrooms, the score asks the performer to use this as a metaphor for observing urban infrastructure. Performers continue walking through their city, looking for evidence of the human-made infrastructural network below them (e.g., fire hydrants, manhole covers, and street lights).

iLANDing scores draw attention to the action of “pre-positioning” rather than taking the preposition “on” for granted as the only possible relationship to land. Instead of advocating for a single best way to relate to one’s environment, the scores point to a variety of ways a person or animal might place themselves *before, in, around, of, with, between, or through* their site.

Changing prepositions—not permanently, but as an ongoing practice—offers an experimental way to “align our lives with [the land’s] inclines, folds, and pockets,” which is a practice that

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<sup>145</sup> Hall’s use of a “we” is interesting here in light of what has been discussed in chapters. In using “we,” to refer to visual dominance and intentionally directed attention, Hall is not referring to people who have sensory differences (i.e., visually impaired), or neurodiverse, and thus assuming a default attentive subject.

Paul Carter has argued that Westerners have rejected in their efforts to civilize by way of flattening (1996, 2). By activating alternative prepositions, iLANDing scores contest the notion that land is a flat surface to be trod upon by “the human” while also revealing the ways in which practices such as verticality and visual dominance, as well as the paving of streets and sidewalks aid in this physical and metaphysical flattening. Furthermore, by rejecting the dominant preposition, scores heighten the performers’ awareness of their embeddedness within contingent and intersecting environmental processes that include weather, mycological and plant growth, the circulation of affect and emotion, processes of urban development, and more. Avoiding the preposition of being “on,” opens up ways of attending and relating to one’s environment via principles of exchange and reciprocity rather than one-sided domination.

### **Looking for What is Ignored**

A second strategy that iLANDing collaborators have used entails looking for what is ignored within anthropocentric attention. What is deemed unimportant within dominant attentional frames? What is physically hidden from view or out of earshot? Which modes of sensing and perceiving are under-utilized within dominant modes of attention? Whose needs are not considered within large and small-scale interventions in the practice environment? How might these questions be connected? According to James J. Gibson’s ecological model of perception, an organism’s ability to move in their environment is integral to the way they understand the relationship between what they can perceive and what they cannot. In Gibson’s formulation, which deals exclusively with visual perception, movement, and stillness call attention to the difference between what he calls the “hidden and the unhidden.” By moving, an organism understands that other vantages are possible of the same object. In stillness, the

organism can appreciate that some vantages are inaccessible from a specific position ([1979] 1986, 69). Thus, the choreographic qualities of movement and stillness not only enable the perceiving organism to appreciate the simultaneous existence of multiple perspectives, but to appreciate that any single perspective is inherently limited.

One iLAND project in which these relations play out was called “Dead Horse Bay,” a 2008 residency that took place on Barren Island near the Marine Park neighborhood of Brooklyn. Dead Horse Bay, as it is commonly called, got its name from the horse and fish processing plant that was active on the island in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today, it is frequented by artists and other scavengers who travel to the Bay to look for trash that was deposited there in the 1950s when a landfill was so poorly constructed, that it soon began to leak out glass, chemicals, and other discarded materials (Spivack 2020). The principal members of the Dead Horse Bay residency included Angel Ayón (architect and preservationist), Sarah White-Ayón (movement analyst, dancer, and somatics practitioner), and Gerald Marks (visual artist), along with collaborating dancers Biba Bell, Rebecca Brooks, Tamara Riewe, and Colin Stilwell. Working across their different disciplines, collaborators sought to find ways of attending to what they identified as the city’s “forgotten waste” (“After Thoughts to 8/16 Event” 2008). As an organizing question, they asked, “How do we understand or assign value in a space?” (White-Ayón 2022), which reflected their intent both to interrogate the hierarchies of value among their respective disciplines and to consider the logics by which objects and places are rendered disposable.

In this residency, collaborators attuned to “forgottenness” in two different ways: first, they studied how different ideas about “waste” were manifest in the topography of Dead Horse Bay, especially through the presence of discarded objects; and second, they developed ways to be “affected” by what they deemed underutilized senses and modes of sensing. The juxtaposition

of these two modes of “forgetting” suggests a link between dominant modes of attention and the failure to manage waste created by humans in an ecologically responsible way that accounts for the afterlives of objects and their impacts on other species. That is, they linked dominant postures, sensory practices, and states of focus to a way of acting towards the more-than-human world that had negative environmental consequences.

In order to counter this widescale “forgetting,” collaborators adopted practices of multisensory “listening” to the site and designed public performances based on those attunements. Sara White-Ayón described how collaborators intentionally pursued a “bottom-up” approach to studying the site, which meant foregrounding bodily experience and “letting the information arise through direct engagement” rather than relying on a more top-down historical study of the space (2022). White-Ayón also shared that while collaborators never formally practiced Alexander Technique at the site, it bore significant influence on how they worked to intervene in habitual modes of relating to their surroundings.

The “professional vision” of an Alexander movement analyst, according to White-Ayón, is to look for “patterns and potentials in movement experience that are affected by both internal awareness and outside influence” (“About Our Collaboration” 2008). As a mode of attention that tracks tactile, proprioceptive, and kinesthetic information, and furthermore one that identifies patterns between one’s movements, context, and overall state of wellbeing, Alexander Technique has the potential to activate participants’ awareness of dimensions of experience that are obscured within anthropocentric frames. In an introductory blog post, collaborators describe how they each bear a different “way of assigning value to experience” (“About Our Collaboration” 2008). What, then does Alexander Technique suggest is valuable? How does this way of attending serve the project of advocating for the improvement of the site? Within formal

Alexander Technique sessions, clients, with the help of a certified teacher, attempt to recognize longstanding habits that cause unnecessary tension, pain, and sometimes injury, in order to “stop and think, and to choose a better response” (Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique n.d.). According to the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT), the Technique teaches skillful “use of the self,” which includes how people move and organize their attention: “You learn to become aware of, and then gradually strip away, the habits of movement, tension, and reaction that interfere with natural and healthy coordination” (STAT n.d.). In part, harmful habits are repeated through what Alexander practitioners term “unreliable sensory appreciation,” or a “distortion of the senses, especially kinaesthesia, caused by misuse” (Gelb 1996, 164).<sup>146</sup> In Dead Horse Bay, Alexander Technique helps to frame the ways in which collaborators examine a set of “unreliable sensory appreciations” or “failed considerations” (White-Ayón 2022) that have enabled habits that negatively impact the health of the Dead Horse Bay ecosystem.

White-Ayón described how pausing and cultivating an awareness of multisensory information was geared towards being more “receptive.” In both performances and workshops that were open to the public, collaborators framed sensing as a receptive activity; they asked people to allow stimuli to arrive rather than searching it out. In the project blog, collaborators described a feeling of the site “speaking” to them by pulling their attention in various directions:

This is what this place is telling me. I must remain alert. Alert to the senses; alert to neglect. The things we have neglected threaten us and are easy to dismiss; easy to never confront again. There is an awareness gained in effort and confrontation that is lacking in comfort and isolation. . . . Here I perceive evidence of culture and human behavior embedded in the shore. Excess, forgotten efforts to curb consumption, a seemingly irreversible obsession with putting products into the world [...] We have barely moved beyond these methods of dealing with refuse. How would our behavior change if we visited our waste once it left us? . . . Instead, we cover it, sweep it under the land, throw

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<sup>146</sup> Alexander also called this “debauched kinaesthesia” or “corrupted and therefore untrustworthy sense of position, tension and movement” (Gelb 1996, 164).

more land on top and hope the earth doesn't notice. What more does this site tell me about our behavior? . . . We avoid a lot. We disregard what is no longer of use to us. (“After Thoughts to 8/16 Event” 2008)

The above text alludes to several of the choreographic elements of anthropocentric attention: the narrowing of the senses, physical and ethical distance between subject and land, and ongoing inattention to the accumulation of waste products and how those products affect environmental others. By choosing to pause, observe, and reconsider one’s behavior, collaborators evoked the Alexander Technique principle of “inhibition” in which the practitioner ceases to repeat a harmful pattern. In this case, the harmful pattern of behavior includes both the mismanagement of waste, as well as the mode of attention that sees the world in terms of objects that can be consumed and discarded.

In order to counter these inattentions, collaborators developed “sensory mapping” scores that established perceptual and affective links between participating bodies the environment and provoked a sense of resonance or commonality between performer bodies and site bodies. This contrasted with the modes of relation that Carter describes in which the individual subject vertically situated “on” the surface of the land. One directive described “getting a sense of scope and volume of the site through [smells and sounds]” and asked performers to “spend some time on the ground locating the volume of your own body using the ground as a reference.” In a subsequent section called “Dredging and Filling,” performers complete the following actions:

*Part 3: Dredging and Filling*

- Body fills with berries, squeeze them out
- Body fills with oil, oil seeps out of skin
- Body fills with glass, crushing and breaking glass
- Bones to bone dust
- Let all integrate

(“About the October 12 Event” 2008)

By imagining what it would feel like to have berries, oil, glass, and bones leaking out of one's body, collaborators used imagery to reattach human bodies to landscape bodies employing their personal indexes of past sensations in order to create an imagined sense of being embedded within or even permeated by the landscape.



