

Moving New Futures: Embodied Movement for a Just Society

by

Brooks Hatton Emanuel

Program in Dance
Duke University

Date: _____

Approved:

Ava LaVonne Vinesett, Supervisor

Michael Kliën

Shambhavi Kaul

Anne Gordon

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in the Program in
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

My *Moving New Futures* workshop uses improvisatory movement to help social justice practitioners—organizers, activists, civil rights lawyers, and others—imagine new possibilities for a just society. The workshop grew out of my own backgrounds in dance and social justice work. It has two major philosophical underpinnings: (1) the radical imagination necessary for prison-industrial complex abolition and (2) the growing body of scholarship showing that our entire bodies, not just our brains, produce thought.

Facilitating the workshop for two separate groups of social justice practitioners, I recorded discussion portions and used a survey to gather data. Discussions and survey responses affirmed my hope that movement would be a source of new knowledge and imagination for social justice practitioners. After these two iterations, I performed a public lecture-demonstration in which I discussed the development of the workshop and results. In a co-creative process with practitioners, I will continue developing the workshop as a tool for their work.

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In memory of Marissa McCall Dodson, who gave so much to the fight, for all of us.

Introduction

“I feel that there’s something that the movement is unlocking that my cognitive journeys have not defined yet.” — Participant, *Moving New Futures* workshop

Moving New Futures is a workshop I created that employs improvisatory movement to help social justice practitioners — organizers, activists, civil rights lawyers, and others — imagine new possibilities for a just society. For the purpose of this research, I define social justice as comprising efforts to end inequities created by the seeking, exerting, or maintaining of power by one demographic group—whether distinguished by race, ability, gender, sex, sexual orientation, class, citizenship status or other demographic category—over another, *and* to create a society actively committed to continuously creating conditions in which everyone can fully find, exercise, and own their own freedom. Freedom, as will be discussed, is difficult to define across cultural contexts, but it is loosely used here as the ability for people to fully live their most meaningful lives.

“*Moving New Futures: Embodied Movement for a Just Society*” unfolds in the following ways. Chapter 1, “Rationale,” discusses my two primary professional backgrounds—(1) my training in dance, particularly African Diaspora forms, and (2) my experience as a policy advocate, political staffer, legislative staffer, and civil rights attorney—and the desire to combine them that ultimately led to the workshop. Chapter 1 continues by describing two major philosophical underpinnings of the workshop: the radical imagination required for being a prison abolitionist and the growing body of scholarship showing that our entire bodies, not just our minds, produce thought. Combining these multiple threads, I created a workshop to help social justice practitioners engage their bodies to more fully imagine future possibilities around the issues on which they work.

Chapter 2, “Methodology,” starts with a discussion of the reason the movement used is improvisatory. It primarily discusses the importance of improvisation within an Africanist dance perspective. It also notes how I have been influenced by the improvisatory practices of choreographer and professor Michael Kliën. The chapter continues with an overview of the *Moving New Futures* workshop. Chapter 3, “Results/Outcomes,” discusses participants’ experiences of the workshop and highlights common themes that emerged about the workshop’s impact. Chapter 4, “Thesis Public Action Lecture-Demonstration,” describes my February 2023 lecture-demonstration about the workshop, including the social justice elements embedded in the structure of the event.

I facilitated ten iterations of the workshop for non-social justice practitioner participant groups (graduate and undergraduate students and other artists) before facilitating it for two groups of social justice practitioners. These two target participant groups were (1) members of the staff of a non-profit civil rights law firm that fights the death penalty and mass incarceration and (2) members of the staff and a few other key stakeholders of a membership-based abolition organization. My hope is for the workshop to be a tool for social justice practitioners. My research investigated its usefulness to that end, through recording and transcribing discussion portions of the workshops and administering a confidential post-workshop survey. Those discussions and survey responses affirmed my hope that movement could be a source of new knowledge and imagination for these practitioners.

As my primary advisor Prof. Vinesett has often reiterated to me, the thesis work is a start. Even in the last days of finishing this written portion, I was exposed to new sources and texts sparking new connections and directions of inquiry. The work discussed below is a beginning of what I hope will continue to be an evolving process of *Moving New Futures*.

The Root System

The *Moving New Futures* workshop came out of my desire to combine my past experiences as, on the one hand, a dancer and choreographer, and on the other, a social justice activist and lawyer. As such, my source material falls into several main categories. Prison abolition served as the inspiration for the idea of trying to imagine new futures, because in order to imagine a world without prisons, one has to be able to imagine possibilities completely outside the constraints of our current reality. Major thinkers who have inspired me here and whom I cite are Angela Y. Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Mariame Kaba.

Another source is the growing body of evidence that our entire bodies—not just our brains—are key to thinking and are critical sources of information. Here, I rely on several sources. First is the work of Susan Leigh Foster for the general proposition that dancing *is* thinking, not merely a post-hoc physical expression of thoughts from the brain. Second, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson elucidate *why* dancing likely is thinking by arguing the divide between mind and body underlying much of Western philosophy is wrong, and in fact, all thinking is a result of bodily experience as much as brain activity. Building on this, Bessel Van Der Kolk and Resmaa Menakem fed my understanding of the immense amount of information contained in our bodies. They do this from the point of view of trauma—the information trauma leaves in our bodies and the necessity of accessing that information in order to heal the trauma. This group of theorists' work is where the idea of *using our bodies* to try to imagine those new futures came from.

My background as a dancer, particularly in African Diaspora forms, has influenced my understanding of the potential of dance as a world-building force. This understanding was developed through training with and learning from teachers and mentors including DeAma Battle,

Baba Chuck Davis, Mama Kariamu Welsh, Baba Leni Sloan, Baba Richard González, Nia Love, Nicholas Leichter, Ronald K. Brown, and Omelika Kuumba. Scholars of African Diasporic dance and performance whom I cite in this paper include Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Kariamu Welsh, Thomas F. DeFrantz, Robert Farris Thompson, Fred Moten, Zita Allen, Ralph Ellison, Sherrill Dodds, Doris Green, Julie B. Johnson, Jonathan David Jackson, Naomi Bragin, and Abby Carozzo. Some of these scholars also support my understanding of how the importance of improvisation specifically in many African Diaspora dance forms has been a particular influence on this project. Coming out of a European postmodern dance tradition, my professor Michael Kliën has also influenced my understanding of what improvisatory movement can do.

Critical Terms

Two terms require definition at the outset. First, “social justice” is frequently used but rarely defined. The lack of precision of the term has even been exploited by critics who seek to undermine its goals.¹ Finding actual definitions in the literature discussing social justice proved difficult. The *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines it as follows: “justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society: *individuality gives way to the struggle for social justice.*”² Here, social justice is posed as looking out for the common, collective good as opposed to individualism, but there is still the vagueness of the term “justice,” which leaves open the question of *how* wealth, opportunities, and privileges should be distributed. The *Social Work Dictionary* defines social justice as an “ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits.”³ Here, there is a suggestion that social justice is a utopian or unattainable idea, as indicated by the use of the word “ideal.”

There is also a vagueness in the central term of the definition: “same.” Does treating people the “same,” require “equality” or “equity”? A common internet meme points out the difference between the two.⁴ In each of two side-by-side frames, three people try to look over a fence to watch a baseball game. On the side that says, “EQUALITY,” all three stand on crates of the same height. Because the three people are of different heights, one person can see over the fence from a high angle, one can just see over, and one cannot see over at all. On the “EQUITY” side, on the other hand, the crates have been reallocated. The tallest person has no crate, the

¹ See, e.g., Frederking, *Reconstructing Social Justice*, 1 (“The rhetoric of social justice is commonplace, but increasingly it means little more than a tag line or a punctuation point.”)

² *Oxford Dictionary of English*.

³ Burkemper and Stretch, “The Right of Justice,” 1.

⁴ Gutoskey, “What’s the Difference?”

middle person has one, and the shortest person has two, creating a situation in which they all can see over the fence from the same height. The point of the illustration is that equality has to do with giving everyone the exact same resources, regardless of need, while equity involves distributing resources based on the needs of the recipients.

In a nation such as the United States, with an entrenched and continuing history of discriminatorily distributing and restricting resources, opportunities, and rights—including the right to live, free of genocidal, racist, sexist, and anti-LGBTQ violence—social justice must seek equity, not equality, if it is to overcome those actions. This cultural specificity is necessary to ground social justice. Researchers doing a cross-cultural analysis of social justice in Health and Physical Education found differences in what social justice meant based on the society. In the more racially homogenous Sweden, for example, social justice is “related to social welfare policies involving public health, democracy, and solidarity.” But in the colonized and racially stratified New Zealand, social justice is “focused on addressing neocolonial disparities, ethnic and cultural marginalization and privilege.”⁵

Educational equity scholar Lee Anne Bell writes that social justice entails “a world in which the distribution of resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable, and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure, recognized, . . . treated with respect [, and] both self-determining (able to develop their full capacities) and interdependent. . . .”⁶ I find this definition’s contribution of safety, security, and self-determination to be valuable. Building on these definitions, in the workshop I give this statement on my working definition of social justice:

I define social justice, for the purpose of this workshop, as comprising efforts to end inequities created by the seeking, exerting, or maintaining of power by one demographic group—whether distinguished by race, ability, gender, sex, sexual orientation, class,

⁵ Schenker et al., “Conceptualizing Social Justice,” 136.

⁶ Bell, “Theoretical Foundations,” 3.

citizenship status or other demographic category—over another, *and* to create a society that is actively committed to continuously creating conditions in which everyone can fully find, exercise, and own their own freedom.

Freedom itself is a slippery term. As historian Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatscheni writes, “Any attempt to coin a generic meaning of freedom is a futile exercise as it means different things to different people across space and time.”⁷ In the South African context about which he writes this, throwing off colonial rule and ending apartheid resulted in juridical (legal) freedom such as the right to vote and emancipation from discriminatory laws. But with nothing to address the poverty Black⁸ citizens were left with in the wake of apartheid or other radical restructurings of society, “[t]hose who fought for the liberation of South Africa from the vicious apartheid colonialism

⁷ Ndlovu-Gatscheni, *Coloniality of Power*, 81.

⁸ Throughout this paper, I capitalize “Black” when, as *Columbia Journalism Review* states, “referring to groups in racial, ethnic, or cultural terms,” but I do not capitalize “white.” (Laws, “Why We Capitalize ‘Black.’”) I have long observed this convention. It is the preferred writing of racial justice advocates I followed and knew, and it felt vaguely like a small elevation of Blackness in a society in which it is so often denigrated.

But there are questions about whether we should capitalize “white” as well. In the wake of the protests after the death of George Floyd, many news organizations began capitalizing “Black,” while continuing to not capitalize “white.” The *Columbia Journalism Review* gives this rationale: “For many people, *Black* reflects a shared sense of identity and meanings; capitalizing [“white”] in this context risks following the lead of white supremacists.” (Laws.) Similarly, the AP announced, “people who are Black have strong historical and cultural commonalities That includes the shared experience of discrimination due solely to the color of one’s skin. . . . [C]apitalizing the term white, as is done by white supremacists, risks subtly conveying legitimacy to [white supremacist] beliefs.” (Daniszewski, “Why we will lowercase white.”)

The National Association of Black Journalists, however, recently advised capitalizing “White” and “Brown,” in addition to “Black.” (Stewart, “NABJ Statement on Capitalizing.”) Legal scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah says that since “Black” and “White” are both constructed categories, they should be treated the same and both capitalized. (Appiah, “The Case for Capitalizing.”) A serious concern is that not capitalizing “white” allows white people to see ourselves as unraced, and that we should capitalize “White” so we too have to deal with being racialized. “No longer,” says a *Washington Post* columnist, “should white people be allowed the comfort of this racial invisibility; they should have to see themselves as raced.” (Painter, “Why ‘White’ Should Be.”)

These are compelling arguments. But the issue is not settled. The writer of *The Diversity Style Guide* wrote, “When I looked to other experts for guidance, the advice was contradictory.” Ultimately, she characterized her decision to capitalize both “Black” and “White” as “a judgment call,” and “a tough decision, one that literally kept me up at night.” (Kanigel, *The Diversity Style Guide*, 4.) While the debate is ongoing, for now I will continue with the convention that I have understood to be a sign of respect for Black people and experience that does not simultaneously risk valorizing whiteness: capitalizing “Black” and not “white.”

found themselves celebrating not freedom and independence but democracy.”⁹ A similarly flawed conflation of freedom with democracy could be said to have played out in the U.S.¹⁰

There are also the perversions of the term freedom, in which people proclaim it as an unfettered ability to do anything they want, regardless of the impact on anyone else. In the U.S. context, this can be seen in Second Amendment extremists who believe there should be no limit on possession of weapons of war such as semiautomatic weapons, despite the centuries of Supreme Court decisions limiting the freedoms of other Constitutional amendments, such as the First Amendment right to free speech. (We all know, for example, the Constitution does not protect one’s right to yell “fire” in a crowded theater.) As the trope often attributed to U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., goes, “The right to swing my fist ends where the other [person]’s nose begins.” Here, I include, “find, exercise, and own their own freedom” to stand for the proposition of continually creating and recreating the *conditions* that allow everyone to fully live their most meaningful lives.

The other term(s) requiring definition is/are “dance”/ “movement.” This thesis paper is for a Dance MFA. I am a dancer-choreographer. And yet, when I talk about the *Moving New Futures* workshop, I generally call it a *movement* workshop, not necessarily a *dance* workshop. As a researcher/practitioner, I understand there can be various understandings of what dance is and isn’t—often around specific ideas of techniques and standards and performance and being watched and judged—that immediately come to people’s minds. As a result, I believe *movement*, as opposed to *dance*, sounds less specialized and thus less intimidating. I also think using the term

⁹ Ndlovu-Gatscheni, *Coloniality of Power*, 73.

¹⁰ “To celebrate freedom and democracy while forgetting America’s origins in a slavery economy is patriotism à la carte. Perhaps no statistic better illustrates the enduring legacy of our country’s shameful history of treating black people as sub-citizens, sub-Americans, and sub-humans than the wealth gap. Reparations would seek to close this chasm.” (Coates, “The Case for Reparations.”)

“movement” is important because it is broader than dance, so it can encompass things happening in our bodies that we are not necessarily doing as art or a form of expression.

At the same time, I would like to see a broader conception of what *dance* is and hope this workshop might have the potential to help create that broader meaning. The workshop is an opportunity to explore dance, to take from Prof. Michael Kliën, not only as a visual art form to be watched and performed, but also as a non-visual embodied practice experienced by the people doing it (and that may, in turn, impact other people through non-visual means).

Chapter 1: Rationale

The *Moving New Futures* workshop comes most directly from two sources: one, the imagination necessary to be an abolitionist—to imagine a world without prisons—and two, the continually emerging evidence of the role our entire bodies play in thought and the information they contain. Those two things came together to inform the work, however, within a broader, existing desire to find the best way to combine social justice work and dance.

I undertook an MFA to find the best way for me to bridge my dual, parallel backgrounds in dance and social justice work. Since adolescence, I have been on two primary life paths, running sometimes concurrently and sometimes separately. I started dancing in my basement watching music videos on MTV, BET, and VH1 when I was 12, continuing through high school. I have been focused on social justice since at least age 14, when I helped organize a protest in response to the Rodney King verdict. In college, I put together an interdisciplinary major called “Race, Gender, and Sexuality in U.S. Society,” while also taking dance classes, choreographing, and performing. After graduating, I was primarily a dancer and choreographer for about a decade. Then, over the course of another decade I became a policy advocate, then a political staffer, then a legislative staffer, and ultimately a civil rights lawyer.

With the interdisciplinary dance MFA, I sought to combine these two things in the most effective way for me. I say *for me*, because there is a long history of dancers and choreographers doing social justice work with their art. Many choreographers have tackled social justice issues on stage. Pearl Primus choreographed and performed the solo *Strange Fruit* (1943) to draw attention to the personal and community devastation caused by the racial terror lynchings of over 4,000 Black people between the 1877 end of Reconstruction (which included the removal of

federal troops from the South) and 1950.¹¹ “Dance,” Primus said, “is the fist with which I fight the sickening ignorance of prejudice.”¹²

Donald McKayle’s *Rainbow ’Round My Shoulder* (1959) addressed the plight of men on a chain gang. At the end of a suite of dances exploring their pain, hopes, and dreams, the audience hears gunshots and witnesses the dramatized death of one of the dancers to lyrics including, “They killed another man. He had a long chain on.”¹³ It could easily be about mass incarceration and police violence today.

In *Not About Iraq* (2007), Victoria Marks responded to the Iraq War and the dishonesty of political leaders and news agencies. She hoped to offer a “solution” of cutting through the misinformation to help people understand the “moral imperatives” we faced. It ends with a dancer backing away from the audience, repeating, “You know what this is. You KNOW what this is. You KNOW what this is.”¹⁴

I have created stage works designed to address specific injustices as well. In 2006, in response to the U.S.’s use of “extraordinary rendition” to disappear people from places like Iraq and Afghanistan, and the revelations of torture at places like Abu Ghraib, I choreographed a solo called, “What happened to our rhythm? (Guantanamo Stomp).”¹⁵ The piece started as a relatively straightforward hip hop-modern solo, danced to one 4-minute-and-32-second song, “Hot Night” by Meshell Ndegeocello and Talib Kweli. After about 3 minutes, however, a man came onto stage, handcuffed me behind my back, shackled my ankles, put a hood over my head, and left. For about the last minute of the piece, I remained on stage, at first moving restrictively within the

¹¹ Equal Justice Initiative, “Lynching in America.”

¹² Strother, “Performing/Performative Activism,” 142.

¹³ McKayle, *Rainbow ’Round My Shoulder*.

¹⁴ Marks, “About *Not About Iraq*,” 225-26.

¹⁵ I use “disappear” here as an intransitive verb describing abduction or murder, most often seen used in relation to Argentina’s “Dirty War.” (Tondo and Goñi, “Argentina Sends Out DNA Kits”; *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*.)

constraints and ultimately just breathing heavily under the hood, facing the audience until the music ended and the lights went out.

My intent was to dramatize the experience of being abducted by a foreign military during the course of one's daily activities. I have no idea if this was conveyed, however, or if it created an impact in people watching that led to any change. Jay (formerly John) Jordan or JJ, co-founder of the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, which brings together artists and activists for radical "experiments,"¹⁶ notes a 1758 letter by philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau stating about theater, "In giving our tears to these fictions, we have satisfied all the rights of humanity without having to give away anything more of ourselves." What Rousseau was saying, Jordan writes, "was that we were letting the audience experience a kind of public virtue and ignoring it in their everyday life."¹⁷ Such an endeavor risks doing more harm than good, in that it can give an audience a sense of being virtuous just by witnessing and experiencing emotions; this sense, in the worst case scenario, lets them off the hook of *doing* something about the issue portrayed.

Others have questioned, for culturally specific reasons, the political utility of activist stage choreography. Performance studies scholar Anna Jayne Kimmel notes her college dance history students wondered "if visual presentation could actually effect justice, or if it was only ever just performance whose reference to violence merely repeated trauma."¹⁸ "Created and performed in a nation founded on disappearing histories of violence, however," she posits, "perhaps it's enough for this performance to amplify the impact of harm and the experiences of those responsible."¹⁹ Certainly "those responsible" fear the power of works on stage to threaten

¹⁶ Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, "Who." I have reproduced here exactly the way Jordan writes their name in the bio on the website: "Jay (formerly John) Jordan or JJ."

¹⁷ Partridge, *Blackness*, 127.

¹⁸ Kimmel, "Sorry/Please/No," 113.

¹⁹ Kimmel, 113.

the status quo. Concerts were cancelled due to Primus's political works, particularly *Strange Fruit*, and people picketed her shows in the Midwest.²⁰ Whatever the potential power of work for the stage, for my own endeavors, I came to the MFA program looking for a more direct nexus between the dance and the problem to be addressed.

Groups and individuals have also used dance as direct-action protest, with multiple aims. During the Black Lives Matter protests after the murder of George Floyd, a number of dances by protesters went viral. Jo'Artis (Big Mijo) Ratti, one of the creators of krumping, danced in silence facing a line of Santa Monica police in an act of defiance and resistance.²¹ Protesters danced the Cupid Shuffle in multiple cities.²² The line dance song's lyrics give easy directions (e.g. "to the left, to the left, to the left, to the left / to the right, to the right, to the right, to the right") that make joining in easy, with the result of unifying those present. Other lyrics—"I just let the music come from my soul / So all of my people can stay on the floor"—can alternately be read, in the context of protest, to inspire staying in a joyful place or staying in a fight.²³

Or both, as cited by protesters. Brandy Factory, a founding member of Upset Homegirls in Fullerton, California, said "It's important, even in all that bad space, to bring all of that goodness. Because you can't fight anything without love and I think there's a lot of love that's rooted in Black joy."²⁴ In New Zealand, protesters performed the *haka*, "a traditional Māori war dance" that represents "strength, pride, and unity," in solidarity with U.S. protesters.²⁵

²⁰ Mills, *Dance & Activism*, 57.

²¹ Kaufman, "In Pain and Rage"; "LAPD Got Served"; Strother, "Performing/Performative Activism," 142-43.

²² Burdon-Manley, "Black Lives Matter Dance"; Edwards, "Black Lives Matter Protest."

²³ "Cupid Shuffle."

²⁴ Pham, "Celebrating Black Joy." The Lexington, Kentucky group LPD Accountability proclaimed, "Carrying the weight of anger . . . can be emotionally exhausting and physically taxing. The positive emotions we as humans are able to experience are invaluable, particularly when protesting against police brutality and racism, and therefore any moment of bliss should be embraced." (LPD Accountability, "Black Joy is Resistance.")

²⁵ "New Zealanders perform the haka"; "New Zealanders Perform Powerful Haka"; Strother, "Performing/Performative Activism," 143.

As early as 2014, founding Black Lives Matter member and scholar Dr. Shamell Bell started teaching Black social dances to other protesters in front of places like LAPD headquarters and the Los Angeles mayor's house.²⁶ "With these street dance activism demonstrations," she writes, "Black Lives Matter activists subverted and transformed spaces of control and surveillance into a liberatory space of social action and self-care."²⁷ Here, there is a tight nexus between the dance and the problem, with the dancers dancing directly at, in, and on the problem *and* for themselves. I take great inspiration from this work for the power of dance to be a radical, insurgent, and joyful act. And dance as part of direct-action protest is still on my mind as a way to combine my two worlds, even though it is not the direction in which I have gone with my MFA thesis work.²⁸

Bridging Worlds

Before talking about the backgrounds that led me to this work, it is important to state my positionality in our society and in relation to the dance forms and social justice issues on which I have trained and focused. I am a white, cisgender man born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, in the U.S. South. I attended public elementary and high schools with 50/50 Black-and-white student bodies due to a desegregation order still in place when I attended, with very little representation of other races or ethnicities. I attended a state public university for undergraduate education and much later attended an elite, private law school. While I got a great education in my public

²⁶ Easter and Saldivar, "These L.A. Dancers."

²⁷ Bell, "Living is Resisting," 10.

²⁸ For a different type of protest dance, see One Billion Rising. Since 2021, this global movement seeking to end violence against women has used dancing flash mobs in cities around the world as an integral part of its work. The first was choreographed by famed choreographer Debbie Allen. (Oh, "The One Billion Rising Flash Mob," 298-99.)

schooling, attending the elite law school astounded me with the different access it gave me to leaders in their fields, internship opportunities, and future jobs.

I now attend an MFA program at another elite, private university. In addition to Atlanta, I have spent parts of my adulthood in New York City (Brooklyn and Manhattan); Boston; Montgomery, Alabama; and Durham, North Carolina. I grew up solidly middle class, by no means wealthy but also not lacking for anything I needed. I had access to numerous channels of power and education, and models for different career paths and lifestyles. My mother is a lawyer and my father a sculptor, and both were also university professors, so I had models for success in both the legal and arts worlds, and I had the privilege of feeling comfortable in spaces of higher education, having been in them since I was young. It is from this milieu that I entered both dance and social justice work.

My Dance Background

I began dancing in my basement when I was 12 years old, watching music videos on television. Janet Jackson and Paula Abdul were my first teachers, followed quickly by M.C. Hammer, Kid 'N Play, and others. This was in Atlanta before Atlanta became a hub for hip hop music and dance. In fact, hip hop was just making it into the “mainstream.” I was learning to dance by watching artists whose *interpolations* of hip hop, sometimes combined with jazz and other styles, had made it onto television.

The next year a friend in New York made me a hip hop mixtape, and as hip hop came into regular rotation on one of Atlanta’s Black radio stations,²⁹ V-103, it started to comprise more

²⁹ This was still an era when I remember a Top 40 station proclaiming proudly in their ads, “no rap and no hard rock.”

of what I listened to and more of the videos I watched. I continued dancing on my own through high school, watching videos, listening to music, and freestyling.

With hip hop being such a staple of U.S. and worldwide popular culture today, it may seem strange that I am explaining my exposure to it. But the fact was that for a white kid in Atlanta, at the time, it was not standard listening. And no one else that I knew of did hip hop or any other form of dance. My growing affinity for Black-created dance and music forms coincided with a growing concern with racial justice. I was drawn to political artists like Public Enemy who addressed white supremacy in their music. I had framed portraits of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X next to each other on my wall, and I wore Cross Colours T-shirts with red, black, and green logos and phrases like, “Love See No Colour.” I was in 9th grade (my second year in high school, because my high school started with 8th grade) when the police who beat Rodney King were acquitted. I wrote a petition to the White House and as a result ended up co-leading a student protest at our school.

As I got older, in my late adolescence and adulthood, I found myself gravitating toward Black cultural spaces, whether parties and clubs, Black arts organizations in college, or the Black Allied Law Students Association in law school. Succinctly answering the question of why as a white person this is where I often felt most at home continues to elude me. I believe I find it difficult to parse and express because, just as there is a longstanding phenomenon in the U.S. of white people appropriating elements of Black cultural production for white commercial gain, there is a parallel problem of white people in the U.S. claiming connection to Black culture as a way of proclaiming their “cool,” or even as a way of distancing themselves from, or trying to disown, their white privilege.

This thesis project and feedback from my advisors has provided the opportunity to continue to try to answer this question. My dancing started when I was around 12 years old, at a

time when I was experiencing bullying and ostracism by my white peers at school, especially by those who were supposed to be my friends. Those classmates who became my closest supporters and friends during those years were Black girls.

I went to 50/50 black-and-white elementary and high schools, and my best friend from first to fifth grade, Chris, was Black. Our schools were integrated by a system called “Majority to Minority (M to M).” So if you were in the majority at your “home” (neighborhood) school, you could travel to attend a school where you were the minority. Unsurprisingly, white parents generally did not send their children to schools in Black neighborhoods. But Black students came to schools in white neighborhoods until they were 50% of the student population.

Because of the distances involved, this meant that most friendships between Black and white students did not carry on after school hours. My parents, however, would drive me across town to play with Chris and have sleepovers. I remember the experience of being the minority and being made fun of for being white by one of his neighbors, and his standing up for me. I think such early experiences likely gave me more political attunement by removing me from the white bubble white people can choose to live in and by giving me the empathy that can be created by being the minority in a situation. On a social and emotional level, these experiences possibly led me to associate Black spaces with safety, family, and friends. (And racism was personalized for me early, as I lost my best friend when Chris ultimately returned to his home school after racist treatment by a white teacher, and we eventually grew apart.)

As a senior in high school, the first dance class I ever took was a community, multigenerational West African class in Decatur, Georgia. As has so often been the case in my life, I was the only white male present. But I was welcomed and taught, and I felt the sense of community immediately. If I think honestly about it, I cannot think of white spaces in which I have been that have created that same intentional, intergenerational, teaching-and-learning

community. So, in my life, this was a form of community-building and cultural celebration that only Black spaces (and some other mixed-race spaces as I have gotten older) have provided. This also meant that, opposite from the “traditional” U.S. professional dance trajectory at that time, I started with hip hop and gained some experience with West African and Caribbean, only later starting modern and ballet training.

After high school, I spent a year in Americorps in Boston. Black peers saw me dancing at parties and in skits, said I was good, and encouraged me to pursue it. My first classes were Dancehall Reggae and Street Funk (a combination of hip hop and jazz). I chose to spend our three-week spring externship period assisting De Ama Battle at the Art of Black Dance and Music and Adrienne Hawkins at Impulse Dance Studio. For Battle, I helped organize ABDM’s extensive text and video library, giving me a small glimpse, at the impressionable age of 18, into the breadth and depth of African diaspora cultural expression.

In college at the University of Georgia, I started studying modern and ballet, and I choreographed and performed hip hop pieces in student shows. My involvement with Black cultural groups deepened. As a freshman, I choreographed a dance for the beginning of a Delta Sigma Theta sorority step routine. Throughout my years at UGA, I choreographed and performed for Pamoja Dance Company and Black Theatrical Ensemble, both through the African American Cultural Center. Academically, I put together a major from African American Studies and Women’s Studies called “Race, Gender, and Sexuality in U.S. Society” to try to examine the workings of and potential strategies for fighting different systems of oppression, a course of study that brought Black feminist thought to the center of my political worldview, where it has remained.