Figure 12 - Performance during “Dead Horse Bay” iLANDing residency.  
Photo: Ryutaro Mishima, 2008

White-Ayón described the creative process as “[allowing] ourselves to be affected” by creating pauses in which “we can listen and be affected by something, and then we can take that energy and direct it, as opposed to always directing something” (2022). In doing so, they proposed a mode of subjectivity in which human actors are vulnerable to influence by the landscape, rather than influencers of landscapes. “Learning to become affected,” or, in Jane Bennett’s phrasing “enchanted” (2001) has emerged as a term within multiple disciplines to describe an ecologically ethical approach to embodied knowledge creation. In his essay “How to Talk About the Body?” Bruno Latour proposes “learning to be affected” as an alternative definition of the body in which the body learns by perceiving their environment with increasing

specificity (2004, 2013). For geographer Derek McCormack, “learning to become affected” has political and ethical implications because of the ways it seeks to form new relationships, meanings, and alliances: “we can never determine in advance the kinds of relational matrices in which bodies are capable of being involved” (2008). Rather than seeking to represent, “learning to become affected” pursues a more-than-representational knowledge practice in which different kinds of living beings can be interfused through what environmental geographer Jaime Lorimer calls “perceptual energies and feelings that link bodies in encounters” (2015, 9). Learning to be affected—opening oneself to perceiving and feeling with increasing specificity—counters an extractive relationship to a single, static conception of nature by recognizing a multiplicity of ways of being affected by the world (10). Whereas extractivism is predicated on attentive practices that separate some classes of phenomena from others, “learning to become affected” promotes a relational approach to attention by seeking to connect phenomena that are often conceived of as separate within Eurocentric/colonial classificatory systems. For White-Ayón, sensory investigation of the landfill offered a way to become affected by a process that, to her, often felt invisible:

I don’t really see where my trash goes. I have an idea, but it’s a little abstract. I can picture it; I can point it out on a map maybe, but I don’t really know where it goes. It feels like suddenly, you let go of your waste [...] and it goes behind the curtain somewhere and something happens to it and you’re not really sure if what’s happening behind the curtain is what people say is happening behind the curtain or not. (2022)

Placing moving, perceiving bodies in a location that has been used as a repository for waste, was an attempt to remedy collaborators’ inattention to their own ecological impact. In this framework, the cultural habits of “civilization” interrupt the natural state of health that existed before the adoption of those habits, evoking one of the central assumptions of the Alexander Technique.



At the same time, the largely undifferentiated definitions of “the human” that are present in both Alexander Technique and in Dead Horse Bay scores produce several important gaps in awareness that remain to be grappled with. By reproducing an undifferentiated notion of both “human” and “nature,” counter-attentions cultivated during the residency overlook some important ways in which conceptions of “waste” and practices of intentional “forgetting” operate on materially on the environment.<sup>147</sup> My aim is not to point out the failures or shortcomings of residency insights, but rather to use them to illuminate the inherent limitations of any singular mode of attention, thus demonstrating the need for plural modes of attunement.

A historical view of Dead Horse Bay—which is precisely the mode of attention that White-Ayón and collaborators avoided—reveals aspects of the topography that complicate the narrative of “humans vs. environment.” As it turns out, the waste that both creates and vexes the landscape of Dead Horse Bay may not actually be there because humans threw it away. Barren Island, the larger landmass around Dead Horse Bay, was used by the Canarsee as a fishing outpost before it was appropriated by Dutch Settlers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Urbanus 2018). In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, it became a dumping ground for waste and, in the pre-automobile era, horse carcasses from all 5 boroughs. During the same period, several large factories were constructed to render the fat from these discarded animals, which attracted a mix of poor Black and immigrant residents, who worked in the factory. Dead Horse Bay got its name from the intense odors that was capable of inducing sickness as far as two miles away (Urbanus 2018).

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<sup>147</sup> In my recent conversations with White-Ayón, it became clear that the 2008 project blogs for Dead Horse Bay were glimpses of an experience, rather than descriptions of a fixed perspective. While, in this essay, I am pointing out how “the human” exists as an undifferentiated category in the Dead Horse Bay scores, it is important to note that, were the scores to be reimagined in 2022, the language would likely shift. White-Ayón is a vocal critic of the white supremacist and colonial underpinnings of Alexander Technique, including the ways in which it posits “right” and “wrong” behaviors and presumes a universal white subject to be healed. For the moment, I am basing my analysis off of the existing scores, in part to show how they offer perspectives that are limited, yet potent in their ability to be repeated, or to inspire future scores that expose the gaps of previous scores.

Nonetheless, at its height, the community that lived and worked on Barren Island numbered as many as 2,000 and maintained a school, several churches, and a post office. According to anthropologist Robin Nagle, “the people that lived there were doing work that was essential to the city’s public health, yet they themselves were ostracized and painted as sort of semi-savage and not even quite human” (Nagle as quoted in Urbanus 2018).

In 1936, Robert Moses, then New York City Parks Commissioner, ordered the forced eviction of all residents in an effort to “clean up” the area, ironically by building up the landmass by depositing and covering large amounts of trash. Appointed rather than elected, Moses promoted an authoritarian model for urban renewal, frequently razing neighborhoods and creating new structures without consulting the communities being affected. Twenty years after the clearing of Barren Island, Moses used the land as a repository for household rubble collected through additional neighborhood demolitions that displaced lower-income families, many of them Black and Latinx, to make way for urban development projects, including the elite performing arts center, Lincoln Center (Foulkes 2007; Marques 2020; Stanger 2021). Because many of the lower income families could not afford to hire moving trucks and were given little time to prepare, they were forced to forfeit their belongings, which were scooped up as trash and carted away by the city. Based on over two decades spent collecting and analyzing trash from Dead Horse Bay, Nagle has noted a difference that distinguishes this garbage from refuse found in other landfills in the city: “I don’t think there was ever much trash here,” she says. “I think this is, by and large, rubble of houses, stuff of people’s lives, things that filled homes—the intimate, personal, mundane stuff of everyday life. That is now what is scattered on the beach” (Nagle quoted in Urbanus 2018).

This sequence of events demonstrates how people and entire neighborhoods are also displaced as the by-products of urban development. Both instances of removal—the eviction of the Barren Island factory workers, and Moses’ multiple “slum clearing” projects throughout the city—indicate an orientation towards marginalized groups of people that echoes how city officials deal with “waste” by removing it from view. Through a material and historical “overreading”<sup>148</sup> in the style of dance scholars Randy Martin (2005) and Arabella Stanger (2021), I propose that iLANDing collaborators also implicated within a dynamic that critical dance studies scholar Stanger has called “utopia as dispossession” in which spatial and racial dispossessions underwrite artists’ idealized spaces of “free” experimentation (2021, 6). As participants within a lineage of Euro-American concert dance that has historically required the material “unmaking of worlds” (5) in order to render spaces “available” for artistic production (such as Lincoln Center), dancers possess significant privilege that has come at the expense of human and more-than-human others. More broadly, Western concert dance as an aesthetic tradition has influenced the conceptualization of what constitutes a “human” body, the. In fact, the selection of Dead Horse Bay as a practice site creates a strange loop in which the rubble cleared in order to make way for concert dance has been reclaimed as the inspiration for future dancing. From a materialist perspective, the “trash” at Dead Horse Bay is also a set of objects that links the site with Lincoln Center and with the ways in which “the arts” have been used to justify racialized and class oppressions that shift the composition of cityscapes. From a vital materialist perspective, perhaps the “trash objects” express their own agency by calling the

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<sup>148</sup> By “overreading” I refer to Martin’s materialist approach to choreographic analysis modeled in his 2005 paper “Overreading the Promised Land: Towards a Narrative of Context in Dance.” Overreading means “to read more in the dance than its dancing can bear and read through and past the dance to the point where it meets its own exterior or context” (178)

dancers back to reckon with it.<sup>149</sup> The trash serves as a reminder of what remains after both objects and people are discarded.

The contention around whether or not the trash should be removed from Dead Horse Bay shows that ecologies are unstable. They are perpetually being reshaped by actors of diverse species, each of whom have different ways of valuing and engaging with the places they occupy. As such, ecologies cannot be “returned” to the primordial state of health that Alexander Technique seeks to access. As with many other similar sites in which nonhuman species find refuge in landscapes devastated by humans, Dead Horse Bay, in being largely “forgotten” by humans, has become available to a range of plant and animal species that have found a foothold in this pocket of New York City. The site also holds value to artists and collectors who gain inspiration and sometimes financial value from the trash they take from the site. Historians and conservationists, meanwhile, lament the history that is being lost as collectors “clean” the Bay, picking it over for what they can use (Urbanus 2018; Charitan 2019). As Jamie Lorimer argues, there is no singular “nature” just as there is no singular “human.” Instead, there are human and more-than-human entanglements, and “ontological choreographies,” or biopolitical processes in which different approaches to conservation are used to enact particular ideas of what should be saved, conserved, or protected (2015, 12).

While the Dead Horse Bay scores may not have accounted for the effects of human dispossession on their research site, by offering up their attention to be shaped by the site, they introduced novel possibilities for using attention as a gateway to forging more ethical ecological relations. By positing attention as a practice that can be examined by setting it down as a

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<sup>149</sup> Jane Bennett has referred to objects as having “thing-power. Thing power “commands attention, exudes a kind of dignity, provokes poetry, or inspires fear” (2004).

choreographic score, iLANDing projects open the possibility of exercising Claire Jean Kim's practice of "multi-optic vision" (2015). Rather than accepting that one's perspective affords access to a stable "reality," the fulfillment of multiple attentive scores evidences an acknowledgment of the incompleteness of any single way of attuning to one's environment. On its own, no score can provide the "right" perspective, however, the activity of identifying and modeling perspectives that may not have been consulted, as an ongoing practice of recognizing for what the dominant has overlooked, may help those in dominant species and social groups to act in ways that acknowledge the interests of a wider community of beings.