Upon graduation, I moved to New York City, where I was on scholarship at Steps on Broadway and took classes at the Ailey school. My mentor at the time had me on a strict training

schedule of ballet six times a week and Horton five times a week. These rigid (to my mind) forms were not good for my body, soul, or spirit, but they did get me into a modern company, Michael Mao Dance. Every chance I got, though, I took classes with the choreographers and teachers I felt most drawn to, who were those creating contemporary dance combining modern dance and other African diaspora forms. Specifically, Ronald K. Brown and Nia Love, both of whom incorporated West African forms, including Sabar, into their work, and Nicholas Leichter, who incorporated house movement into his.

I felt more at home doing what are commonly considered Black dance forms. I use the qualifier “commonly considered” because “Black dance” is a complicated and potentially problematic term. As performance study scholar and dance journalist Zita Allen points out, the term “Black dance” “snuck into our vocabulary several decades ago [but] has remained undefined.”³⁰ As a result, it is often used to oversimplify what is seen as Black dance, labeling it with “a glib grocery list of characteristics (or stereotypes). Black dance is ‘pop’ (cheap), ‘entertaining’ (lightweight), laden with ‘political overtones’ (didactic), ‘angry’ (provocative), and loaded with ‘literal gesture, trite narrative, and stereotyped characteristics’ (simplistic).”³¹ And the term is used to pigeonhole Black choreographers. Choreographer Eleo Pomare told Allen, “I don’t think I create black dance. I think I create works that are hybrid forms of our experience as blacks.”³²

Scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild, on the other hand, identifies key *Africanist* aesthetics of dance. Rather than using them to simplify or narrow the field, she complicates notions of “Black dance” by pointing out how these aesthetics have influenced all aspects of U.S. and

³⁰ Allen, “What Is Black Dance?,” 1.

³¹ Allen, 1.

³² Allen, 1.

European culture.³³ The traits she identifies are, first, embracing conflict: “The conflict inherent in and implied by difference, discord, or irregularity is encompassed, rather than erased or necessarily resolved.” Second is polycentrism/polyrhythm: “[M]ovement may emanate from any part of the body, and two or more centers may operate simultaneously.” Third, high-affect juxtaposition: “mood, attitude, or movement breaks that omit the transitions and connective links valued in the European academic aesthetic.” Fourth, ephemerism: “‘the phrasing of every note and step with consummate vitality,’ with response to rhythm and a sense of swing as inherent attributes.” And finally, the aesthetic of the cool: which is “an attitude . . . that combines composure with vitality.”³⁴

Kariamuwelsh argues the existence of an *African* dance aesthetic comprised of an oral tradition and seven senses—polyrhythm (the motion sense), polycentrism, the curvilinear, dimensionality, the epic memory, a holistic sense, and repetition—that encompasses Black-created dance forms in the Americas.³⁵ Recognizing the enormous diversity of African cultures, she writes, “I speak of African as one speaks of Western, European, Eastern. . . . There are schools and differences among the groups within the African culture, but there is a common ground that history, race, and politics contribute to in order to make for collective expression.”³⁶ She writes in a diasporic frame, defining “Africans” as “all people of African descent,”³⁷ and

³³ Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence*.

³⁴ Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence*, 13-19. Art historian Robert Farris Thompson writes that West African music and dance have five traits: “the dominance of a percussive concept of performance; multiple meter; apart playing and dancing; call-and-response; and, finally, the songs and dances of derision.” (Thompson, “Aesthetic of the Cool,” 88.)

³⁵ Asante, “Commonalities in African Dance,” 73-81.

³⁶ Asante, 81.

³⁷ Asante, 73.

includes in the scope of African dances, “the rumba of Cuba, to the Ring Shout dance of the Carolinas, . . . to the jazz dance of Black America.”³⁸

In a panel discussion called “What Is Black Dance?” hosted by American Dance Festival in 1988, both Allen and Gottschild illuminate the difficulty of honoring cultural contributions without limiting the personhood and artistic genius of the creators. Allen does so with a question: “Even though you might not set out to create *quote* ‘Black dance,’ is there a drawing so heavily on the material, on the culturally specific material that might give it something very unique that you wouldn’t find anywhere else? And then what do you call that?” Gottschild, in the ensuing discussion, says the following when discussing white colleagues who said, “You people want it both ways”:

Of course we want it both ways. And of course everybody wants it both ways. Both ways being that yes, there are Black influences in there, and yes, it is our culture that in *some* of our works we draw upon. Though we as Americans may as well draw upon the Renaissance or 19th-century European music or dance forms, etc. But yes, we want it both ways, that we want it to be recognized that we can use our identity when we choreograph in Western forms, but we also want to be recognized as choreographers in a Western concert dance form. We are both. We do want to have our cake and eat it too.³⁹

During the summers of my New York years, I sought out more training in the bases of these traditions. My first summer I studied Afro-Cuban and Afro-Haitian dance with Baba Richard González at Bates Dance Festival. My second summer I studied dances of the African continent and New Orleans with Baba Chuck Davis, Mama Kariamuwelsh, and Baba Leni Sloane at Jacob’s Pillow. Back in Atlanta for the rest of the aughts after an injury that kept me dancing less than half-time, I still did my own choreography combining hip hop, house, and

³⁸ Asante, 71.

³⁹ American Dance Festival, “What is Black Dance?,” 19:40. The racist usage of the term “you people” was implied in Gottschild’s telling of the story.

modern; I studied African dances with Giwayen Mata, led by Omelika Kuumba; and much of my social and dance life was rooted in the city's Black-led house dance scene.

Gottschild's and Welsh's descriptions resonate for me in my aesthetic connections to these forms. In trying to write about my own experience, I also have found community to be a central theme: In West African classes I loved the wave pushing a line of us dancing across the floor together. I loved the inseparability from the drums and from fellow dancers. In Nia Love's classes I loved the high lift of Sabar and sudden directional changes and swoops into the floor, the feeling of everyone holding on for dear life trying to get through the movement. In Ronald K. Brown's class I remember the energy of the community as class would extend an hour or two extra into the night, Brown leading us in sequence after sequence across the floor as streetlights outside lit the darkened studio. At house dance parties, I loved finding an individual flow that could draw everyone's attention to my spirit, and I loved finding partners to battle and play off of, pushing each other's crafts higher.

My background in these forms is an important part of my dance and personal development. The reason I write about it in *this* paper in particular is because of the likely role it had in the understanding of dance as a radical force that helped birth the *Moving New Futures* workshop. In addition to aesthetic attributes like Dixon and Welsh identify, scholars of Black dance or Black performance—the terms these scholars use—describe other unifying characteristics directly related to the goals of the *Moving New Futures* workshop. In discussing Black creativity, Thomas F. DeFrantz frames the generating of new futures that is the core goal of the workshop: “Black creativity arises within a constellation of living that has everything to do with imagining together forward. Rewind: Black

creativity imagines forward together, arriving as a group process of reflection and rejuvenation.”⁴⁰

Numerous scholars have written about Black dance as an engine of resistance, *and/or* an engine of generation. In each case, they nod toward the power of dance to move humans forward. In terms of resistance, Sherrill Dodds writes, “[B]lack popular expression frequently operates outside the logocentric limitations of Western culture, thus offering opportunities to articulate difference and resistance.”⁴¹ Julie B. Johnson writes, “Black performance is understood as a radical act.” Of her participation in Dancing for Justice Philly’s dance march in response to the police killings of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice, and others, she states, “Embodying mechanisms of African diaspora cultural and artistic expression served as a performance/performative act of resistance.”⁴² Similarly, regarding “[e]mbodied knowledge in African Diaspora communities,” Yvonne Daniel writes, “Through resilient and exciting ritual performance, dance and music embody memory of perseverance and, in the end, inspire and support survival.”⁴³ Thomas F. DeFrantz further writes (and performs), “The people who understand any aspect of black life also understand that it is unspeakable and best expressed in resistant creative acts.”⁴⁴

But resistance is only one way Black performance operates, and to focus too heavily on it risks centering whiteness. Instead, DeFrantz and González observe the infinitude of ways Black dance exists and manifests:

performance may be resistant, affirmative, or several states in-between and simultaneously; it may underscore oppositional aesthetics or collude with creative practices far removed from the lives of black people. . . . In this way,

⁴⁰ DeFrantz, *You Have to Be Willing*, 10.

⁴¹ Dodds, *Dancing on the Canon*, 197.

⁴² Johnson, 209.

⁴³ Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*, 5.

⁴⁴ DeFrantz, *You Have to Be Willing*, 12.

narratives of domination and oppression that often circumscribe depictions of black performance arrive alongside considerations of presence and activity as their own means and ends.⁴⁵

Naomi Bragin's writing on street dance forms is specifically relevant to my background in hip hop and house. Complementing DeFrantz's and González's assessment, she reflects how street dance forms can, beyond and apart from resistance, be acts of actualization and creation that confound and overwhelm subordination, affirming fuller scopes of life: "[B]lack street dances are techniques for accessing subordinated ways of being (and knowing being)."⁴⁶

As a white person, I am very aware of the danger of reducing, or simplifying, or essentializing by writing about "Black dance." As myself, with my own lived experience, however, it would be negligent to not write here that my current work is rooted in my experiences in Black or Africanist dance traditions and communities.⁴⁷ I am also deeply aware of the fact that white people try to use adjacency to Blackness to claim authenticity or credibility, or just to claim an air of "cool." I instead describe my attachment to Africanist aesthetics because I am indebted to them for my dance and so much of my identity. I would not be writing faithfully about how my dance background has shaped me if I were not putting this credit and gratitude here. Thus, my belief in the social justice power of dance comes at least in part from the elements of what many scholars and practitioners call "Black dance" that make it a radical, resistant, affirmative, reflective, *and* rejuvenating force.

⁴⁵ DeFrantz and Gonzalez, "From 'Negro Expression,'" 10.

⁴⁶ Bragin, "Techniques of Black Male Re/Dress," 63.

⁴⁷ And, as Gottschild writes, "Until racism and white-skin privilege are no longer an everyday issue in American life, I believe that there is good reason to use a terminology of difference (black dance; black dancing body) that allows us to honor these contributions." (Gotschild, *Black Dancing Body*, 14.)

My Social Justice Background

When I began the MFA program, I thought the way dance and social justice work would work together is that I would figure out a way for dance to directly impact policy. In my experience in the advocacy-policy-politics-law worlds, I had the ability to have a direct, material impact on policy, whether through legislation, or elections, or court cases. A few illustrations follow.

As an attorney at Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), I represented people sentenced to death and life-without-parole in challenging both their individual sentences and the use of such excessive sentences in general. A win in such a case could lead not only to an individual's lesser sentence or potential freedom but also a change in the law that could lead to less incarceration in the future. At The Justice Collaborative, I worked with local organizers around the country to run public pressure campaigns against prosecutors to persuade them to incarcerate fewer people.

For the 2018 Georgia Democratic Coordinated Campaign, when Stacey Abrams first ran for governor, I ran the voter protection hotline, which took upwards of 1,000 calls per day. In responding to voters' calls, we were able to help them obtain absentee ballots, correct information on voting hours and deadlines, and connect them with county election officials to make sure their votes were counted. In addition to helping individuals, we documented the problems people faced in casting votes or having them counted, in order to build a case for reforms.

Earlier, as assistant to the director of Georgia Rural Urban Summit, I lobbied at the Georgia General Assembly. My proudest moment in that role, early in my organizing career, was coming up with a slogan that helped defeat an anti-immigrant bill. Republicans looked likely to pass a bill requiring driver's license written tests (as opposed to road tests, in which you have to be able to recognize and read English road signs) to be administered in English. There was no rational basis for the bill. It was clearly intended only to use xenophobic rhetoric to advance

partisan aims and dissuade recent immigrants to the U.S. from coming to Georgia. But the state had also just convinced Kia, the Korean car company, to build a plant there. We created the narrative that the bill might cause Kia to pull out because of the burden it would place on non-English-speaking families of its immigrating employees, using the slogan “SB 72 = Kia Go Home,” and defeated the bill.

With this background, I came to the MFA program wanting to find a way for dance to have a similarly direct impact on policy. I wanted to import models I knew from the policy/political/legal worlds and impose them on dance. But maybe, I subsequently understood, dance works more indirectly, or on a different level of experience or consciousness or society, which may be exactly part of why it is so important. Forward Together, an organization working for rights and resources for all, explains why it incorporates artmaking into its programs and actions: “Art-making is often (but not always) nonlinear, intuitive, dreamy, and aesthetic. Organizing is often (but not always) linear, strategic, shifting, and timely. These methods are complementary. Art is not watered down for political aims. Political aims are not watered down for art. *The integrity of both is essential to shift culture.*”⁴⁸ Both being essential means both have their own strengths to bring. So instead of trying to get dance to do a certain thing, I started sitting (and moving) with the question of what dance can do that these other things do not.

⁴⁸ Bazant, et al., “How to Reimagine” (emphasis mine).

Two Ideas and An Opportunity

The imagination necessary for abolition, along with recent research on the role of the entire body in thinking, merged with the opportunity to guest teach an undergraduate dance class, resulting in the *Moving New Futures* workshop.

Abolition

I had been doing criminal legal system *reform* work for several years when I was first exposed to the idea of prison-industrial complex abolition (also referred to as “PIC abolition,” “prison abolition,” or simply “abolition”) as a serious endeavor. The marginalization of abolition within progressive circles itself says a lot about our society’s failure of imagination, because people like Angela Y. Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore have been working for abolition for decades. I understood not only the possibility but the necessity of abolition when I listened to Mariame Kaba speak at a conference.⁴⁹ Now I fully consider myself an abolitionist and it is my primary social justice concern.

In order to believe in a world without prisons, one must be able to imagine outside the constraints of our current realities. Abolition inspires this workshop because it requires us to *believe in the possibility of worlds we have not yet experienced*—to imagine new futures are possible. The population of people incarcerated in the United States went from 200,000 in 1972 to 2.3 million in 2017.⁵⁰ Black people are 13% of the U.S. population but 38% of the people in prison or jail.⁵¹ This is no accident. As Bryan Stevenson (for whom I used to work at Equal

⁴⁹ “MUMI Conference Schedule,” 2.

⁵⁰ Equal Justice Initiative, “Criminal Justice Reform.”

⁵¹ Prison Policy Initiative, “Race and Ethnicity.”

Justice Initiative) says, “Slavery didn’t end in 1865, it just evolved.”⁵² Before the Civil War, most people incarcerated were white, because Black people were enslaved. After the Civil War, Black Codes were passed to enable arresting people for things like “loitering” for standing on a corner. And convict leasing was created to allow the jails and prisons to then “*lease*” these people out to do forced labor for the people who’d previously enslaved them. This variation on enslavement meant “the literal complexion of prisons changed.”⁵³

Yet many people in the U.S. who understand that the carceral state operates as a tool of white supremacy still cannot imagine the end of prisons. As Angela Y. Davis writes, “[T]he prison is considered an inevitable and permanent feature of our social lives.”⁵⁴ Mariame Kaba notes a frequent response to abolitionists is to decry the problems but argue “we cannot simply uproot the system because we don’t have polished, universalized, fully formed solutions to address the dangers some individuals, often characterized as predators, may pose to our communities.”⁵⁵

This response ignores the complicated nature of “dangerousness,” when “our society enforces . . . social and economic conditions that we know generate crime and despair.”⁵⁶ And it ignores that the current system is not preventing the feared harms, with two-thirds of those experiencing sexual violence, for example, never reporting it.⁵⁷ But it is a response that still feels nearly impossible to think outside of, because it is so useful to upholding oppressive structures.

⁵² Seslowsky, “Bryan Stevenson says.”

⁵³ Kaba, “A People’s History,” 73.

⁵⁴ Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 9.

⁵⁵ Kaba and Hayes, “A Jailbreak of the Imagination,” 23.

⁵⁶ Kaba and Hayes, 23.

⁵⁷ Kaba, “Yes, We Mean Literally,” 17.

As Kaba and Hayes quote writer and educator Erica Meiners as saying, “Liberation under oppression is unthinkable by design.”⁵⁸

Yet, Davis notes, “slavery was also seen as inevitable.”⁵⁹ And Kaba and Hayes follow the Meiners quote with, “It’s time for a jailbreak of the imagination in order to make the impossible possible.”⁶⁰ Davis, Kaba, Gilmore, and others can make the case for abolition much better than I can. But what is key about abolition for this workshop is its belief in our ability to reframe and restructure everything we know. Kaba writes:

Prison-industrial complex abolition is a political vision, a structural analysis of oppression, and a practical organizing strategy. While some people might think of abolition as primarily a negative project—“Let’s tear everything down tomorrow and hope for the best”—PIC abolition is a vision of a restructured society in a world where we have everything we need: food, shelter, education, health, art, beauty, clean water, and more things that are foundational to our personal and community safety.⁶¹

When asked what a world post-prison would look like, Angela Davis turned the question around: “My question would be: What would a world have to look like in order not to require the persistent interventions of police and imprisonment. . . . So abolition urges us to expand and make more capacious our very vision.”⁶² Seeking access to this capaciousness of vision is the heart of the *Moving New Futures* workshop.

The Information Our Bodies Generate and Contain

The second influential underpinning of the workshop is the growing body of research demonstrating that our entire bodies, not just our brains, are involved in thinking—and thus that

⁵⁸ Kaba and Hayes, “A Jailbreak of the Imagination,” 25.

⁵⁹ Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 22-23.

⁶⁰ Kaba and Hayes, “A Jailbreak of the Imagination,” 25.

⁶¹ Kaba, “So You’re Thinking About,” 2.

⁶² “Angela Davis On Continuing.”

our bodies are critical sources of information. An idea that has had a profound impact on me in my MFA studies is dance studies scholar Susan Leigh Foster's suggestion that dancing *is* thinking. Early in the MFA program, we watched a video of Foster giving a lecture in which she says, "What if *this* is a thought, and *this* is a thought, and *this* is a longer thought or a sequence of thoughts?" Each "this" accompanies specific movements as she simultaneously talks and dances across the stage.⁶³ "What if this really *is* thinking," she continues, "not the expression of thought devised elsewhere and translated into bodily action, but thinking itself?"⁶⁴ Foster explains that new understandings from cognitive studies "suggest that sensory motor feedback loops play a central role in all forms of thinking. . . . Thinking is not a process that takes place in the brain but instead is accomplished through and across the combined neural, muscular, and perceptual systems."⁶⁵ This idea was incredibly compelling to me and, importantly for the role/necessity of movement, seeing it danced rather than just hearing it discussed or reading about it helped drive the point home for me much more deeply. I remember Foster's movements, in fact, every time I hear her saying the words in my head.

Supporting Foster's proposition is the work of philosopher-linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who argue that most of Western philosophy is wrong because it is built on the idea that the mind and body are two separate entities, with the mind producing thought independently of the body. To the contrary, they argue, recent evidence from cognitive science shows reason — or, more simply, thinking — is an inherently embodied process, because of our evolution as animals, as biological entities. "There is no such fully autonomous faculty of reason separate from and independent of bodily capacities such as perception and movement," they write.⁶⁶ "Our

⁶³ I first encountered this lecture in Prof. Sarah Wilbur's "Theories of Corporeality" course.

⁶⁴ Foster, "What Dancing Does," 7:52.

⁶⁵ Foster, 8:30.

⁶⁶ Lakoff & Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 16.

sense of what is real begins with and depends crucially upon our bodies, especially our sensorimotor apparatus, which enables us to perceive, move, and manipulate, and the detailed structures of our brains, which have been shaped by both evolution and experience.”⁶⁷ In other words, our ability to reason developed alongside the sensorimotor systems that allow us to perceive and interact with the world, and there is every reason to believe they are not truly separate systems. One key result that is a deeply important underpinning of this workshop is that “[t]hought is mostly unconscious.”⁶⁸

While Foster, Lakoff, and Johnson have informed my understanding of dance as thought that may *produce* useful information, trauma theorists have been at the leading edge of understanding that information can be *stored* in the body. In recent years, researchers have documented the way emotional trauma impacts the body, and how trauma stored in the body impacts the individual, and society. Bessel Van Der Kolk, in *The Body Keeps the Score*, plumbed his medical background to describe the way trauma impacts the body and how working with the body can help heal trauma. Resmaa Menakem is a therapist working with body-centered trauma therapy as well, but he has directly applied the work to social justice ends, proposing that white supremacy has traumatized us to such an extent that we cannot end white supremacy without healing its trauma in our bodies.⁶⁹ He proposes that the trauma of white supremacy impacts three specific groups—white people, Black people, and police—in specific ways.

I question what I read to be Menakem’s assertion that dealing with trauma in the body is the *most* important way to address white supremacy (as opposed to, for example, reparations and/or other policy changes). And, as an abolitionist, I disagree that addressing police officers’

⁶⁷ Lakoff & Johnson, 17.

⁶⁸ Lakoff & Johnson, 3.

⁶⁹ Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*.

trauma and “reforming” policing will protect Black people from police violence. Instead, I agree with the “Defund the Police” movement that police departments as we know them need to be done away with, because, as Mariame Kaba writes, they have always existed to “suppress marginalized populations to protect the status quo”: “Policing in the South emerged from the slave patrols in the 1700s and 1800s that caught and returned runaway slaves. In the North, the first municipal police departments in the mid-1800s helped quash labor strikes and riots against the rich.”⁷⁰ But these concerns do not diminish the fact that Menakem’s book makes a critical contribution by naming and describing the body’s role in white supremacy and its hopeful demise.

Somatics

It is important here to give credit to a field of study in which I have negligible training but which is adjacent to this work: somatics. *Somatics* comes from the Greek root *soma*: “the living organism in its wholeness.”⁷¹ “Somatics is a holistic methodology and theory of change that understands both personal and collective transformation” as being an embodied process.⁷² Rather than adding a body-based element to another practice like psychotherapy or leadership development, “[s]omatics essentially sees the self as indistinguishable from the body. The body is an essential place of change, learning, and transformation. You can think of it as muscles having memories and tissues having intelligence.”⁷³

⁷⁰ Kaba, “Yes, We Mean Literally,” 14.

⁷¹ Haines, *The Politics of Trauma*, 19.

⁷² Haines, 18-19.

⁷³ Haines, 20.

In the workshop, I use the shorthand of talking about information in the *body* because it feels like an easier entry point for people than what would be a new term for many, the *soma*. At the same time, I nod to somatics by trying not to divide the brain from the rest of the body, telling participants the work we are doing is about engaging the *rest* of the body, the *entire* body, not *just* the brain. In other words, I try, in accordance with somatics, to discuss a mind-body-self that is all of a piece—a *soma* without naming it that.

In recent years, somatics has started to be used toward social justice ends. Staci Haines, creator of generative somatics, writes that somatics has primarily been used for healing individual trauma. While somatics is effective at doing this,⁷⁴ that work does not consider the oppressive systems that have led to so much trauma in the first place.⁷⁵ “This is a limitation that, I propose,” she writes, “perpetuates the oppression and trauma that we are trying to heal.”⁷⁶ (Resmaa Menakem’s work described in *My Grandmother’s Hands* is a notable exception to this trend.) Generative somatics, as described by Haines, is very much in line with the *Moving New Futures* workshop:

A politicized somatic theory addresses the need for deep personal transformation, aligned with liberatory community and collective practices, connected to transformative systemic change. One is inseparable from the next, and each should serve the other. We need all three to generate strong and grounded strategy, to build compelling alternatives, and to mend the deep wounds of oppression and violence. We need all three to build collective power that has wisdom, and to act and organize in accordance with liberatory values. My hope is that the use of a politicized somatics by social and environmental justice

⁷⁴ Discussing this effectiveness, Haines quotes Pat Ogden: “In bottom-up approaches [to processing trauma], the body’s sensation and movement are the entry points and changes in sensorimotor experience are used to support self-regulation, memory processing, and success in daily life. Meaning and understanding emerge from new experiences rather than the other way around. Through bottom-up interventions, a shift in the somatic sense of self in turn affects the linguistic sense of self.” (Haines, 259 (quoting Ogden, Pat et al. *Trauma and the Body: A Sensorimotor Approach to Psychotherapy*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006)).

⁷⁵ Haines, 44-45.

⁷⁶ Haines, 19.

movements and healing practitioners will help to advance large-scale systemic change.⁷⁷

As I discuss above, the idea for the *Moving New Futures* workshop came from my experience with abolition and with a more general exposure to research showing the information the body produces and contains. After facilitating the workshop many times and deciding to focus on it for my thesis research, I was directed to the work of people like Haines, which situates my work within a broader context.

The Opportunity

Those are the two major theoretical underpinnings for this research—the imagination required for abolition and the information our bodies contain. Putting them together, my hope and curiosity in doing the workshop is this: *whether our bodies contain not only information from the past, but whether they also contain information that is forward-looking and can help us imagine the future, specifically new possibilities for the future.*

Right at the time I was thinking about these things, Prof. Michael Kliën invited me—as well as everyone else in the program—to guest teach in his undergraduate “Dancing States of Mind” class. I put together a workshop to teach from the ideas that were most compelling to me. I had no idea if it would “do” anything, but it had a profound impact on at least one of the students. The student’s description of how the unconscious process of moving generated emotional and intellectual changes in them—indeed in the way they may approach their expression of their identity and the way they live their life—told me the workshop had indeed “done” *something*.

⁷⁷ Haines, 46.

I decided to continue working with it, and over the next eight months, I tweaked it as I did it another 10 times with various groups. These included my somatics class in May 2022; a pop-up workshop for American Dance Festival students in July; workshops for three groups of Duke first-years (100 students total) in the Project Change program (one of Duke's immersive orientation experiences) in August; ROOTS Week 2022, a gathering of members of the artist-activist organization Alternate ROOTS, in Atlanta, also in August; and several iterations for our MFA critique class, which included as participants members of the Dance MFA program as well as the Experimental and Documentary Arts MFA program, and professors.

Moving Towards a Targeted-Audience Workshop

I hope for the workshop to be a tool for practitioners to use in their work. (I do not intend the workshop to shift people's opinions on any given social justice issue. Abolition, for instance, is an inspiration for the workshop, but the workshop is not aimed at producing abolitionists. As I describe in Chapter 2, in fact, participants choose the social justice issue on which to focus during the workshop.)

In the workshop with Duke students, I thought about whether it made sense for the long term to do the workshop with such a general audience that is *not* already working on social justice issues. Because I ask the participants to choose a social justice issue or problem to focus on, what if, I wondered, someone decides their "social justice issue" is that white men are oppressed? Or that "critical race theory" is being taught in schools to teach white kids to hate themselves? Or that kids are being indoctrinated by drag queen story hours? Or that "the election was stolen from

Trump”⁷⁸ Would I then be helping these people process these issues and plan a course of action to tackle them, meaning a course of action that would work *against* marginalized people or democracy?

I spoke to an advisor, wondering if I was overthinking the issue, but they told me they did not think I was. They told me it was a legitimate concern because the workshop is a technology, and any technology can be used to further anyone’s goals regardless of political leanings or agenda. Around the same time, I did the workshop for a group of students at American Dance Festival. That iteration arose in the wake of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. The ADF school director, Leah Cox, reached out to the Dance MFA director, Sarah Wilbur, asking if there was a law professor who could talk to concerned ADF students about the decision’s ramifications. Sarah told her about me, and Leah asked me to cofacilitate several conversations with groups of students. We met two Sunday afternoons in a row, talking as a group about what the decision meant and what could be done, and expressing concerns and fears. When I asked Leah about doing an iteration of the workshop with ADF students, she suggested for the third Sunday I offer the workshop instead of the third conversation.

Doing this workshop with a group of people I knew already cared about social justice issues bolstered my feeling that it made most sense to do the workshop specifically for social justice practitioners. This, I felt, might be one of the things that dance could do in relation to policy and systems change. The workshop wouldn’t *directly* change policy, but maybe it could affect people working to change policy in a way that rippled out into the broader world and ultimately impacted policies and systems.

⁷⁸ If anyone is reading this paper many years from now, a search of contemporary news sources will show that these examples are common claims of the right/Republican/“conservative” side of the U.S. political spectrum today.