## Biomimicry



Figure 13 - Image from "Coyote Walk" iLANDing laboratory.  
Collage: Dillon de Give, 2015

Scholars and conservationists have evaluated the ethics of anthropocentrism and its alternatives. Those critical of anthropocentrism have attempted to decenter humans as the most

valuable species and key arbiters of the value of other species and entities. Numerous other models have been proposed as replacements, including ecocentrism (finding inherent value in the maintenance of ecosystems), biocentrism (finding value in all living or sentient beings), and zoocentrism (finding value in all animals). Other models refer to qualities of sentience, such as pathocentrism, or the ability to experience pain in ways that are observable to humans. At the core of these models are the questions: What traits make a life valuable? Which lives are valuable and worth protecting?

A limitation that all of these models hold in common is that they still point back to a human subject or group of subjects who are debating the value of other beings. iLANDing projects contribute to the domain of environmental ethics by developing ways of studying *what* other beings value, rather than studying *how* or *why* they are valuable by using choreographic scores that organize movement by mimicking other species' techniques of attention. In doing so, they approach a way of examining ecologies from the position of multiple stakeholders, which shifts emphasis away from "the human" as the primary appraiser of environmental and species value.

The term "biomimicry" was popularized by scientist Janine Benyus in 1997. In her book, *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature*, Benyus describes biomimicry as a "new science that studies nature's models and then takes inspiration from these designs and processes to solve 'human' problems." The term biomimicry is not without its drawbacks. Critics have argued that biomimicry reinforces a separation between "human" and "nature" in which the human has to mimic nature because he conceives himself as distinct ("Whitewashed Hope: A Message from 10+ Indigenous Leaders and Organizations" 2020).<sup>150</sup> Biomimicry, it has been argued, is not

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<sup>150</sup> The Indigenous Advocacy group, Cultural Survival published a critique of Regenerative Agriculture and biomimicry, titled "Whitewashed Hope: A Message from 10+ Indigenous Leaders and Organizations," in which

inherently sustainable or ethical, but rather exploits design principles found in a fabricated domain called “nature” in order to develop military and surveillance technologies and other bio-inspired products for dispersal in a capitalist market (Marshall and Lozeva 2009; Mathews 2011).

Biomimicry in a general sense—which I take to mean the intentional study and emulation of another species—recurs in many iLANDing projects. I use this term because it evokes iLAND’s mission to weave together scientific and dance-based approaches to investigating urban ecologies. However, within iLANDing projects, biomimicry is not used to produce design solutions or novel products. Instead, biomimicry is used as a strategy for shifting out of an anthropocentric lens on the world and to contemplate how value is constructed from perspectives outside of the human.

In iLANDing projects that use biomimicry as a strategy, human performers emulate other species either by adopting their modes of attention, or by mimicking how they move and coordinate with each other and their environments. In most scores, this reveals how the practices of movement and attention are interconnected. Take, for example, the “Migration Mapping” score, which was taught during a 2011 iLAND Symposium called “Slow Networks: Discovering the Urban Environment through Collaborations in Dance and Ecology”:

“Migration Mapping” (excerpt)

Choose an animal, bird, or insect that inhabits this place.

Choose a point A and point B. Note why you chose them.

Migrate as your animal, bird, or insect from A to B.

What structures, plants, habitat would you gravitate towards?

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they distinguished biomimicry, which “copies” nature from Indigenous approaches to land stewardship in which human act *as nature* (2020).

How quickly do you move?

Are you affected by wind, sun, predators?

Note your physicality.

Draw a map of your journey.

(iLAND 2017)

In this score, the performer is asked to choose an animal, bird, or insect that can be observed in the space, and then to move in the manner of that animal. The questions that follow this initial directive clarify that the goal is not to extract the movement of that animal from its context in order to use it as inspiration for dancing, but to use dancing to consider the environmental relations that inform the animal's movement. Which aspects of the habitat offer sustenance to this organism? Which would be considered threatening? How does the plant, animal, or insect respond to aspects such as wind or sun? Thus, scores assume and illustrate that movement emanates from a particular way of paying attention to one's environment. While the human performer and the observed animal share the same setting, they attune to and interact with aspects of that location differently, which has implications for their movements on multiple scales, from tiny adjustments in orientation to gross navigational trajectories.

By braiding together attention, movement, and value, iLAND's biomimicry scores catalyze an experiential analogue to J. J. Gibson's ecological theory of perception, which highlights the ways in which perception is always-already laden with meaning. According to Gibson, all perceiving beings are immersed in a surplus of stimulation. Because of this, perceiving beings make selections from their perceptual field based on what is valuable to them (in the both the positive and negative sense). Perception, thus, is a skillful practice, and is particular to an organism's morphology, its environment, its ways of moving within it, and its needs. Within this framework, movement at different scales—from the small adjustments of



one's perceptual apparatuses to the inclination of one's entire body towards or away from objects—is integral to the practice of perceiving and helps to determine what and how phenomena are perceived ([1979] 1986).

Thus, in the scores above, emulating how an animal migrates from point A to point B or adopting another being's attentive priorities affords a glimpse into another species system of value. This disturbs dominant anthropocentric conceptualizations of land as a resource that can be exploited to serve “the human's” purposes by attuning human observers to the multiple resources the environment affords to other species. Because of the links between movement, attention, and value, the practice of embodied biomimicry will yield fundamentally different insights that simply mapping a movement trajectory of the observed animal from a more “objective” distance. It is notable that “Migration Mapping,” which asks the performer to generate a map as a final step, does so only after directing them to occupy many different positions within, among, between, and through the research environment. Most importantly, in this and other similar scores, iLAND models the movement trajectories of more-than-human others as sets of relationships, rather than simply inscriptions upon a flat surface.<sup>151</sup> Additionally, scores like the one above enact a decentering gesture that differs from anthropocentric, ecocentric, biocentric, or other alternative ecological ethics because, rather than debating (among humans) about what is valuable *about* nonhuman entities, iLANDing scores shift the question to consider what is valuable *to* other-than-human actors.

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<sup>151</sup> This is where iLAND (and my analysis) departs from Gibson's theory, because he talks about the environment as a “surface.”

In another example, “Fish Migration,” which was generated during a 2010 iLAND Residency called “River to Creek,” asks people to adopt the perceptual practices of fish as a mechanism for coordinating their movements with other people.

“Fish Migration”

Start at the edge of the water.

Become aware of the sides of your body. Imagine that you can sense, hear, and feel the space around you through your sides as if you had the lateral lines of a fish. What can you hear?

Can you feel vibrations from the sounds and actions around you?

Soften your front focus and tune into your peripheral vision.

Choose a point along the edge of the water some distance away. Note open pathways and obstacles.

Migrate from here to there—darting, schooling, resting in an eddy, floating—guided by the information coming from the sides of your body.

(Hall et al. 2017)

The score begins by sensitizing human performers to the sides of their body, using their imagination to approximate the “lateral lines” that fish use to detect movement and vibration in surrounding water. Even though the human performers possess different configurations of sensory receptors and are performing the score on dry land, the imaginative exercise of perceiving the space from the long sides of one’s body presents an alternative to the vertical distancing (“top-down”) and visual dominance of anthropocentric attention. The question of whether or not the human performers are actually able to perceive what a fish perceives is less important than the practice of making oneself available to be affected by peripheral, lateral, and vibration-based stimuli. To listen through vibrations is, furthermore, to listen through the intermedium of touch, or to perceive how one’s own body is changed by movements in their surroundings, which contrasts with the dominant anthropocentric dynamic in which the “the

human” modifies, but seldom conceived of as being modified by, their surroundings. Next, the score asks performers to intentionally de-emphasize their direct vision in order to take in their surroundings peripherally, which gives rise to a visual practice of “taking in” rather than “looking at.”

In addition to provoking a set of attentional modifications that contrasts with dominant anthropocentric protocol, this score invites a different form of relationality between human and their environments. When sensitizing to lateral stimuli, it is harder to imagine oneself as on top of land; via this spatial and sensorial recalibration, the perceiver is located somewhere in the middle of the action. Furthermore, in the workshop scenario in which this score was originally used, multiple human performers attempted this score simultaneously, which established a logic by which a group of people could coordinate with each other and with their surroundings. In this practice, movement is the observable outcome of a transformation in modes of relating to one’s environment and others, produced through a shift in what and how one perceives. Without being overly optimistic about what a single instance of practice might produce in terms of a lasting intervention in a deeply ingrained anthropocentric paradigm, I propose that performing this score affords a potentially catalytic glimpse into an alternative set of priorities, relations, and modes of being.

It should be noted that mimicry is generally a unidirectional relationship rather than a reciprocal one. At the same time, iLAND’s uses of biomimicry can provide valuable nuance to existing models for ecological ethics. Mimicking the attentions and/or movements of more-than-human species helps to not only expose the limitations of anthropocentric perspectives but does so in ways that reveal what and how aspects of the environment hold value for more-than-human entities. In a power dynamic in which “the human’s” actions and modes of attention have outsize

influence in environmental conditions, this is crucial because it opens a pathway for becoming more sensitive to the other-than-human stakeholders and their needs in any given ecological scenario. This use of biomimicry deviates from commercial and governmental uses of biomimicry in that it does not seek to create a product. iLAND collaborators are not trying to leverage millions of years of “natural” innovation for the good of humans. Instead, biomimicry scores aim at temporarily sidelining human needs in order to consider the needs of other beings. In doing so, biomimicry scores attempt to bridge species divides, rather than fulfilling the dominant epistemological framework that differentiates beings within a species hierarchy. In an attentive framework in which “the human” is socialized to ignore, or not see, or not engage with the more-than-human, this is a potent strategy for initiating the process of resensitization.

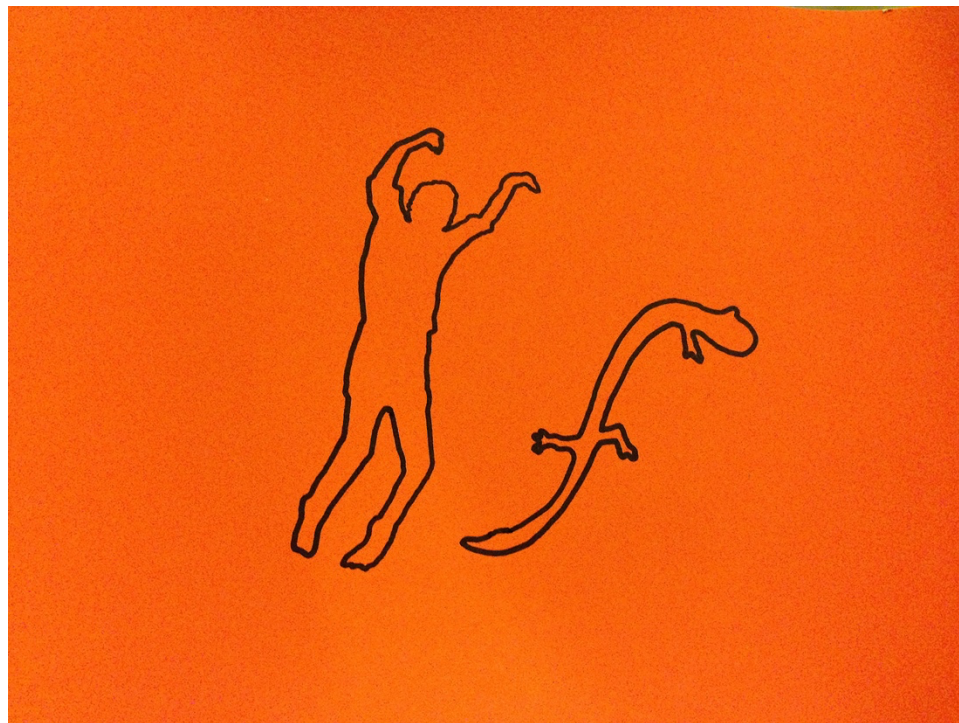


Figure 14 - Drawing by iLANDing collaborator during 2013 residency at Earthdance.  
Image: iLAND, 2013.

Collaborators have shared that their scores are motivated in part by the possibility of generating affective ties between human performers and the more-than-human beings that they

emulate. Carolyn Hall, one of the originating collaborators of the “Fish Migration” score, described how she intended the for score to provoke contemplation, rather than merely offering a touristic visit to the consciousness of an aquatic species. Hall explained that, by perceiving in the manner of another species:

[Participants] had to think like that creature: where would they go for shade and protection, or for habitat and shelter along the way? What sort of pace would they move at? Would they just go in a straight line or wiggle with an arc? It takes you out of being in the dominant human being [way of sensing]. And you realize you are part of a richer ecology where all these decisions are being made, all these lives are being lived. All these mouths need to be fed [...] So just expanding your sense of place in the world, and maybe raising some other creatures up to a similar sense of importance . . . (2022)

Hall’s score and reflections demonstrate how kinetic, the perceptual, and the ethical/relational perspectives are inseparable. As feminist and animal studies scholar Lori Gruen describes, “perspective taking” as a foundational requirement for moral action. In order to accurately empathize with others, the empathizer must engage in perspective-taking, which entails “a reflective act of imagination that puts her into [a being or object’s] situation and/or frame of mind” (2009, 29). Biomimicry scores attunes the performer to perspectives that they generally do not engage, using movement as an entry point. This is one strategy by which the perspective of others may be approximated. Perspective taking, she explains, is about trying to bring about flourishing through getting everyone’s interests satisfied. Although this may not be possible, as interests may even be competing, the aim is to avoid discounting the needs of those who may be less likely to get what they need. Gruen explains how perspective taking enables us to hold onto that loss of interests that have not been met. “That’s the reality of our complex interactions in a world of exploitation and violence” (2021).

iLAND scores model how a shift in how human participants notice their surroundings has the potential to augment their future actions. Expanding beyond the temporal and spatial bounds

of practice, many iLANDing collaborators express hope that these exercises might instill a more long-term sense of care for one's surroundings in ways that acknowledge the role humans play in the ecologies they inhabit, as well as the various survival needs of other beings. Carolyn Hall discussed this objective, explaining how movement prompts gleaned from a study of fish migrations provided a specific set of parameters through which to contemplate broader ethical questions concerning how humans participate in the ecologies they are part of:

So, when you take something in with your senses, you're putting it more into your felt memory, which is a different kind of storage than just cognitive memory. And it really takes both for something to "land." The idea is that it becomes something you can feel, and if it's something you can feel, then it's something that you might care more about, and if it's something you care more about, then it might be something that you would be willing to take more ownership over, or invest in. And so, we weren't asking people to clean up the shoreline, or stop gentrification or, stop development... We weren't asking people to do that; that wasn't something that we felt was in the scope of what we could ask. But what we were asking people to think about: How do you live on this land? How have other people lived on this land? How are they related to the waters? How have they used the land in these waters? And what has been done to the place you live in now? Why is it as it is? And, if there was a way to have a different relationship to it, what might that be? (2022).

To borrow a term from Donna Haraway, biomimicry scores are part of a training regimen that teaches humans to become more "response-able"—that is, to be both accountable to and able to respond to a set of overlapping processes (Haraway 2016). This is inherently an improvisational practice inasmuch as it asks for practices of attention that can track the intersecting and sometimes competing priorities of multiple stakeholders and to choose a mode of action that supports survival across species lines. Like "learning to become affected," cultivating interspecies response-ability entails both a recalibration of attention and an openness to being moved, or to move in response to those recalibrations. Hall is careful to qualify the scope of her intervention. Moving like a fish is not to be equated with overt activism or ecosystem repair. It does not take the place of other efforts to pursue climate justice. What it does offer is a

complementary change in the way people orient to their surroundings in ways that might make them better collaborators with other species.

Dillon de Give, leader of a 2015 iLANDing laboratory called “Coyote Walk” echoes Hall’s belief that a shift in perception of a single ecology might lend itself to a scalable reconsideration of individual and collective accountability. In “Coyote Walk,” de Give led a group of participants in a three-day urban hike that began in Central Park and ended in Scarborough, New York. He conceived of the hike as a reciprocal gesture of connection to Hal, the infamous Central Park Coyote, who died in captivity after making his way into the center of Manhattan in the spring of 2006. De Give explained that he wanted to mythologize this singular moment in Hal’s life and to make Hal “emotionally significant” to himself and others in the way that royalty and public figures are endowed with emotional significance to the general public. By following what they guessed to be Hal’s trajectory in reverse, de Give and a group of other hikers observed the many ways in which urban environments are constructed to restrict the movement of both people and animals. The effort required to complete this three-day migration stimulated reflection upon the ways in which humans have constructed their environments to serve the needs of humans exclusively (and the needs of some people more than others). As de Give described his experience of “Coyote Walk,” which he has repeated multiple times since 2012, he noted that addressing this single instance of failed connection between humans and animals provoked him to reflect on much larger manifestations such as factory farming and clear-cutting forests (2022). Following the coyote’s pathway, in this context, felt like a meaningful way to re-establish a sense of kinship with animals by building intimacy with a single animal’s story. This was accomplished by recalibrating his attention *to* the more-than-human *through* a pilgrimage informed by Hal’s trajectory from urban to wild landscapes.

“Migration Mapping,” “Fish Migration,” and “Coyote Walk” are alike in that they study attention and movement as entry points into understanding how nonhuman beings make sense of their environments. By investigating the interconnections between movement, attention, and value, they offer an avenue for decentering the physical and attentional practices that help to impose “the human” as the ultimate arbiter of value, while simultaneously making manifest the multiple ways in which the environment holds value to nonhuman others. Emulating the movement trajectories and attentive priorities of more-than-human species not only sensitizes human participants to this multiplicity, but also stimulates a consideration of how the consistent centering of “the human’s” needs and values inhibits more-than-human survival. These scores, for the most part, do not aim to intervene within individual relations between specific humans and specific other animals, but rather they cultivate a sense of accountability among humans to other members of the ecological web.

According to feminist care theory, shifts in perspective are a crucial first phase of care. By invoking care, I am primarily adopting the definition outlined by Berenice Fisher and Joan C. Tronto who articulate care as “a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible.” (1990). Tronto further enumerated four phases of a caring process: caring about, caring for, caregiving, and care receiving (1998). Feminist care theorists have agreed that attentiveness is one of the central requirements of care, and without it, care is not possible (Murdoch 1970; Gruen 2009; de la Bellacasa 2017). iLANDing scores, which re-choreograph attention as a plural set of practices, each with their own mode of relating towards environments and others, has the potential to complicate theories of care according to an ecological perspective.