Workshop Goals and Research Questions

In deciding to focus the workshop's development on its potential as a tool for social justice practitioners, my primary hope was that the workshop would be *generative*: that it might help practitioners imagine new possibilities for a just society. Often people doing social justice work must spend so much time focused on overwhelming problems and how to solve them that they have very little time or space to dream about where we're trying to go, what the future we want actually looks like and feels like. If, however, the workshop did not help them immediately "imagine new possibilities for a just society," I hoped it would, at a minimum, provide a respite from the exhausting intellectualizing of problems by giving them time to engage with their bodies. Such "self-care," often made difficult by the grueling work schedule, could be a potentially important contribution to social justice work by helping practitioners sustain their work.⁷⁹

Until I did the workshop with practitioners and heard their feedback, I did not realize the extent to which I had created a false binary between future visions and present self-care, and even between what counts as work and what counts as self-care, in my mind. As reflected in participant responses discussed in Chapter 3, engaging their bodies in the workshop opened up participant understandings of why they do the work they do and how to do it in a way that sustains them. This development is in line with what Paloma McGregor, founder of Angela's Pulse dance company and the organization Dancing While Black, has said about art's role in activism: that art can be a place of visioning "without necessarily having to be in resistance to

⁷⁹ As a practitioner, I have experienced the difficulties of burnout and vicarious trauma myself. Rather than being an outsider artist coming in and trying to impose solutions, I believe my backgrounds in both of these worlds position me to address these issues in a unique way.

legislation or a set of economic circumstances. So, it brings into the movement a kernel of a practice that can be a relief for folk who are pushing for things in our communities that need change.”⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Mercer, “Inside the *Fishtrap*,” 98.

Chapter 2: Methodology

The *Moving New Futures* workshop begins with a verbal introduction and warmup, proceeds through three primary sections, and ends with a brief closing exercise. To assess its effectiveness as a tool for social justice practitioners, I gathered two types of data: recorded discussion portions of the workshop (which I later transcribed)—one in each of the three sections—and an optional post-workshop survey. In this chapter, I first discuss the movement ideas at the core of the workshop and then summarize the workshop itself.

The “Moving” in Moving New Futures: The Role of Improvisation

The movement portions at the center of the *Moving New Futures* workshop are improvisatory. My goal is to create an opportunity for movement to be driven by each person’s unique experience. This focus comes from both theory and practice. On a theoretical level, it comes from the evidence showing the importance of information created by and stored in the body, as discussed in Chapter 1. On a practical level, the focus of improvisation comes from both (1) my early experience freestyling and my understanding of the importance of improvisation in dance forms in which I trained and (2) my experience in the MFA program with Prof. Michael Kliën.

The Africanist Contribution of Improvisation: My Training and Understanding

In the workshops, I do not direct participants to move in a certain way because I want the process to be generative, for people to find their own movement within themselves. Individual

movement takes precedence, echoing *one* element of my definition of social justice movements, which is ultimately to create conditions in which everyone can own their freedom.

My attraction to improvisation comes from the importance placed on it in the dance forms in which I have trained and participated. Numerous scholars have noted the importance of improvisation as an Africanist contribution. Abby Carozzo writes “[I]n a European or North American dance context, dance improvisation is often a separate practice, a personal exploration used to gain bodily awareness,” to support a separate, later, more respected act of choreographic production. Many neotraditional West African dances, on the other hand, are defined by improvisatory “rhythmic play and ‘innovation within form’” that “not only perpetuate . . . dance traditions but also grant[] individual artists the agency to contribute to the evolution of dance traditions.”⁸¹ In other words, improvisation in these African forms is an inherent and necessary element of the forms and their growth through cultural transmission.

Brenda Dixon Gottschild writes that improvisation as part of an Africanist perspective is deeply embedded within contemporary European American popular culture, lifestyles, and arts.⁸² This contribution has deeply influenced my movement in multiple genres. My earliest dancing was characterized by freestyling, the hip hop iteration of improvising. Jump forward 30 years, and under the influence of Prof. Michael Kliën, I have explored primarily postmodern movement forms. In my current *liminal animal* performance practice, for example, I embody an emerging being, starting in a prone state and letting my movement be driven by this being’s internal impulses. I have learned postmodern movement practices during my time in the MFA program from Prof. Kliën. He has been influential on me in his use of “field studies,” which consist of

⁸¹ Carozzo, “Embodying Rhythm,” 206. “*Neo-Traditional Dance* . . . includes all dances that make use of the elements of traditional dance, but not necessarily in the same context as they were found in the traditional culture.” (Green, “Cornerstone,” 12.)

⁸² Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Perspective*, xiii.

prompts designed to help dancers unearth movements from within themselves and the social connections around them. In one, called “Necessary Changes,” we wait in stillness until an internal signal tells us to make a small change. Once we make that change, we continue with it until internally prompted to make another, and so on.

I have found Prof. Kliën’s way a very important adjunct to my previously existing movement practices. “Release the need to know, to own, to fear, to matter” is a field study prompt I have found very useful in its ability to help me let go of preconceptions of what my movement should be. I have incorporated it, with permission, into the *Moving New Futures* workshop. This has been an expansive opportunity for me in that it differs from my experience freestyling. In my earlier freestyling, I was moving in my *own* way, expressing *myself*, but within specific aesthetics (hip hop, house), and musicality was my most important impulse. I resonate strongly with this impulse of West African dance as described by Robert Farris Thompson: “In the West African world, it is one of the dancer’s aims to make every rhythmic subtlety of the music visible.”⁸³ This rootedness in rhythm has been a central element of how I have danced most of my life and continues to be one of my greatest joys when I dance.

Moving into postmodern movement modes with Michael, in which I was still improvising but not responding to the music, has been an excitingly disruptive adjunct to my work. *And* it comes back full circle to Africanist contributions. Gottschild observes, “The value placed on improvisation in modern and postmodern dance stems from the pervasive presence of Africanist improvisatory forms in American popular music and social, ballroom, cabaret, and revue dance genres.”⁸⁴

⁸³ Thompson, “Aesthetic of the Cool,” 89.

⁸⁴ Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Perspective*, 49. Gottschild states, “I am not suggesting that the postmodern aesthetic does not have other, more direct and deliberate historical roots in Dadaism and other movements from the modernist period,” though, she notes, Africanist presences “are inherent in nearly all modernist genres” too). Instead,

Directly related to my goals for the *Moving New Futures* workshop, literary giant Ralph Ellison noted the importance of improvisation to *world-making*. Ellison defined “vernacular” as “a dynamic *process* in which the most refined styles from the past are continually merged with the play-it-by-eye-and-by-ear improvisations which we invent in our efforts to *control our environment* and entertain ourselves.”⁸⁵ Improvisation creates new possibilities in the face of obstacles. In fact, for Ellison, as a part of building the vernacular, these improvisations increase democracy and become a “gesture toward . . . a perfect society.”⁸⁶

Scholar Jonathan David Jackson further affirms the world-building role of improvisation in Black dance forms, in that it reveals, among other things, “the valorization of emotion as a path toward intelligent knowing” that challenges the Cartesian divide between body and mind.⁸⁷ As discussed in Chapter 1, Susan Leigh Foster shows how *dance in general* challenges this divide, and Lakoff and Johnson write about how the *body in general* does. In Jackson’s writing, it is *improvisation* specifically that becomes especially important for this knowledge creation. Scholar of performance and street dance Naomi Bragin further argues for a more specific world-building function of improvisation in Black social dances including hip hop: that it “imagine[s] new forms of kinship, non-biological and queer.”⁸⁸ And she argues more broadly that “kinesthesia, the body’s ‘sixth’ sense of movement, is foundational to black thought and protest struggle, sustained through practices of feeling together in movement.”⁸⁹

she is naming the presence that has been the subject of “historical, systematic denial and invisibilization.” (Gottschild, 50.)

⁸⁵ Ellison, *Going to the Territory*, 139 (first emphasis in original; second emphasis mine).

⁸⁶ Ellison, 140.

⁸⁷ Jackson, “Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing,” 43.

⁸⁸ Bragin, “Black Power of Hip Hop Dance,” 3.

⁸⁹ Bragin, 2. “Street dance encompasses a transnational range of technical styles, based in collective improvisation and driven by African-derived grammars that retain in their practices and politics an alliance with a discourse of the street.” (Bragin, 1.)

Finally, scholar Fred Moten points to an element of improvisation directly on point for the *Moving New Futures* workshop. Saying that improvisation is usually understood as action “without foresight,” he points out, “That which is without foresight is nothing other than foresight.” “Improvisation,” he writes, “always also operates as a kind of foreshadowing, if not prophetic, description.”⁹⁰ This is precisely the hope for the *Moving New Futures* workshop: that it opens the possibility for improvised movement to serve as imagination of what the future can be.

The Moving New Futures Workshop

Introduction

I ask the participants to gather in a seated circle. I give them a brief overview of my background and tell them that from my experience in social justice work, it seemed that we often have to put all our energy, day in and day out, into fighting problems and don't have time or space to consider what we're actually working toward. I also note that we generally focus on issues from an intellectual or emotional standpoint but that there is evidence that our bodies actually hold a great deal of information, especially from research on trauma. So, I tell them, the point of this workshop is to try to see if our bodies contain not just information from the past but also information that can help us envision new possibilities for a future just society.

Warmup

The goal of the warmup is to, in just a few minutes, start to get people comfortable in their bodies, around the other participants, with moving, and with the space. My committee

⁹⁰ Moten, *in the Break*, 63.

member Prof. Anne Gordon, a practicing attorney who also trains young attorneys, watched an early iteration of the workshop I did with a group of dancers and noted how much more important a warmup would be for *non*-dancers to get them open to the possibility of moving. Likewise, when I did the workshop at Alternate ROOTS, while everyone present was an artist, most of them were not body-based artists. For time's sake, I had actually skipped a warmup. In the first discussion portion, people expressed their difficulty moving when we hadn't done anything to get into our bodies or the space. I paused the workshop where it was and did a warmup without going any further. Both of these inputs made clear to me the critical importance of the warmup.

The warmup incorporates various elements with specific purposes. We do breath exercises to calm the nervous system and ground people in the space. We progress from slowly rolling up and down through the spine, to gentle bounces in the knees, to letting the bounces impact our whole bodies, to walking and running around the space and going into and out of the floor. I include pedestrian movements, like letting one's arms swing in gentle opposition to one's hips (literally "pedestrian") to help people not used to movement classes feel comfortable. These are juxtaposed with movements they may not be as comfortable with in order to put them in a physical and mind state of expansiveness. So, after the gentle arm swings, we increase the twist in our hips and allow our arms to fling and slap against our bodies. While traveling around the world, I prompt them to take in their surroundings with each sense, including making eye contact, if they are comfortable, to take in and connect with fellow participants.⁹¹

⁹¹ This eye contact portion was inspired by part of the warmup taught by Monique Haley, Assistant Professor of Dance and African American and African Studies at Western Michigan University. Through Duke's MFA program, I was able to take Haley's class, Contemporary Jazz: The Diasporic Encounter Method, at ADF last summer. For a discussion of her method, see Haley, "Cultivating African Diasporic Ethos."

Part 1—“Feel where it lands in your body, and let that motivate your movement.”

In Part 1, I ask the participants to think of a social justice problem or issue of concern to them. I ask them to try to be specific: instead of anti-Black racism or the ideology of white supremacy, one might focus on police violence or housing discrimination; instead of restrictions on bodily autonomy, one might focus on restrictions on access to birth control or violence against trans people. Feedback from earlier workshops suggested specificity helped participants focus and engage their bodies more deeply.

I tell people they can focus on an issue that does or does not personally affect them, and I give an important caveat. I recommend choosing an issue that is not deeply traumatic for them personally, especially if it is something around which they have not done body-based work before. When people are not used to working in their bodies, it can sometimes be surprising how powerful what comes up is, and I don't want anyone in a situation in which they are retraumatized. Another way to think about it is to not choose something that will be too triggering. I tell them there are workshops designed to address trauma through movement but that that is not this workshop.

Not long before I created the workshop, I had been in an excellent workshop on “Teaching and Practicing Social Justice Through Dance,” taught by Valerie Winborn & Tarin T. Hampton at the 2022 Collegium for African American Dance (CADD).⁹² Another student in that workshop ended up in a very difficult emotional space, and I witnessed Winborn expertly navigate them through it, creating what appeared to be a very healing experience. The participant started out expressing anger at being led by the workshop prompts to unearth painful emotions.

⁹² Winborn and Thompson, “Teaching and Practicing.”

Rather than treating this as an issue to get past to continue the rest of the workshop, Winborn let it become an important part of the workshop for that participant and everyone else. She helped the participant sit with the emotions, figure out where they were coming from, and process them in a way the participant had not before, with the participant ending up expressing gratitude for the experience.

When I started facilitating my workshops, I remembered this moment. It was instructive for me not so much in terms of how to handle a situation if it arose, but instead in terms of the importance of trying to not guide students into those moments to begin with. Winborn is a Registered Dance Movement Therapist (R-DMT) and had the expertise to let such a moment be a valuable part of her workshop and that person's experience, but I knew mine should not be trying to do that same work.⁹³ Because I am *not* a certified practitioner of any kind of somatics or therapy, I wanted to be careful not to irresponsibly lead people into places so difficult they might get stuck in them.

At the same time, when I advised people *too* strongly to be careful about what they picked, by advising them to not pick something too personal to them, I received feedback that people were having a hard time physically connecting with the issue precisely because they did not have a personal connection to it. This is how I settled on a middle ground of saying it needs to

⁹³ The potential for such moments to arise is documented by other somatics practitioners as well. Staci Haines, for example, writes of how just letting oneself feel what is in one's body and take up the full space of one's body can have unsettling results. After telling participants in a training for Black movement leaders to notice the sensations in their bodies, let their breath drop into their bellies, center in their full natural lengths, let their weight drop into gravity and let more breath and space into their spines, "a tall, large man passed out!" He was okay, and he later figured out that his collapse had to do with this: "[B]y the time he was thirteen, he was already over six feet tall. What he'd learned growing up in Birmingham, Alabama, in his muscles and tissues and bones, was that he needed to fold in on himself and make himself appear smaller. . . . just to make sure nobody, especially anyone white or in a cop uniform, ever noticed him and decided he was threatening." Letting go of this contraction and tension had caused him to get light-headed and faint." (Haines, *The Politics of Trauma*, 215.)

be something you personally care about but that it *may* be better to steer clear of something *very personally traumatizing* for you *if you haven't dealt with it in your body before*.

I consulted with two social workers, Kadeisha Bonsu and Tria Smothers, about how to be prepared in case someone did go to a difficult place. Based on their advice, I created a “cool down room” containing numerous items and instructions for bringing oneself back to the present moment.⁹⁴ My intent in having the cool down room available was two-pronged. One, I wanted participants to be able to use it for exactly the purposes described. Two, I hoped that by knowing I had made it available, they would know I cared about their wellbeing and thus the workshop was a space in which they were safe to actually let themselves be in their bodies in generative ways.

After having participants free-write about the issue or problem for four minutes, I tell them we're going to move. I tell them I'm going to put on some music for about ten minutes, and I want them to **“feel where the issue or problem you wrote about lands in your body, and let that motivate your movement.”** I then demonstrate.