Part of this work begins with returning to Tronto's foundational definition of care as everything we do to maintain "our world." I echo Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's question: "What is included in 'our world'? And why should relations of care be articulated from there?" (2017, 4). Because Tronto describes care as a "species activity" that she believes is unique to humans, she presents a somewhat biased vision of care as tending to the world as perceived from a human perspective and perhaps even implies a lack of care on the part of nonhuman animals. Instead of drawing lines around *who* cares and what is included within "the world" of care or even identifying traits that make different kinds of life deserving of care, iLAND's biomimicry scores propose a re-orientation towards *how* more-than-human others care and *what* they care about.<sup>152</sup> In order to do this, they ask participants to shift from vertical posture, uses senses other than vision, and attune to phenomena that they may often disregard.

Biomimicry scores highlight how tracking the details of how another being moves can give access to a glimpse of how they find value within their surroundings. This disturbs dominant anthropocentric conceptualizations of land as a resource to be exploited to serve human needs by attuning human observers to the multiple resources the environment affords to other beings. It also re-choreographs dominant practices of attention by dislodging the human performers from their dominant position of "on," and instead asking them to situate themselves within, among, between, and through the research environment.

In addition to re-choreographing the physical patterns that uphold anthropocentrism as a value system within dominant attention, biomimicry scores propose praxes for reformulating

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<sup>152</sup> The attunement to what more-than-human beings care about, rather than why they matter, is in line with Maneesha Deckha's proposal of "beingness" as a new legal category that would move current legal understandings of animals away from a rights/property model and towards a model in which behavior towards animal others are grounded in responsibility (2021).

care ethics in ecological terms. Using movement to learn about the value systems of other beings decenters the “anthro” in ways that differ from other proposals to widen ethical paradigms beyond the human. Whereas other alternative ecological ethics have gotten mired in debates concerning traits that make different kinds of life valuable (e.g. the capacity to communicate, feel pain, or even the length of time they spend with their young), biomimicry scores consider what is *valuable to* more-than-human beings.

I read this as a practice of care that advocates for “caring-as” as a complement to other requirements of “caring-about” and “caring-for.” “Caring-as,” or regarding the world through the value system of another being, is crucial to developing care that will be effective. That is, that it will actually address the needs of that being, rather than prescribing a solution that may or may not be in line with the care recipient’s needs and desires. Furthermore, hearkening back to Tronto’s definition of care as those actions we undertake to sustain “our world,” choreographic emulations of other species affirm the possibility that there might be many worlds coexisting within one. This awareness urges a reconsideration of care ethics in ways that honor these many interlocking worlds and ways of “worlding” a shared space.

There are, of course, many limitations to this method of encouraging care. First, it only gets us part way through the caring process. Biomimicry scores intervene mainly in the preliminary stages of care in which the prospective carer is attuning to the need for care and the needs of the being to be cared for. This is a crucial phase of any caring process but also requires both action and a positive receipt by the care recipient. Second, it is important to note that mimicry is generally a unidirectional relationship rather than a reciprocal one. The living entity being mimicked in “Migration Mapping” does not necessarily want to be copied, nor is there any guaranteed benefit from serving as a model. At the same time, if you accept my argument that

dominant attentive practices promote a lack of care for the more-than-human, and if attentiveness is central to effective care, then the project of creating plural experimental attentions that re-sensitize people to the needs of more-than-human others takes a potentially generative first step towards reconstituting anthropocentric relationships on more ecologically just terms.

## **Conclusion: Reflexive Anthropocentrism**

It becomes clear through an engagement with iLANDing scores that the end goal is not to depart completely from a species-specific perspective. As referenced earlier, abandoning the human presents problems inasmuch as it sidesteps the work needed to dismantle Eurocentric “humanism.” As multiple scholars have argued, abandoning the human runs the risk of reiterating the binary between human and more-than-human and fails to address iniquities among humans.<sup>153</sup> Abandoning the human also presents methodological problems linked to iLAND’s philosophy that affirms how knowledge emanates from moving bodies and the modes of attention they cultivate through moving within their surroundings. This viewpoint assumes that the particularities of one’s (human) body is central to that being’s experience, making it incompatible with efforts to transcend one’s own physical experience.

In this concluding section, I argue that iLANDing scores, in their aggregate, work towards a perspective I call “reflexive anthropocentrism.” Reflexive anthropocentrism describes a mode of awareness that accounts for the effects that human performers have on human and

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<sup>153</sup> There has been significant intellectual debate concerning the ethics of moving beyond the human. Native/Indigenous and Black feminist scholars have critiqued posthumanism for redirecting critical theory away from discussions of racial and colonial violence (King 2017). In Tiffany Lethabo King’s words, “[t]he selfless, subjectless, posthuman still persists as the realm of life because of the annihilation of Indigenous and Black life . . . Black and Native people are rendered structuralist (or modernist and dead) as white self-actualizing subjects disguise themselves as rhizomatic movements that transcend representation and the human (177). For key critiques of posthumanism, see Jackson (2013 and 2020), and TallBear (2019).

more-than-human others in a shared environment. It also reflects on fissures within the category of “the human” by engaging human perspectives and knowledge practices that are often left out of dominant environmental management and urban development decision-making processes. My definition of reflexive anthropocentrism is informed by both Susan Leigh Foster (2003) and Janet O’Shea’s use of the word “reflexive” as a political gesture that both calls attention to oppression and inequity while also embodying an alternative (2021). Whereas Foster and O’Shea de-emphasize reflexivity’s association with introspection, I retain this quality in order to point to the ways in which reflexive anthropocentrism points out inequity, fosters ongoing accountability at the individual, community, and species level, and embodies experimental alternatives to anthropocentric action. I conclude by suggesting that reflexive anthropocentrism is not achieved through any single score, but rather gestured toward through an aggregation of scores that, in their multiplicity, point to potentially infinite ways of being and valuing. This multiplicity engages both human and more-than-human perspectives that have been obscured by Western liberal humanism.

iLANDing collaborators foster the first aspect of reflexive anthropocentrism by using scores as frameworks for generating *feedback* about the implications of their own actions in a complex ecological web with many other actors. According to systems theory, intelligence is defined as the ability to self-correct in response to feedback. “Feedback,” in this context, is produced when aspects of one’s actions “feed back” into the system as input and, in turn, influence that system’s future actions. This loop structure is present in the ways that iLANDing participants employ choreographic scores. A score, as iLAND uses it, “proposes a framework in which to re-create and reimagine a present that can rely on a dynamic past and look toward a moving future” (Monson 2018, 266). Scores are feedback generating devices, producing data

that can be “fed back” into the system in order to inform future actions, sometimes begetting new scores or protocols for action.

A clear example of this structure is present in a score that came out of a 2015 iLANDing laboratory workshop called “Use Values: Re/imagining Urban Waste,” which I co-facilitated with artist Katarina Jerinic and waste management architect, Juliette Spertus. Our practice site was a small triangle of “Adopt-a-Highway” land that Jerinic was responsible for keeping free of litter as the site’s “adopter.” One score that came out of our collaboration, “Score for Minimizing Impact,” asks the performer to observe how their movements across the site impacted plants and other materials as they transited the site, while simultaneously tracking their willingness and ability to minimize these impacts.

“Score for Minimizing Impact”

Travel in pre-trampled paths in order to minimize the effect of traversing. Note the degree to which you experience discomfort (or are willing to experience discomfort) while doing so.

(Bibler, Jerinic, and Spertus 2017)

Returning the focus to the role of human actions contrasts with reclamations of anthropocentrism within ecological ethics that insist that anthropocentric “self-love” is a requirement to appreciating nonhuman others, or that a species’ self-interest can motivate environmental protection (Kopnina et al. 2018). iLANDing constitutes a novel ecological praxis precisely because it proposes a set of strategies through which to understand the ways in which environments hold value to their human and more-than-human inhabitants, rather than debating the value those inhabitants possess as “resources” within a capitalist economic system. If anthropocentrism, in its original connotation within environmental ethics, is the belief that moral value is dictated solely by “the human” and that all other beings are means to “human” ends (Kopnina et al. 2018), then iLANDing scores provide collaborators with a means of

contemplating how their own systems operate in relationship with, and often in tension and competition with, other value systems.

The second aspect of reflexive anthropocentrism reflects on fissures within the category of “human” and complicates the nature/culture binary by studying the interplay between social, cultural, and ecological processes. In 2015, multiple iLANDing laboratories and residencies attended to the bleed between social and ecological processes, investigating how immigration, colonialism, and other forms of structural oppression shape the urban landscape and relations with the more-than-human. In a 2015 laboratory “JUST LIKE THAT,” Rosza Daniel Lang/Levitsky (cultural worker and organizer) and Leila Mougoui Bakhtari (urban ecologist) studied how embodied strategies for communication and collective decision-making within dance club spaces might be applied to serve political movements that seek to transform urban spaces. In the same year, “Mar Sea Sol,” led by Estrella Payton (artist), Grisha Coleman (dancer, composer, and choreographer), and Meredith Drum (video and animation artist) asked, “What impacts of our colonial pasts are still in motion? Are these histories physically evident in our natural and cultural landscapes?” (“Mar Sea Sol” 2015). Both of these projects attempt to grapple with the ways in which human movements participate in the creation of ecosystems in ways that trouble the divide between natural and cultural. Furthermore, they specifically contend with the embodied practices of groups of humans who have been marginalized within dominant Western conceptualizations of “the human” in order to better understand the improvisatory processes by which those groups coordinate their movements, create kinship, and build a sense of home.

How can attention be used as a tool to create a feedback structure that integrates input from human and more-than-human perspectives that are frequently left out of dominant

environmental conversations? This process is identifiable within a 2012 iLANDing residency called “Follow the Water Walks.” Led by collaborators Paloma McGregor (choreographer), Damian Griffin (Education Director of the Bronx River Alliance), and Rebecca Boger (Professor of Earth and Environmental Sciences at Brooklyn College), “Follow the Water Walks” sought to create multi-dimensional maps of man-made and natural waterways in the East Tremont neighborhood of the Bronx. Collaborators intentionally subverted the idea of “neutral” space and instead attempted to reveal how the process of selecting landmarks is laden with notions of value. One of the ways they did this was to track the presence of green landmarks. From the blog posts she wrote after research sessions, McGregor was concerned with adding kinesthetic and community-generated insights to a “data dictionary” that would reimagine what features of the block would be deemed important enough to be mapped. McGregor asked in the blog, “What approaches do we use to deepen our understanding of these physical spaces and their histories through some embodied practices?” (McGregor 2012a). Aiming to engage an intergenerational audience, residency approaches consisted of simple actions like stretching one’s arm span to map sidewalk widths or finding other kinesthetic modes of measurement to assess how much space was available for potential “greening” projects.

“Follow the Water Walks,” and specifically McGregor’s approach to “community specific” dance which emerged out of this residency, provides an example of how a score was used to elicit feedback from environmental experts who are frequently not consulted as such. These included longtime neighborhood residents, community gardeners, bikers, pedestrians, and children, as well as trees and the Bronx River. Furthermore, residency collaborators embraced modes of producing feedback that are not frequently valued within institutional decision-making processes, including hanging out, playing, and having informal conversations. McGregor cited

her upbringing on the Caribbean Island of St. Croix and her work as a community organizer as influential to her approach, which amplifies public space practices in Black and Brown communities as vital knowledge- and culture-bearing activities.

In this project, the score served as an entry point: a way to draw attention by doing something that is out of ordinary for the space and, in doing so, open up possibilities for connections between people. In a recent interview, McGregor described how she prepared scores in advance, but was willing to abandon them in order to respond to conversations that emerged as a result of her provocations. During the residency, McGregor notes scored deviations from habitual sidewalk behavior led to conversations with people who lived on the block. A score that contrasts with expected actions in the space, she explained, “sets the potential for a circular set of curiosities.” It can “raise people’s curiosity in a way that also drives or impacts or influences what we are doing” (2022). McGregor described her role as attuning and responding to feedback: “I’m sort of observing in real time, and then valuing [...] I’m observing what I’m doing, and I’m observing or reflecting on the doing, and I’m noticing connections between one sort of moment in time and something else that’s happening that might have a thread between it” (2022). Rather than simply keeping insights for herself, McGregor connects the capacity to notice the after-effects of one’s actions allows her to build connections between people, places, and ideas—in other words, to build community.

Generating and responding to feedback from the other entities in the space and then adapting her trajectory based on that information is a hallmark of McGregor’s process of making “community specific” choreography. A “community specific” approach, McGregor explained, asks the question: “How do we build connections with each other, and with the place that we’re in?” (2022). The language of “community-specific” responds to the term “site-specific,” which is



frequently used within Euro/American contemporary dance to describe dances that respond to their environment. For McGregor, “site” feels like colonial language in its reference to land as a decontextualized ground upon which something can be constructed.<sup>154</sup> In McGregor’s definition,

“community specific” is the idea that your capacity to do is influenced not just by the space, but what came before in the space, who shows up, and how you cultivate your attention as you attend to not only the physical markers and excitements and ideas that the space may be bringing up for you and the people you have invited, in particular, to play and create with you, but also the people who call that space home. Because so often that's not how the work is being done. (2022)

Thus, attention to the feedback that arises in response to one’s actions is crucial to one’s ability to deviate from a previously created plan in order to co-create with community members in real time. This attention to feedback from the beings that inhabit the space prior to the arrival of artists and collaborators distinguishes a “community specific” process from other “site-specific” choreographic practices that employ a more extractive approach in which artists enter, intervene, and exit, using the site as a resource for the creation of art.

“Follow the Water Walks” used scores as feedback-generating devices that wove relationships in multiple directions between humans, and between humans and more-than-human entities. For example, a score that attempted to understand the perspective of a cement-bound tree was used to initiate relationships not only between the tree and the performers of the score, but between the performers and other people that reside in or were temporarily inhabiting the practice site. For example, in this score empathetic perspective taking with the tree was used to shape relations between people:

Another idea that kept emerging was the size of the cement tree pits and the way they can constrict the roots of a tree and stop it from reaching its full potential. We played a bit as

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<sup>154</sup> McGregor explained in an interview that she felt intuitively that the concept of “site” was a colonially inflected concept. The definition of “site” as “an area of ground in which a town, building, or monument is constructed” supports that association because it describes places as locations to be built upon or developed.

a group with our body's dimensions and then with boxing one another in with our bodies to get an embodied sense of what the tree experiences." (McGregor, 2012b)

Additionally, by deviating from typical pedestrian patterns, the performers opened themselves up for engagement by non-participants who might ask "What are you doing?" In McGregor's project logs, interactions with passersby culminated in them joining the score, or taking the exploration in a new direction by sparking conversation. When McGregor and collaborators allowed their actions to be deviated by input from others, they sometimes resulted in conversations in which community members shared their knowledge about the trees on the block: three men from a biker club called the Ching-A-Lings told her that the trees in front of a nearby apartment complex were planted 20 years ago; another man who was resting under one of the trees offered that there were similar plantings made around the same time along 180<sup>th</sup> street, but that they were damaged by children climbing them; a woman shared that the trees, while beautiful in the daytime, were a safety concern for her at night because they block the light of the streetlamps (McGregor, 2012b). These insights are examples of the kinds of expertise and modes of sharing information that are not generally incorporated within decision-making processes concerning the "greening" of city spaces. They present a more complex picture of how the block's inhabitants value the trees.



Figure 15 - Working with site and community during “Follow the Water Walks” iLANDing residency.  
Photo: Charles R. Berenguer Jr., 2012

Moving, observing, attuning, and adapting activates the feeling of kinship with other actors in an ecological matrix that, for McGregor, exists whether cultivated or not. The role of the practice is to cultivate an attentiveness and responsiveness to that kinship such that it engenders new possibilities for actions and coordinations among kin. For McGregor, scores catalyze alternative ways of attuning to and engaging with one’s surroundings. Beyond the specific instructions they offer, scores provide a rationale for something simpler: spending an extended amount of time in a place that one might ordinarily pass through quickly. As McGregor says, “The pace of things feels important. When I say ‘community specific,’ it means I actually have to *build* with folks” (2022). The pace is critical, and the connections being built are not intended to end with a culminating performance, rather, performance-making is a process through which community ties can be strengthened. “Performance,” McGregor notes, “is a measure of: ‘How well did we do the community building?’” Performance “is a way to practice all of those community building skills when the stakes are not so high.” (2022).

In conclusion, iLAND's use of scores as devices for collecting and responding to feedback has important implications for the ways we think about knowledge creation and environmental ethics. First, this use of scoring situates movement as a *mode of knowing*. This intervenes in Cartesian oppositions between mind and body, which have been central to the creation of the human/nature binary. While not expressed in all iLANDing projects, elevating movement as a mode of knowing helps to integrate feedback from groups of humans who have been excluded from exclusive Western notions of "the human" conceptions of knowledge. Furthermore, by tracking different sensations, occupying an array of perspectives, and cultivating the capacity to be affected by multiple aspects of its surroundings, iLAND's moving bodies participate in a form of thinking that is relational, rather than objective. Movement, in this sense, offers an ideal medium for contemplating how ecological processes impact one's actions, and conversely, how one's actions exert influence on those processes. The next implication is that moving is also an *expression of knowing*. Movement is the research output that generates further feedback. Movement gives off visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory impressions to both performers and witnesses. If the score proposes "a set of instructions for activating relationships between participants and ecological conditions" (iLAND 2017, 4), movement is both a catalyst of those relationships and the result.

Finally, using scores as feedback generating devices supports reflection upon the kind of information and sources of expertise (or, for Goodwin, "professional vision") that are frequently left out of conversations that take place in architectural firms, governmental offices, and global climate summits. iLANDing projects frequently question, "Who is considered an expert?" and "Whose opinions are not often consulted?" In different projects, undervalued expertise has included dancers, informal users of a park space, field mice, community members, clouds, and

the land itself. Likewise, activities like playing, dancing, wandering, collecting trash, flocking, cooking, conversing, and migrating have all been engaged as undervalued knowledge-producing practices.

Considered through the lens of “feedback,” iLAND scores can be understood as strategies for considering Western liberal humanism’s “detached loops,” or sources of feedback that are frequently unincorporated within dominant systems. By sensitizing to information that is often not acknowledged within dominant practices of attention, by re-attaching feedback loops that infrequently make their way back into human decision-making processes, and by weaving new loops among people and between people and other beings, iLANDing scores enact corrective measures to a culture of ignoring the multiple ways environments are imbued with values by their inhabitants. By developing numerous environmentally calibrated practices of multisensory listening, iLANDing scores present actionable protocols for creating knowledge that is both transpersonal and transspecies in nature. This mode of soliciting feedback through engagement with the more-than-human is especially important because of the power human actors hold with regard to the ability to make dramatic changes in their environments, and in relationship to a Western acculturation towards the environment as material to be subdued and dominated. At the same time, a consideration of unincorporated feedback loops also has implications for the ways in which members of the human species have different degrees of power and influence over their surroundings.