When I started these workshops, I did not demonstrate, because it is important that the movement is personal to the participants and that they know there is no right or wrong way to move. Demonstrating seemed to risk conveying the opposite of that. But doing the workshop for three groups of Duke first-years showed me the importance of demonstration. The first two groups hardly moved at all. With the third group, when we got to this portion of the workshop, one student asked for a demonstration.

At first, I resisted, for the reasons above, but then I tried a brief demonstration. The students applauded, and when I asked if it was helpful, there was a resounding and enthusiastic,

⁹⁴ A photo of the cool-down room, along with list of items included, appears as Appendix A.

“Yes.” And then this third group moved much more than either of the first two. Talking to the students afterwards, they said the demonstration was very helpful because they genuinely felt like they’d had no idea how to move in response to the prompt otherwise.

As an example of what a demonstration might look like, I might start standing, with my eyes closed. I might say I feel the emotion in the back, left of my ribs, and let my ribs push to the back left and pull me off balance and up onto my left heel. That makes my left shoulder pitch up and over to the front, I might tell them, to keep me balanced. And that sends my torso forward and to the right, my right toes lifting and my body spiraling as my torso descends, causing my left leg to be crossed behind my right. I might not be thinking about where the thought is now, I tell them, so I try to refocus on it, and this time I feel it in my belly. My belly initiates a rolling up of my torso that continues up through my chest, which pitches forward and causes me to step out on my right leg, and I slowly let the feeling settle in my torso as my right leg slides forward, pressure through the ball of the foot into the ground, to be in a position as if it had taken a forward step. I narrate all of this as I show it to them, as a way for them to understand the way I am connecting internal and external bodily and emotional processes.

I ask participants to keep in mind principles I’ve borrowed from Prof. Michael Kliën: “Release the need to know, to own, to fear, to matter. Don’t try to be creative.” The feeling in one’s body, I tell them, may motivate them to lie on the floor for the whole 10 minutes, and that’s totally fine. I suggest people keep their eyes closed, for two reasons: (1) many people find having their eyes closed can make it easier to focus internally on their bodies and (2) knowing everyone else’s eyes are closed makes many people feel safer and more secure, because they don’t feel like they’re being watched or judged. I also let them know I won’t really be watching them. I will periodically look around the room to get a “temperature check” to make sure everyone seems

okay, but I'm not concerned with or even interested in any individual's movement. It is about them having an exploratory experience with themselves.

It was one of the Duke first-years that led to my request that people close their eyes *for the sake of their fellow participants*. I had already been suggesting people close their eyes, for both of the reasons noted in the instructions above, but it went from *suggestion* to *request* in response to one of the Duke first-years. Once I gave the suggestion, they asked if we could agree as a group to all keep our eyes closed so everyone would feel less self-conscious and safer. I am very grateful to that student for their request and have implemented it since then.

I leave the practice loosely bracketed at 10 minutes then slowly fade the music and ask participants to return to a seated circle. I ask them to free write about their experience, and then we discuss the experience as a group in a very open-ended way. *What was the experience like for you? What surprised you? What didn't surprise you? What physical feelings came up? What emotions? What thoughts? Were there different things that arose from writing and from moving?*

The goal of the discussion is to create an environment of mutual reflection on the experience. Putting the experience into words is an opportunity to deepen understanding of the experience and its potential usefulness (or not) in participants' work. As will become apparent in Chapter 3, the discussion portions helped create a communal experience from the individual experiences, with hearing about others' experiences helping participants better understand their own experiences and the relationship of those experiences to their work. Discussion also provided me the opportunity to assess the usefulness of the workshop. I tell participants, *This is an experiment. So if you're like, "What the hell was that?," or "I didn't feel anything at all," I want to know that as well.*

Part 2—“How would your body move in that world?”

I tell the participants I'd like them to imagine that the problem or issue they wrote about is not a problem or issue. Maybe it's no longer a problem or issue, or maybe it never was. The point is that it doesn't exist. That doesn't mean we live in a utopia, but it means this one issue or problem is not an issue or problem. “How,” I ask them, “would your body move in that world?” Critically, I tell them they don't have to figure out how to *solve* the problem. I'm going to put on music for another about 10 minutes, I tell them, and I'd like them to try to experience ***How would your body move in that world?***

There are a few important notes about the development of the language I use in this prompt. Originally, I said something closer to, “Now I would like you to try to move as if the problem or issue you wrote about *is completely solved or resolved*. . . . How would your body move in the world if that issue or problem *no longer* existed?” (emphasis added) I worried, however, that, for social justice practitioners constantly focused on solving problems, these references might make it harder for them to step out of that problem-solving mode. In fact, some people in earlier workshops asked if the prompt meant they should be figuring out how to solve the problem, and some mentioned in the post-movement discussion that they were thinking about how to solve it when moving.

Doing the practice myself, I had a related experience with Part 2. In Part 1 (*“feel where the problem lands in your body, and let that motivate your movement”*), part of my experience was as follows: I would return my mind to envisioning the problem, and small movements would come. Without worrying about how they were related to my thoughts, I would let those movements repeat and/or develop more fully. In Part 2, however, I found myself overthinking things in a way in which I did not in Part 1. I found myself wanting the movement to be meaningful, rather than just letting it come as it came and be what it was. There was a mental

interruption of the organic emergence of movement. For those of us accustomed to trying to solve these problems, it seems likely to me that being prompted to imagine a *future* in which they *no longer* exist triggers an impulse to figure out how to solve them.

This response is counterproductive to the aims of the workshop in two ways. One, it can lead to a mental interruption of the emergence of organic movement. Two, it prevents participants from experiencing what this different world might be like because they are stuck in a mode of trying to get there. As a result, I removed the temporal elements from the language and now say, “Maybe it’s no longer an issue, or maybe it never was.” I also added the explicit statement, “[Y]ou don’t have to figure out how to solve the problem.” After moving for about 10 minutes, participants free write for two minutes, and then we again discuss as a group.

Part 3—“Travel the journey from the first place to the second place.”

In Part 3, I succinctly tell participants, “*I’d like you to travel the journey from the first place to the second place.*” I intentionally leave the prompt simple so participants can bring their own interpretations to it. I want them to feel/decide/experience what it means to travel from one to the other. In response to this prompt, one participant clarified: “It’s the ‘how do we get there?’” My response was, “It’s whatever it means to you. It could be, ‘How do you get there?’ But it’s less necessarily about that. It’s less intellectually *thinking* about how but just feeling it, like, if I start in the first place, and I end up in the second place, what does it look like/feel like to travel from one to the other?” Again, after moving, I ask them to free write for two minutes, and then we discuss the movement experience.

Closing

We close with a collective breathing exercise.

Data Gathering

In order to do research with human participants, I completed an Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol to assure their safety and confidentiality. The IRB process put me in a very empirical data/scientific method state of mind. Moreover, my background as an attorney, in which I had to support every point with a citation to case law, made me feel like I should be gathering data to prove something.

I did gain useful information from a quantitative question on the optional post-workshop survey. But as I worked with people in the workshops and typed up and reviewed the transcripts afterwards, I realized an adequate assessment must be a holistic one. This is why in Chapter 3, I speak of results largely in terms of what the participants said, in their own words. Moreover, in contrast to norms of traditional academic “research,” rather than my unidirectionally trying to extract information from participants, it became clear participants and I were working *together* to build something. This observation was in line with the realization, discussed in Chapter 1, that dance likely works in different ways from other academic modalities. It also felt like part of the remedy for what Prof. Shambhavi Kaul had flagged, when I first told her about the workshop, as its being too results-oriented.

Only after completing the workshops did I learn that this desire for a holistic assessment, along with the way participants and I cocreate the experience together with a common goal, situates my work within a framework resembling Participatory Action Research (PAR). Diverging from the positivism and notions of “objective” distance underlying much scientific

research and indeed academic research in general, PAR has been defined as: “a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.”⁹⁵ I learned of PAR at a Durham Beyond Policing member meeting, and I plan to engage it more directly moving forward.

PAR is a “family of approaches” to inquiry that resists the idea that people can be studied “objectively” as “subjects” of outsiders’ research.⁹⁶ Instead, it is an “orientation to inquiry” that seeks to work *with* others—those who might otherwise be seen as research subjects—as “coresearchers” in an effort “to link practice and ideas in the service of human flourishing.” It thus differs from much traditionally accepted Western academic research in at least two primary ways. One, it requires proximity and involvement (rather than distance) between researcher and the rest of the communities of inquiry created by the process (the coresearchers). Two, it seeks to bring its processes to bear on “significant practical issues,” openly seeking progress rather than seeking to extract knowledge without directly or immediately impacting that which is being studied.⁹⁷

At the same time, PAR has been said by some of its supporters to have a foundational tension verging on a “double bind”: “[E]ngaged researchers have been careful not to overstate their humanist struggle against ‘scientific management’ to the point of renouncing the ideals of science.”⁹⁸ Indeed, science has been critical to social progress, with some early scientists (at least those in Europe) taking on a risky and radical venture of proposing new understandings of

⁹⁵ Reason and Bradbury, “Introduction,” 4.

⁹⁶ Reason and Bradbury, 1, 7.

⁹⁷ Reason and Bradbury, 1.

⁹⁸ Chevalier and Buckles, *Participatory Action Research*, 4.

humanity and the universe in opposition of the powerful interests of the Church.⁹⁹ “Caught midway between two negative injunctions,” then, “PAR has not yet reached its full potential.”¹⁰⁰ This midway place resonates for me as I seek frameworks through which to assess the workshop’s usefulness.

A description of PAR as an “emergent process that cannot be predetermined but changes and develops as those engaged deepen their understanding of the issues to be addressed and develop their capacity as co-inquirers” resonates with my hopes for and experiences of the workshops, as participants and I have developed knowledge together in a reciprocal exchange through movement and discussion.¹⁰¹ My above description, of course, reflects an extremely cursory understanding of PAR, but finding out about it and doing limited research into it has helped me understand a broader context into which my research can fit, and from which I can potentially draw inspiration and learn best practices, as I continue my workshop into the future.

⁹⁹ Chevalier and Buckles, 3.

¹⁰⁰ Chevalier and Buckles, 5.

¹⁰¹ Reason and Bradbury, “Introduction,” 2.

Chapter 3: Results/Outcomes

The ten iterations of the workshop I noted earlier were all done before I submitted an Institutional Review Board protocol for the protection of human research participants. Once I had submitted the protocol and obtained approval, I did the workshop for two participant groups in my target audience. One was members of the staff of a non-profit civil rights law firm fighting the death penalty and mass incarceration. The other was members of the staff and a few other key stakeholders of a membership-based abolition organization. There were 16 participants total. Because we ran out of time for most people to complete the surveys in person immediately after the workshops, I had to rely on most participants to scan or photograph them and return them via email or text. This meant I received 11 completed surveys, along with partial demographic data for one additional participant. The survey itself appears as Appendix K.

In order to not make any assumptions about anyone's race or gender, I relied completely on the survey responses for demographic information, so the demographic information I have is from those completed the survey. Out of the 11 people for whom I have data, eight identified as women, two as men, two as non-binary, two as transgender, four as cisgender, and one as genderqueer. Six people self-identified as Black or African American; three as white; two as Asian or Asian American; one as Indigenous, American Indian, or Alaska Native; one as Latinx, Latina, Latino, or Hispanic; and one as "another race, ethnicity or origin." Six people self-identified as queer, four as straight/heterosexual, two as lesbian, one as pansexual, one as bisexual, and one as asexual. Four said they were 21-30 years old, four said 31-40 years old, two said 41-50 years old, and one said 61-70 years old. The periods of time they had worked professionally in social-justice oriented roles ranged from two to 40 years, and the periods of time they had been involved in social justice movements outside of a professional setting were a little

higher, ranging from five to 43 years. Charts displaying this demographic data appear as Appendices C-I.

To assess the usefulness of the workshop to social justice practitioners, I asked both qualitative and quantitative questions in the post-workshop survey. On the quantitative side, I asked participants to rate, on a number scale, several statements about the workshop's effectiveness and relevance to their work. The responses were positive and affirming, but the limited sample size diminishes their utility as data. Still, they support the proposition of the workshop as a useful endeavor. These quantitative responses appear as Appendix J. Answers to the qualitative questions, which covered topics such as what felt helpful and unhelpful to participants; whether emotions or ideas arose that surprised them; and how their responses to the three parts differed, are incorporated into "Participants' Experiences of the Workshop in Their Own Words," below.

Issues on Which Participants Focused

Issues on which participants focused in the workshop, as ascertained from the discussions and the post-workshop surveys, included the incarceration aspects of surveillance; food insecurity, especially for Indigenous people; police brutality; young people, especially queer people, limited by different forms of oppression; detention and in-school suspension as preparation for jail and prison; carceral elements of legal guardianship for disabled and mentally ill adults; solitary confinement; sentencing children to die in prison; wrongful incarceration; intentional difficulty of communicating with incarcerated people; state and personal failures to protect vulnerable people from COVID-19; biometric tracking; focus on punishment instead of solving root problems; and sexual violence against racially marginalized groups.

Participants' Experiences of the Workshop in Their Own Words

I believe what participants said in discussions and the surveys simultaneously demonstrates both the need for and the effectiveness of the workshop. Below, I have grouped statements from the discussions and surveys into several themes. Because of time constraints, I only got to do Part 3 of the workshop with one of the two groups. Thus, most of what is discussed below is about Parts 1 (*Where does the problem land in your body? Let that motivate your movement.*) and 2 (*The problem doesn't exist. How would your body move in that world?*). After those portions I briefly discuss the results of Part 3 (*Move the journey from the first place to the second place.*).

Literal Movements

One thing that arose that was perhaps not surprising was that literal movements were a way people connected to the issues. About Part 1 (*Where does the problem land in your body? Let that motivate your movement.*), a participant said, "I think something that was interesting for me was the issue I was thinking of was confinement, and so a lot of my movements were very confined, which sounds ridiculous, but I felt like I was struggling to do any bigger movements, like it felt like it was very confined to myself." Another said, "That's why I was running in place. I'm free. I got to go. Run Forrest, Run!"

The Transformative Power of Movement

My hope that engaging one's entire body would have power to transform one's relationship to an issue was borne out. About Part 1 (*feel the problem*), one person said,

“Transitioning from writing to moving felt like everything was in my head and in my throat, and then it was cascading down to the rest of my body.” About the entire workshop, another said, “How in touch I am with my grief and joy, how many different bodily sensations I had, in allowing myself to feel, surprised me.”

Specifically, as I hoped, Part 2 (*The problem doesn't exist. How would your body move in that world?*) in particular did have a transformative effect for people. “[I]mmediately,” one participant said about Part 2, “when you . . . said the prompt, I had . . . anxiety or stress of like, ‘I don’t know what to do with that, I don’t even know how to imagine that,’ it started stressing me out immediately. And then as I kind of got into the movement . . . , I just noticed it was a lot lighter than my previous [Part 1] movement, it was a lot less confined, there was a lot more movement.” Another said, “[T]o me it was freeing. Like a bird released from a cage and saying go.”

A third person, about Part 2, said something particularly affirming of the workshop’s usefulness: “I enjoyed it. I needed the opportunity to experience that freedom without trying to solve it.” As I wrote about in Chapter 1, one of my hopes for the workshop was that people who spend all their time focused on problems and how to solve them might get some space they don’t usually have to imagine where they’re, or we’re, trying to go. The Part 2 prompt is designed to provide that space, so it was very affirming and encouraging to get this person’s response.

Surprising, Nuanced Results from Parts 1 and 2

While Part 2 often allowed people a freedom for which they were grateful, the idea of Part 1 (*feel the problem*) being heavy and Part 2 (*problem doesn't exist*) being light was not nearly so clear cut across the board, and that produced some very interesting results.

Part 1 as Helpful or Empowering

One was that Part 1 (*feel the problem*) could in itself sometimes be a positive, empowering experience that generated new relationships to the issues. Even though Part 1 was focused on the *problem*, the bodily engagement it prompted felt helpful and positive. One participant reflected, “I felt tension releasing . . . [I]t felt good to . . . think about the work in a new, creative, and imaginative way even if it was emotional.” Another said the process helped show them the issues they needed to deal with: “[I]t felt like the opposite of what I normally do, which is that I become very still and try to swallow it.” Similarly, another person said moving showed them how angry they were, when, without being “forced into action . . . , I don’t think I would have sensed that, I think I would have let it keep being like a logic problem that I intellectualize” and didn’t feel. One person who said the issue they chose often makes them feel powerless said they started in postures of powerlessness but “suddenly I was led to this posture where I felt like I actually do have that power . . . and just put enough energy to move through.” Similarly, another participant said, “I felt like my brain was intellectualizing, it was just like, ‘grief, things are bad, things are bad,’ and ‘we aren’t going to make it,’ and then my body was like, “If you want to make it, you have to look up and be the thing that you’re fighting for. . . .” They saw trees out the window waving in the wind despite the harm humans do to the natural world, and they started following that movement.

Part 1: The Body as Resistor

The last quote above hints at a specific phenomenon that arose in multiple people in Part 1 (*feel the problem*). Several participants’ bodies spontaneously resisted the oppression of the issues on which the participants were focusing, against the participants’ intellectual intent. One person was focusing on “the incarceration aspects of surveillance of our lives.” They started

moving in a very restricted, subjugated way, with one hand feeling like it was tied behind their back and “in this motion which felt like picking cotton.” They were restricted to a square foot and in a full crouch because of hiding from the surveillance. Then their mother came to them, and they felt, “I have to keep going, I have to figure out where to pull the energy from.” Their body “started resisting even the form that I was taking.” The picking became a motion of taking back. “[W]hat really shocked me,” they said, “was how my body naturally was like, I can’t actually stay in this form, like I need to be bigger and wider and taking up more space and so I kind of ended with . . . just . . . taking up more space.” Important in this last statement is that their body was giving them information on which they felt like they could act. This speaks to me of the importance of engaging the body to imagine new ways to move in the world, new solutions to problems.

The next person to speak described a similar experience. In response I said, “It feels like in both cases y’all’s bodies were like, ‘Nope.’ Like, ‘I have more agency over this.’ Does that sound right?” This second person replied, “Yeah. But not even an intent. It’s like a, “I need to move, right now.” The way I heard this is that their bodies were taking action to move them towards a better place, against conscious, intellectual thought to the contrary.

Part 2 Was Not Inherently or Exclusively Positive

Another surprise was that Part 2 (*problem doesn’t exist*) was not exclusively positive. For some people the absence of the issue they had focused on in Part 1 (*feel the problem*) was not only freeing but also burdening. One participant was focused on the lack of communication with people in prison. “I don’t think I ever, *ever* imagined what it would be like,” they said, “if that just wasn’t a thing, so that was really, really freeing, just imagining everybody being able to use their own voices and to let light shine on everything that’s going on.” But along with this freedom

came great heaviness, “because I was like, what would we do with all of that information?” In other words, how would we address all the problems information exposed? A step in a positive direction brought with it a next phase in tackling an extremely difficult problem.

Similarly, another person at first felt comfortable sitting down and resting, but then they remembered all the other problems that would still exist, “so I just felt the need to stand up again, and start moving, and start searching, so I started turning around and searching for something else.” Ultimately the experience was instructive about how to manage the difficulty of their activist work: “[I]n the end I concluded that it was just like a cycle and that it was okay sometimes to go from feeling powerless to feeling empowered, and then sometimes you need to sit down and take a deep breath and rest.”

Part 2: Rest

This last statement takes us into another theme appearing in Part 2 (*problem doesn't exist*). One person caused the whole room to laugh when they said that in Part 2, “[t]he piece around rest . . . was immediately where I went,” and they lay down on the floor. “I was like, the privilege right now to not take action feels really good.” They described standing up at points, which felt like a kind of waking, but rather than having to rush somewhere to address a problem, it felt like, “I’m waking up and I can just be.”

Moving Toward Community

The director of the MFA program, Sarah Wilbur, who participated in the workshop several times as part of our critique class, asked if there will be a point when the workshop moves from the individual to the communal. I think it is a good question and that there are future

avenues for continuing to explore that. But something I realized in doing the workshop with these groups is it already is communal. The moving and the writing are individual, but the discussion portion is where it becomes a communal experience. This was affirmed by post-workshop surveys. “Hearing how others were processing each part during discussion,” one participant wrote, “sparked new ideas and questions—so I had more specific and more expansive ideas by the third part.” Another relayed, “I found the group reflections to be very effective. The realization that this is a collective activity is powerful. By reflecting on our individual actions, I also gained a more thorough understanding of these individuals’ identities, experiences, and thoughts. As a result, I developed a more holistic understanding of my position and society.” Perhaps even more encouraging for my hope that the workshop would be generative is that during a discussion portion, one participant explained that hearing about others’ experiences helped them better understand the reasons they do the work they do. The accounts of people whose bodies resisted the prompt in Part 1 (*feel the problem*), resonated with the limitations put on this person during their childhood and adolescent schooling. “I haven’t really thought a lot,” they said, “about how much of my own work as an abolitionist as an adult is connected back to those experiences as a child or as a teenager.”

Community also came up for several people during movement, as a solution or alternative to the problems on which they focused. About Part 1 (*feel the problem*), one participant stated, “I . . . imagined what a new way could feel like. . . . It felt like a hug to me, and so I hugged myself. Because part of what I’m hoping for, what I hope for is that we care for each other and so that was the first time I had thought about like, what would this feel – physically feel – like, not just what it looks like, but what does it *feel* like to [have] community.” Another said, about Part 2, contrasting it to Part 1, “[I]t felt like I like wanted to be open, . . . which felt very

different from thinking about confinement and wanting to be very sunken into myself and on my own.”

Another person, however, talked about a desire for community in a way that made me aware of places I need to clarify instructions or strengthen the workshop. About Part 2 (*problem doesn't exist*), they said:

I really wanted to see that world, not only in my imagination but in my reality. . . . I wanted to hug someone, physically, but I don't know I can, . . . so I touched the people in [a framed historical photo on the wall]. Also I wanted to speak with someone physically, but, I'm not sure whether I could or couldn't, so I tried to use my sign languages to speak my emotion I really wanted to have someone share with my feeling emotion during the workshop.

This statement demonstrates that I need to do some thinking about how people may or may not vocalize or otherwise connect with others during the movement. It also, however, continues the pattern that emerged of people seeking community as an alternative to problems when engaging their bodies in the workshop.

Part 3

I got to do Part 3 only with the second organization because with the first one, we ran out of time. I had based the schedule on how things had gone in earlier workshops, and I budgeted wrong, so we only got to do the first two parts. In fact, even with the second group, with whom I had budgeted much more time, the discussion portions of Parts 1 (*feel the problem*) and 2 (*problem doesn't exist*) were so rich that I had to cut them off after 30 minutes each and we were still over time by the time we got to Part 3. I asked the group if they had time to continue and do Part 3, and if they wanted to. One participant said the following, which felt very affirming of the usefulness of the workshop as a whole: “I feel like my whole day today I've been learning so much from how my body is moving through these questions. And so, I would like to be able to

try the movement because I feel that there's something that the movement is unlocking that my cognitive journeys have not defined yet.”

Part 3 (*Move the journey from the first place to the second place.*) seemed to provide participants useful information about their relationship to creating change and how change and progress happen, which I found very encouraging. Part 3 (*move the journey*) came as a surprise to some people after being “allowed” in Part 2 (*problem doesn't exist*) to not have to think about solutions. But they said they were grateful for the order of the exercises. One person described their experience of Part 3 in part as moving along a line, during which,

[i]t felt like I was getting some information and then coming back for it. . . . like I was learning that part of the solution for me is in slowing down and allowing some grace for mistake-making, and lots of reflection along the way. It felt helpful to allow barriers to be in place and not just go around them but to try and move over them, like engaging directly with obstacles but doing so with a lot of patience and intentionality felt right.

I found this response incredibly compelling, because in essence the person was saying that in embodying the journey between the first two places, they gained insight into helpful ways to do their work. The way they described it, their physical journey paralleled their activist work and provided lessons they could carry into that work. The next person who spoke built on that idea:

I was appreciating that order [of Parts 2 and 3] for the same reason, because when you go from a space where you're like, “I found my peace. I'm in a liberated world,” and then you go back out and it's a brutal world. Just my drive home is awful, [I have to watch] capitalism and urban planning that doesn't value human life, as soon as you step outside. And so it's a really dramatic transition when I go from being embodied or being in my peace, to then seeing the world that we know is out there. . . . [H]ow are we gonna move through it in a way that honors what we know is possible and also honors that we can't always move towards what's possible, like sometimes we have to move towards survival.”

Again, embodying the journey gave this person insight into how to do their work, illuminating that sometimes they can be striving towards an ideal world, but that it is also okay to sometimes just survive in order to be able to carry on the work.

In a post-workshop survey, another participant gave a more general view of the experience of Part 3 (*move the journey*): “It felt useful to be able to imagine myself in the third part of the movement where I was being in what journeying from what is now to what could be. It felt like my body was time traveling through the marathon that is trying to churn a better world into reality.” In this case, the workshop simply provided the space and prompting to experience how moving towards a better world might feel.

“What Could *That* Ripple Look Like?”

In the Part 2 (*problem doesn't exist*) discussion, one person (I'll call them “A”) said the freedom to not have to solve the problem led them to “joyful” movement that felt like “spontaneity and . . . I wanted to . . . be able to feel the possibility of transitioning to anything at any time Without this idea of sort of external labeling or surveillance or pressure, it's like you don't have to do anything, but just the knowledge that you could is really powerful.” In response, a second person (I'll call them “B”) said they had noticed in their periphery that “A” was moving a lot. “And I thought that was interesting,” they said, “because I think particularly folks of Black masculine experience often navigate the world presenting a particular way and there's no freedom to be fluid or playful without being perceived as something” (Both people were of Black masculine experience.)

“A” agreed, and “B” continued about racist assumptions that come up when someone is identified as Black. “A” affirmed again, and “B” continued, noting and celebrating the freedom with which “A” had been moving: “I was thinking about the movements you were doing and it's

like there's no judgment, . . . there's no association about what this means in relation to the identities that I hold. . . . I was like, 'A' is over there boogeying, like I don't know what he's doing!"

"A" then added something I think is very important for what these opportunities to engage our entire bodies provide: "I think contextually, . . . I've been in spaces like this and had the privilege to see Black men do movements like this and so that's a horizon of possibility that I come in with too, of just the power of having witnessed things like that." In response, another participant spontaneously summed up the potential power of this transmission of action through witnessing with: "What could *that* ripple look like?"¹⁰²

This question affirmed my hope that the workshop could have an impact on individuals that ripples out into the world and creates broader change. The helpfulness of the workshop to participants is further affirmed by this statement in a post-workshop survey: "I deeply want more of us to have practice spaces with one another to be in intentional movement where we're working through a range of what comes up in our bodies and minds."

¹⁰² This was in part, I believe, in response to my statement early in the workshop about my hope that the work with practitioners could "ripple" out into the world.

Chapter 4: Thesis Action Public Lecture-Demonstration

For the public action portion of my thesis, I live-streamed a lecture-demonstration that took place with a live audience on Monday, February 13, 2023, in the Ruby Lounge at the Rubenstein Arts Center on the campus of Duke University. In it I discussed much of what I have written about in this paper thus far. I share below the rationale for doing a lecture-demonstration, elements included to build community and send the work more fully out into the world, the way I modified exercises to create demonstration portions of the event for an audience (as opposed to full participants), and the elements of the event's structure designed to forward social justice aims.

Rationale

For several reasons, I opted not to do an iteration of the workshop itself as my public thesis action. First, the workshop is intended to be a tool specifically for social justice practitioners, not necessarily a general audience. Second, I wanted to expose the work to as many people as possible, and many people are not interested in and/or are intimidated by participating in a movement workshop. I considered an event in which some people participated in the workshop and others watched. I decided against this option because having an audience is antithetical to the aims of the workshop. We close our eyes so people don't feel watched and can move freely. An audience could make it nearly impossible for participants to not be restricted by insecurity, shyness, or the unconscious need to externally perform.

Time-Traversing, Tangibles, and Community-Building

One way I ensured the work would reach further into the world was the decision to livestream the in-person event online. People who RSVP'd for the live stream received the link.¹⁰³ In person, as people entered the event, they received a pen and a choice from among an assortment of small, decorative notebooks. The idea was for them to have something attractive to write in so they might hold onto it, be reminded of the workshop, and revisit their notes at a later date. I asked people watching the live stream to also grab something to write in/on and with. I had food catered so that people would be more likely to stay after the lecture-demonstration to talk with each other and potentially build community, enhancing the potential impact of the work.

Modifications of Exercises to Create Demonstration Portions of the Lecture-Demonstration

While much of the lecture-demonstration presented the underpinnings, development, and outcomes of the workshop, in the middle portion I engaged the audience in modified versions of the workshop exercises. I had on a wireless lapel mic that allowed me to move around freely. To distinguish between my dual roles of lecture-demonstration *presenter* and exercise *facilitator*, the I remained standing while in “presentation” mode and kneeled at the front of the stage when in “facilitation” mode.