Rather than promoting a singular ethically correct way to relate to the more-than-human, iLAND attempts to model numerous modes of attuning to and orienting towards aspects of one’s ecological milieu. Unlike dominant attention, iLANDing scores do not prescribe a single most accurate, efficient, or polite way to practice attention. On the contrary, they demonstrate the

ecological specificity of individual practices of attention and illustrate the impossibility of an all-encompassing attentive frame. Rather than pursuing one best mode of attention, iLANDing scores propose that studying how beings attend to and move within their environments can teach us about the values an environment holds for members of multispecies communities. As a collection, scores help to re-populate value systems that have been obscured through anthropocentric frames and address gaps in awareness that have been left by previous iLANDing scores.

Scores, in their capacity to produce “iterative difference” through repetition in different places, by different performers, an/or at different times, aid in this process of acknowledging the heterogeneity of values that exist within a place. Scores’ modeling of different value systems through the nexus of attention and movement lends itself to ethical “perspective taking” (Gruen 2015) but does so while working towards a multi-sensory “multi-optic vision” (Kim 2015) that can hold multiple interrelated and sometimes conflicting perspectives. The proliferation of scores that occurs with each project affirms that there are nearly infinite ways of orienting oneself to the intersecting lives and forces that constitute “the environment.” As McGregor has put it, working with the more-than-human world “points to the fact that we need to have multiple ways of being . . . and if we center one too much, we’re going to be out of balance” (2022). Enacting scores with human and more-than-human others reinforces this idea. In Monson’s words, “it produces a specific thing to do a score with others. And, while you can imagine the score, to be there doing it with others gathers these attentive practices that enable a type of coordination that wouldn’t be possible otherwise. So, it’s constantly reminding me that my perception is just one of many. That’s so exciting” (2022).

## Conclusion | On “Mattering.”

How does attention matter? This question has articulated itself in different forms throughout the process of researching and drafting this dissertation. By proposing that attention “matters,” I have been advocating for an alternative understanding of attention as an activity that involves the whole body, rather than the mind alone. “Mattering” speaks to attention’s materiality—something that has mass, energy, and can be observed (Merriam-Webster 2023). At the same time “mattering” also carries other associations. To say something “matters” is to say that it has value. To write about the “matter” of attention is also to suggest that there are problems with attention, and perhaps differing ideas about how it should be wielded. All of these aspects of “mattering” have been at play in this study.

Whereas prevailing definitions of attention refer to “the act or state of applying the mind to something” and “a selective narrowing or focusing of consciousness” (Merriam-Webster 2023), my choreographic analysis of attention illuminates it as a whole-bodied extension of the self—a technique that entails a particular spatiality, temporality, and muscular tone. That is to say, paying attention is an action in its own right. Furthermore, in common parlance, when something requires prompt attention, it merits a quick response. This suggests that attention also shapes the trajectory of future actions.<sup>155</sup>

Attention “matters” because its meanings and practices are subject to debate. Joining with scholarly voices that have argued for a reconsideration of attention as a plural set of practices

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<sup>155</sup> Indeed, reaction time has been one of the metrics used to measure “attention” since the rise of modern psychology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although attention and reaction time are considered to be closely related, both 19<sup>th</sup> century and 21<sup>st</sup> century studies have had trouble determining exactly what that relation is. Recent scientific studies have shown that higher levels of attention can produce both shorter and longer reaction times (Golmohammadi et al. 2021).

(Crary 2001; Pedersen, Albris, and Seaver 2021), I have emphasized periods in which dominant modes of attention are undergoing transition, or in which there are conflicting ideas about what constitutes attention and how one should perform it. I have framed attention as a “matter of concern” instead of a “matter of fact” (Latour 2004). Whereas a matter-of-fact approach would treat attention as a stable object that is best studied through empirical methods and described by experts, to treat attention as a matter of concern is to highlight how attention has been asked to do different kinds of work across various historical eras. Whereas matters of fact close down opportunities for debate, matters of concern propose that debate, or at least differing opinions and practices of attention, are key to understanding what attention is and does. This approach contrasts with scientific studies that have attempted to quantify attention by measuring eye movements, visual working memory, response time, or the ability to perform arithmetic (Treviño et al. 2021). Instead, I have located moments in the history of attention in which monarchs, philosophers, educators, scientists, doctors, and businessmen have struggled to impose a particular meaning and practice of attention over others. I have also alluded to the ways in which dominant techniques of attention are embedded with colonial, racialized, gendered, classed, and ableist logics concerning who “matters.”

I want to advocate for redefining attention as a matter of concern because it is valuable both within and outside of capitalist economic structures. Today’s attention economy ascribes attention’s value to its status as a commodity—something that can be stabilized, possessed, and exchanged for other goods. However, this concept of attention’s value is also inherently linked to a narrow understanding of attention as biological and operating at a fixed rate. If we return to the idea that attention is valuable as a kind of action that leads to other actions, then we might arrive at a different understanding of the value systems that organize our attention and direct our



actions in ways that may seem at first to be “natural” or matter of fact. More importantly, if we find that our attention is not aligned with the value systems we believe ourselves to hold, we might look to these artists to find a range of strategies by which we can shift our physical, sensory, and conceptual postures to bring ideology and action into alignment.

In this project, I began with an analysis of now normative practices of attention have been historically and culturally constructed. I primarily discussed the formation of normative techniques of attention. This genealogy revealed how attention has always contained choreographic elements and helped to contextualize Brooks, Suseno, and Monson’s 21<sup>st</sup> century counter-choreographies of attention. However, counter-hegemonic practices of attention certainly existed before the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In fact, the regimentation of attention during each period provides clues as to the alternative modes of attention that institutions sought to repress. While they do not use the language of attention, critical dance and performance studies scholars have uncovered examples of unruly modes of consciousness in their analyses of dancing manias, Black Pentecostalism, Spiritualism, and hysteria, which are all politically resistant activities that would have threatened to destabilize dominant choreographies of attention (Braude 2001; Forbes 2016; Phelan 1996; Crawley 2017; Gotman 2017). More work is necessary to understand how these resistant modes of consciousness interacted with the imposition of one way of paying attention.

Rethinking how attention “matters” has important implications for dance studies. Choreographers and dance scholars have already explicated how choreographic decisions move audience attention in particular ways (Bishop 2018; Gottschild 1996; Humphrey 1958; Srinivasan 2009). Of course, this is not an exact science; there is no singular experience of any dance piece. A dance’s witnesses also play a role in creating the work by directing their own

focus towards different elements and introducing their own references and frames of interpretation.<sup>156</sup> As Priya Srinivasan has argued in her article “A ‘Material’-ist Reading of the Bharata Natyam Dancing Body: The Possibility of the ‘Unruly Spectator’” (2009), audience members may decide to attend to elements that the choreographer does not emphasize, yielding different perspectives of the work. Likewise, audience members are not alike in their interpretation of signs, codes, vocabularies, and references encoded in the work (Pillai 2017). However, a choreographer may still influence attention by controlling how elements come to the foreground or recede into the background and positioning the audience in ways that affect how they perceive the dance.

Expanding upon this idea, I argue that we should also consider what the dancers are paying attention to, for how long, and in what combinations while they train and perform. This mode of analysis troubles distinctions between choreography and improvisation by highlighting dancers’ attention as a source of choreographic structure that operates within improvised activities in dance and everyday life.<sup>157</sup> Attending to attention adds dimension to the critical dance studies method of choreographic analysis by engaging attention as structuring element that researchers might track as they analyze performances and forms of movement training. This has important implications for conversations concerning the role of dance and other embodied practices within the domain of ethics and politics.

Tracking dancers’ attention enables us to examine how physical practices inform one’s orientations to the world around them. It proposes that dancing is the outcome of implicit or

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<sup>156</sup> This parallels Roland Barthes’ argument that it is the reader that effectively “writes” a text (1968).

<sup>157</sup> In destabilizing the binary between choreography and improvisation, I join a chorus of other scholars who have done so by other means (Foster 2002; Goldman 2010; Jackson 2001; Kraut 2014; 2016; Puri and Hart-Johnson 1995).

explicit decisions about what matters—that is, what is considered important or relevant. Dancing also shapes how phenomena is perceivable or not perceivable by changing the posture, position, and location of the sensing body. Building on Sara Ahmed’s discussion of orientation as simultaneously conceptual, material, and social (2006), I urge a consideration of how attention is a key component of the act of orienting. Attention is a practice of extending our consciousness, senses, selves, and communities towards some things and not others. As Parcon Resilience/Moving Rasa teaches us, it may not always be possible to ascertain how or to what another person is attending. However, studying how dancers develop particular modes of attention provides clues as to what a dance practice posits as valuable and relevant, and perhaps even more importantly, what it inhibits or excludes. As Improvising While Black pedagogy demonstrates, this enables performers and scholars to reflect not only on that which is left out of artistic canons, but how dance practices themselves might be complicit in ontological exclusions. Rather than simply focusing on whose work is left out of the canon, it sharpens our ability to recognize the ways of being, moving, and valuing the world that canonical works repress or leave inactive.

My interest in choreographic attention began with the revelation that, throughout my dance training, what I was learning could be best described as “particular ways of noticing” rather than “particular ways of moving.” In my studies in improvisation especially, it became clear that the particular ways in which we deploy our observational powers have political and social implications. One teacher, Ishmael Houston-Jones, emphasized ongoing observation of the ways we censor ourselves. Through journaling and performance prompts, he encouraged us to think about how we display ourselves to others; how we allow or avoid being witnessed; what we make public and what we keep private. In one workshop, I remember him opening up his

shirt, showing us the scars of his open-heart surgery as he performed an excerpt of one of his works. He modeled vulnerability—yes—but with a critical awareness of how intentional disclosures of “private” material complicate the ways we are hailed as subjects within social categories.

Years later, I joined twenty other students for Nancy Stark Smith’s three-week “January Workshop” at Earthdance in Western Massachusetts. Throughout her teaching and demonstrations, Smith cultivated us as an intentional community. She compelled us remain open to interacting with each member of our group, guiding us away from the tendency to form cliques. In the opening circle, she stated this explicitly: “How you treat each other outside the studio affects how you dance together in the studio. Try not to leave anyone behind.” She also advised us to avoid pairing up romantically with other participants, explaining that she had witnessed how couples become closed loops, impacting the connections that can happen in the whole group. Her efforts to foster community were evident in her facilitation and manner outside the studio. She had us sing rounds together, invited us to share Shabbat dinner with her on Fridays, and made sure we each got a chance to speak with her one on one. In the studio, I remember watching her encourage the heaviest person in the room to allow her—a 64-year-old woman—to carry their full weight. Even though I have critiqued the false neutrality of contact improvisation’s attention to bodies into mere “surfaces,” I also witnessed how attuning to bodies as surfaces and interpreting contrasts and aversions as elements of composition helped us maintain a rare state of openness to collaborate with people with whom we were not friends. Harkening back to Parcon Resilience/Moving Rasa’s practice of No/Yes/Modify, which enabled participants to avoid the question of “should I or should I not engage with this person or object,” Smith’s teaching also invited us into an attentive pivot that shifted how we related

physically with each other. Viewing each other as elements of composition created a framework in which all people were potentially valuable collaborators, while also enacting a concerning erasure of our differences. As mayfield brooks and Andrew Suseno have pointed out, this attitude towards difference introduces both possibilities and problems in a society in which social differences cannot easily be checked at the door.

The story I am weaving has in part to do with generational and epistemic shifts in U.S. American experimental dance. brooks, Suseno, Monson, and Smith are all invested in the question of how we should be together, and how we might be together in better, more inclusive, more just, and more generative ways. All of these artists wield attention as a tool that can shape actions and relations between people, and between people and their world. They also share an understanding that the division between life and studio is porous, and that both might potentially influence each other. Dance practice, in this view, affords an opportunity to rehearse alternative and better ways of relating, produced through a shift in perspective that might remain after the practice has concluded. However, whereas Smith and her generation de-emphasized difference and appealed to what they viewed as universal, the artists in this study reject the idea that collaboration and care require sameness. This is important because it speaks to historical exclusions within Euro/American contemporary dance and somatics<sup>158</sup>—exclusions that brooks, Suseno, Monson, and many of the dancers that work with them have directly experienced. At the same time, these artists' interventions are impactful beyond the domain of experimental dance. I believe that they are articulating a model for politics that honors difference and enhances our ability to collaborate respectfully with others by adopting flexible and plural attentions. Rather

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<sup>158</sup> Scholarly critique of the exclusionary nature of Euro/American concert dance canons is robust. For examples, see Gottschild (1996), Foster (2002), Manning (2004), Kraut (2014), brooks (2016), Hennessy (2017), Kwan (2017), Mitra (2018), Chaleff (2018), George (2020), and Stanger (2021).

than proposing one form of attention as a tool for synchronizing perspectives across a group, they ask their communities to disorient, juggle, and exchange practices of attention. In doing so, they recognize a plurality of perspectives and ways of being that are continually remaking themselves through practice.

Crucially, for Brooks, Suseno, and Monson/iLAND, a shift in perspective is not a destination in its own right, but a means to bring about a different way of acting, and more specifically, a different way of acting in responsive relationship to others. If attention is a tool by which we might develop new and better structures for relating to others, and especially for relating to others with whom we may have difference or conflict, then attention must be treated as both ethical and political. Reactivating the “tending” that has always existed within the word “attending,” the artists in this study use attention to mobilize a politics of relation based in care. Etymologically, attention and care bear similar roots. Attention, especially in its early iterations, connoted actions of tending, or sustaining the conditions under which another can survive. Tending implies both habitual actions and actions that stretch us towards others. As Adriana Cavarero has argued, tending is associated with feminized and racialized labor in which the laborer inclines: leaning, bending, and listening (2016). In Chapter One, we witnessed a historical process by which attention becomes straightened and compelled into verticality, thus enabling rational independent thought. Attention’s disciplinization moves it away from care and toward the pursuit of capitalist profit.

At the same time, anthropological studies of attention have revealed how the management of attention is always incomplete. Our ability to control the direction, scope, and duration of our own attention is always subject to competition by various objects and forces enacting “attentional pull” (Throop and Duranti 2015). Attunement, which is ongoing and

improvisational, is vulnerable to glitches and failure (Duranti and La Mattina 2022). This untameability of attention is, in some ways, good news. It leaves openings for remaking attention on more relational terms, by acknowledging the ways in which we are implicated and responsible to others with whom we are sharing (or making) a world.

Choreographic engagement with attention—that is, examining the kinds of actions and material relations that constitute and ensue from attention—uncovers one more way that attention “matters.” As becomes apparent through Brooks, Suseno’s and Monson/iLAND’s interventions, attention has potential to become a “matter of care” if we are careful about how we perform it. Building on Latour’s “matter of concern,” Maria Puig de la Bellacasa has proposed “matter of care” as a revision of care that accounts for action (2017). As scholars of feminist care ethics have repeatedly argued, attention is a necessary first action in a caring process (Tronto 1993; 1998; Topolski 2015; Gruen 2009; Warren 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). But whereas care theory typically distinguishes between thought (“caring about”) and action (“caring for”), choreographic attention complicates this division because it is neither purely conceptual, nor purely practical. It is both at once and often mediates between the two.

By mediating between what is and what could be, choreographic attention brings together prefigurative and pragmatic visions for politics. Prefigurative approaches to politics contend that, before existing orders can be opposed and transformed, they have to be radically reimagined (Monicelli 2022). Rather than directly protesting an existing dominant regime, prefigurative political projects perform a radical vision of a “better world” to come generally by enacting that vision on a smaller scale (Jeffrey and Dyson 2021). Contact improvisation, as a form, can be read through the lens of prefigurative politics. It practices a version of democracy in which all bodies are alike in their ability to provide surfaces for connection but is generally able to do so

by retreating from public space and inhibiting attention to aspects of cultural and social difference (Novack 1990; Paxton 2003). Hence, difficulties arise when the experiment in demographic collaboration is scaled to include dancers who are unable to, or do not want to check their identities at the door (Brooks 2016; Hennessy 2017; Mitra 2018; 2021). Pragmatic politics, on the other hand, is often pitted as a more conservative approach to bringing about change by working with what *is* rather than what could be. Pragmatic political projects cooperate with existing economic and political structures and reform the system from inside (Törnberg 2021).

My mentors, Janet O'Shea and Susan Leigh Foster, have each attuned me to the ways in which choreography can do both pragmatic and prefigurative political labor simultaneously (Foster 2003; O'Shea 2021). Choreographic interventions can both point out the ways in which institutions have failed or oppressed their publics, while also enacting future solutions in the here-and-now. Choreographic attention is pragmatic inasmuch as it calls attention to what is wrong or missing with dominant attention. It identifies phenomena and modes of sensing that are repressed by a model of attention-as-selection. It also gestures to the limitations of techniques of attention that undergird "objectivity" and "truth" by uncovering the specific locations, postures, and sensory activities that give rise to this way of knowing. It also demonstrates who and what is left out when attention is performed as a process of selection guided by racialized, gendered, classed, and ableist logics.

Choreographic attention can be considered as prefigurative because it asks questions about how communities might go about repairing incalculable losses. It experiments with ways to build more inclusive dance practices, publics, and public spaces. It reaches for a revision of "the human" that can participate ethically in multi-species relations. These imaginings have



aspects of utopian thinking and could be critiqued, as prefiguration often is, for dwelling in the realm of fantasy, rather than working in the dimension of the real (Monticelli 2022). However, as I hope this study of attention has made clear, re-organizing attention is less about escapism than it is about activating the multiple alternative and simultaneous options for caring about and caring for the world. In a historical and cultural regime in which attention has been shaped as a cultivated *unresponsiveness* to all but select phenomena, political projects that re-choreograph attention redistribute *responsiveness* according to alternative value systems. In a period referred to as the “attention economy,” this is a tangible redistribution of a valuable resource that questions the very logics by which that resource is valued.

The tangible effects of choreographic attention are apparent in the way one person endeavors to hold another’s weight; or helps them move towards a goal; or witnesses their grief; or draws up plans for habitat that accounts for the needs of multiple social groups and species. To be sure, these interventions may be small in scale, but as adrienne maree brown says, “small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies” (2017, 3). My point in connecting attention to politics is not to advocate for a particular kind of attention that can solve all problems. No tool can. In fact, the belief in “one best way” of doing attention is part of the problem. As with brooks’ project to foster witnessing attention as an *ongoing* project of repair, and Suseno’s cultivation of attentional plurality, and iLAND’s commitment to proliferating multiple and cross-species ways of attending to our environments, perhaps the most actionable insight is that we might attune to the gaps and elisions in our own awareness by engaging attention as a practice with many possibilities. Rather than pursuing what 19<sup>th</sup> century educators called “positive attention,” or what is today referred as “executive attention,” we might cultivate *many* attentions. That is, we might endeavor to move our

attention—to channel it with agility and discernment. By repositioning attention as a practice, rather than a stable biological fact, I hope to convince you, as I have been convinced, that how you pay attention matters. In order to create the grounds for acting towards more just futures, we may have to redesign how we experience the past and the present.

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