Before going into facilitation mode, I explained we would be doing much shorter versions of the exercises than in the actual workshop. All moving and freewriting portions would

¹⁰³ In addition to the 45 attendees in the room, there were 59 unique viewers online, 27 of whom stayed on for the entire stream. (Some of these logins were multiple-viewer households, so the actual number of people watching was higher.) Viewers logged in from Georgia, North Carolina, California, Texas, New York, Massachusetts, Illinois, Tennessee, Louisiana, New Jersey, Iowa, Montana, Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, South Carolina, Mexico, and Hong Kong.

run one minute each. As much as possible I stayed in facilitation mode, but at moments I shifted out to explain, for example, “Again, in the actual workshop we would do this for 10 minutes,” or “We’re not going to go into discussion now, for time’s sake.”

For each of the workshop’s three sections, I gave the same prompts I give workshop participants, except I qualified that seated, stationary audience members could move *and/or* focus on the sensations *in* their bodies—i.e. the movements happening *within* their bodies. I hoped to give them a taste of what the workshop might feel like within the parameters of the setting.¹⁰⁴

I also demonstrated the warmup, in an accelerated mode. A warmup is something we can get so used to as dancers that we forget that people who haven’t studied dance class may have no idea what a warmup is like. So I physically did all the warmup movements at many times faster than normal speed. As I did so, I described them and described their purposes.

For the walking and running portions, I walked and ran around the room and through the audience. When I finished the warmup on stage, the audience applauded. I laughed, did an exaggerated curtsy bow and said, “Thank you. I call this piece . . . ‘Warmup,’” in response to which the audience laughed. I include these details here because I think they demonstrate how the lecture-demonstration itself became a sort of performance. The workshop is built on the importance of embodiment, so I wanted to include here how I incorporated movement into the lecture-demonstration and how that incorporation enhanced my connection with the audience.

¹⁰⁴ I qualify “seated” with “stationary,” because my point is that being arranged in an audience where, because of sitting between other people, everyone is in effect anchored in place changes one’s ability to participate fully. This is not meant to imply that merely being seated limits one’s ability to participate, which would be to suggest that someone in a wheelchair could not participate fully. In fact, the workshop can be fully engaged in by people of any physical ability or mobility level. I have not yet had anyone with a significant mobility limitation in the workshop, but I intend the workshop to be (and believe it is) accessible and useful to everyone interested in participating.

Embedding Social Justice

I tried to embed social justice into the event in several ways. One was by having a live stream so people who could not attend in person for any reason (including, potentially, due to ability) could still watch. I also made sure the live stream was closed captioned. I was told Duke's policy was not to pay for an ADA-compliant closed captioner unless an audience member had specifically requested one, but that the automatic closed captioning by the live stream provider was generally good. There is a conversation to be had here about the justice and desirability of the Duke policy on this, but the event was closed-captioned.

I opened the event with a land acknowledgement in which I made clear that land acknowledgments alone do nothing and pointed to actions Duke has been advised to take in order to support Indigenous students and communities.¹⁰⁵ I also gave a physical description of myself and the setting for anyone with limited sight capabilities either in the room or at home. I read or described what was on each slide as I went through the presentation, both for people who might not be able to see them, and because people have different learning styles—some people are more aural than visual. All of these feel like important accessibility issues to me. I did not explain why I was doing any of them, however, and if I had it to do over again, I might. I decided *not* to do so because I didn't feel like I needed to justify things that might be necessary for everyone to fully participate and enjoy the event. I did not want to sound like these were "special" accommodations for outliers requiring special treatment, when these steps should be the norm. I think now, however, that making people aware of these measures they may not have previously thought of may be more likely to build a world in which accessibility measures become the norm.

¹⁰⁵ The land acknowledgment portion of my lecture-demonstration script appears as Appendix B.

Also for accessibility, I wanted people to wear masks. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to disproportionately harm people with disabilities and people of color. While we are in a different phase of the pandemic, with more people vaccinated and less community spread, it felt to me that if I was going to invite people into an enclosed, crowded space, it was a matter of justice to try to protect them as much as possible. I asked Duke if we could require or strongly recommend the use of masks, and they said we could strongly recommend them. A large sign at the entrance did so, and we provided masks. I believe all attendees wore masks for the duration.

Finally, I ordered vegan catering. My Dad is vegan and was attending, so I wanted there to be food for him. But more broadly, there are serious ethical and environmental issues around eating meat and the way we produce meat. I felt that to create as welcoming a space as possible, I wanted to respect those who might feel deeply troubled by meat being a part of the event. While I have qualms about eating meat, I still do so, so I worried the move to exclude meat might seem merely performative. “Performative activism is a critical label that is applied to instances of shallow or self-serving support for social justice causes. The accusation rests on a distinction between what is said by supposed supporters and what they actually do.”¹⁰⁶ Performative activism can do more harm than good if used as a *substitute* for actually doing something concrete to address issues, like changing behavior. Ultimately, however, I decided serving all vegan food was the right thing to make people feel welcomed and create community, and it became a step in my journey towards being more cognizant around the ethical issues of eating meat and animal liberation.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Thimsen, “What Is Performative Activism?,” 83.

¹⁰⁷ Near the top of my current list of books to read is a book that deals with these issues by my friend Sunaura Taylor, who is herself also an artist—an incredible painter. The book, *Beasts of Burden*, according to the publisher, “suggests that issues of disability and animal justice—which have heretofore primarily been presented in opposition—are in fact deeply entangled.” <https://thenewpress.com/books/beasts-of-burden>.

Conclusion

As I concluded in my lecture-demonstration, having done only two workshops specifically for social justice practitioners at this point, I feel like it would be foolhardy and a disservice to the participants and the work to try to draw many specific conclusions in terms of the work's potential for rippling out into the world and creating policy and systems changes. For the conclusion of the lecture-demonstration, I drew out themes that had emerged from participants' responses, and I also include them here: Rest, Resistance, Liberation, Transformation, and Cycles. These words become powerful when thought of as potential prescriptions for how we move to the future.

One conclusion I think it is safe to draw because it was voiced by many participants is that engaging with social justice issues with their entire bodies, rather than just their minds, felt like it opened up new pathways for how they—social justice practitioners—deal with those issues. That to me is very hopeful and is evidence that makes me excited to continue with this work. It may be that as a sustained, repeated process with one group of practitioners (a possibility discussed below), it would fulfill my original hope of sparking imaginings of “new possibilities for a just society.” Regardless of whether the process ultimately creates these new future visions, however, it already fulfills my hope of its being a useful tool for helping social justice practitioners do their work. That is a key success. As my research continues, I hope to understand the full range of its effectiveness as a tool.

As my committee chair, Prof. Ava LaVonne Vinesett, has often reminded me, the thesis work is often just the beginning, and that is certainly the case here. The following are my specific avenues for continued research:

PAR as I Continue the Work with Social Justice Practitioners: I will continue to facilitate the workshop specifically for groups of social justice practitioners. As I move forward

with this research practice, I would like to more meaningfully engage with the principles of PAR in hopes of deepening the facilitator-participant relationship in ways that will continue to strengthen the workshop in its ability to create meaningful results.

Additional Elements of the Workshop: As I continue to develop the workshop in conjunction with participants, there are several elements on which I already know I want/need to focus. First, I would like to experiment with longer durations. Ten minutes can often be just the beginning of when people start to feel deeply connected with their movement, and I would like to see what having more time provides. Second, I want to continue to observe and figure out if there is a way for the movement portions themselves to become more communal and/or involve interaction and/or vocalization. It may be that interaction or vocalization would work against people's ability to feel unselfconscious in their movement, but the ideas are worth considering. Finally, and most critically, I need to incorporate into the end of the workshop a smaller process for participants to take with them to incorporate, if they wish, into their daily lives and work.

Collaboration with Educational Institutions: One group of practitioners for whom I hoped to have already facilitated the workshop, but it didn't pan out, is clinical law students—law students getting practical experience as a part of their J.D. process—working in social justice organizations. Considering this as a future possibility, Prof. Vinesett asked what my first year of law school would have been like if I had taken this workshop as a part of it. The idea of this workshop being a modality through which practitioners could engage with their work at the *beginnings* of their trainings/careers is very exciting for me because of the transformative potential that engagement may hold.

Codification: Eventually, after such development and after many more iterations, I am interested in the possibility of codifying the workshop. Inspirations here include Liz Lerman's Critical Response process and Urban Bush Women's community engagement processes. This

possibility may be a long way off, but I want to name it as I hope to continue to make the workshop as useful as possible to social justice practitioners.

Choreography, Performance, and Rehearsal: While I make a practice of not watching participants during the workshop, I have not been able to help noticing the beautiful and interesting movement that has arisen. As the workshops have gone on, I have begun to wonder about the possibilities for the workshop process as a basis of choreographic process. I already have interest in this exploration from some participants and am hoping to start a collaborative rehearsal process to explore what such choreography may look like.

One possibility for the effectiveness of such a process is that performances could influence audience members in ways that ripple out towards new futures. Perhaps more important than the impact on an audience, however, is the impact of an iterative rehearsal process on practitioners and their ability to do their social justice work. Damani Partridge writes of rehearsal for performance as “a key node for re-articulating the self and the everyday realities of who one, as part of a collective, might become.”¹⁰⁸ “If one is to think seriously about systematic change,” Partridge writes, “the arts more broadly, and theater, in particular, should be thought of, even in the United States, as a kind of necessity. And . . . the rehearsal might become the main site of possibility for practicing and thus realizing a new social life.”¹⁰⁹

My hope is that, through continued co-creation with social justice practitioners, the *Moving New Futures* workshop becomes an increasingly useful tool for doing the work of creating such a new social life.

¹⁰⁸ Partridge, *Blackness as a Universal Claim*, 119.

¹⁰⁹ Partridge, 119.

Appendix A



Figure A.1: Cool-Down Room

The cool-down room contained soft textures on which to rest; calming blue tones; written breathing instructions; written instructions for observing one's senses to come back to the present moment; drawing and coloring materials; and tactile elements including playdoh, modeling clay, a "pop-it" toy, and a bowl of ice and sandwich bags so one could make a bag of ice to hold, a method of bringing one's attention back to the present moment. Photo by the author.

Appendix B

Land Acknowledgement

I'd like to start with an acknowledgement of the people whose land we are on, with the recognition that in and of itself a land acknowledgment doesn't do anything. It is a starting point, a reminder, and means nothing without concrete action like reparations.

Duke's Nicholas School of the Environment has a discussion of the need for land acknowledgments and the controversy around them on its website. They cite to a column in the *The Duke Chronicle* by Duke Native American & Indigenous Student Alliance (NAISA) member Kyra Hoskin (enrolled member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee tribe), which points says that before NAISA is willing to offer Duke an official land acknowledgment to use, the University needs to take steps like the following:

- Establishing a Native American & Indigenous Studies Program,
- Founding an Indigenous Cultural Center, and
- Hiring multiple, senior Indigenous faculty to create a more supportive environment for Native students at Duke.

In the meantime, NSOE recommends using the following Land Acknowledgement, generously provided by Drs. Ryan Emanuel and Malinda Lowery of the Lumbee tribe, until Duke University completes the process of working with tribe members statewide to come to agreement on a Duke-wide land acknowledgement:

“What is now Durham was originally the territory of several Native nations, including Tutelo (TOO-tee-lo) and Saponi (suh-POE-nee) – speaking peoples. Many of their communities were displaced or killed through war, disease, and colonial expansion. Today, the Triangle is surrounded by contemporary Native nations, the descendants of Tutelo, Saponi, and other Indigenous peoples who survived early colonization. These nations include the Haliwa-Saponi (HALL-i-wa suh-POE-nee), Sappony (suh-POE-nee), and Occaneechi (oh-kuh-NEE-chee) Band of Saponi. North Carolina's Research Triangle is also home to a thriving urban Native American community who represent Native nations from across the United States. Together, these Indigenous nations and communities contribute to North Carolina's ranking as the state with the largest Native American population east of Oklahoma.”

There's also useful site — native-land.ca — for looking up whose land you're on, and they show where we are tonight to be on the ancestral lands of the Lumbee, the Chera, the Mánu: Yj Jsuwa (Catawba), the Occaneechi, and the Shakori peoples.

Appendix C

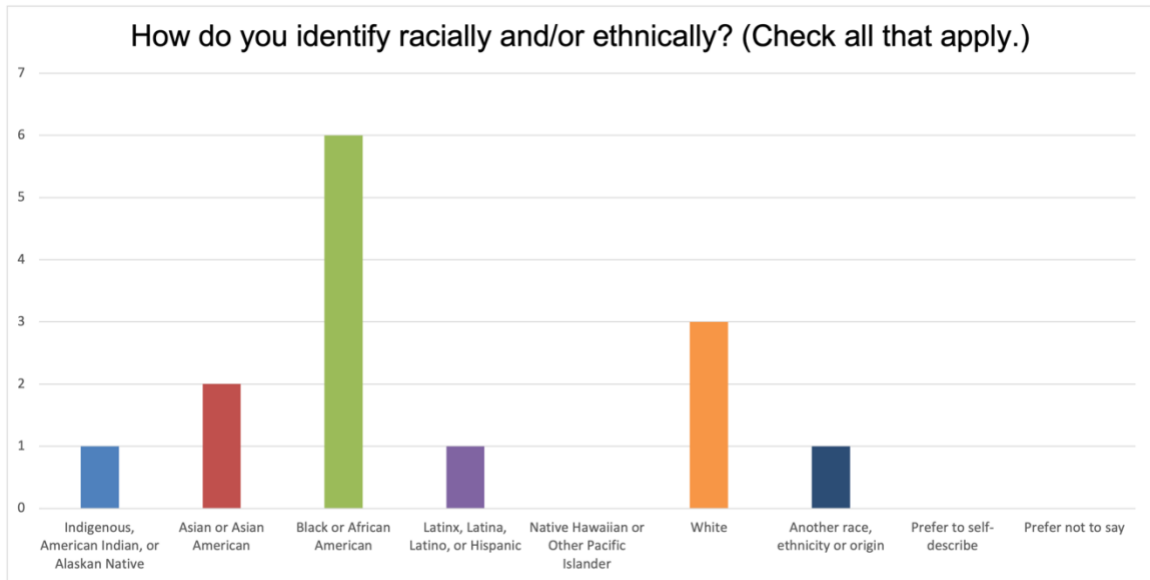


Figure C.1: Participant Races/Ethnicities

Appendix D

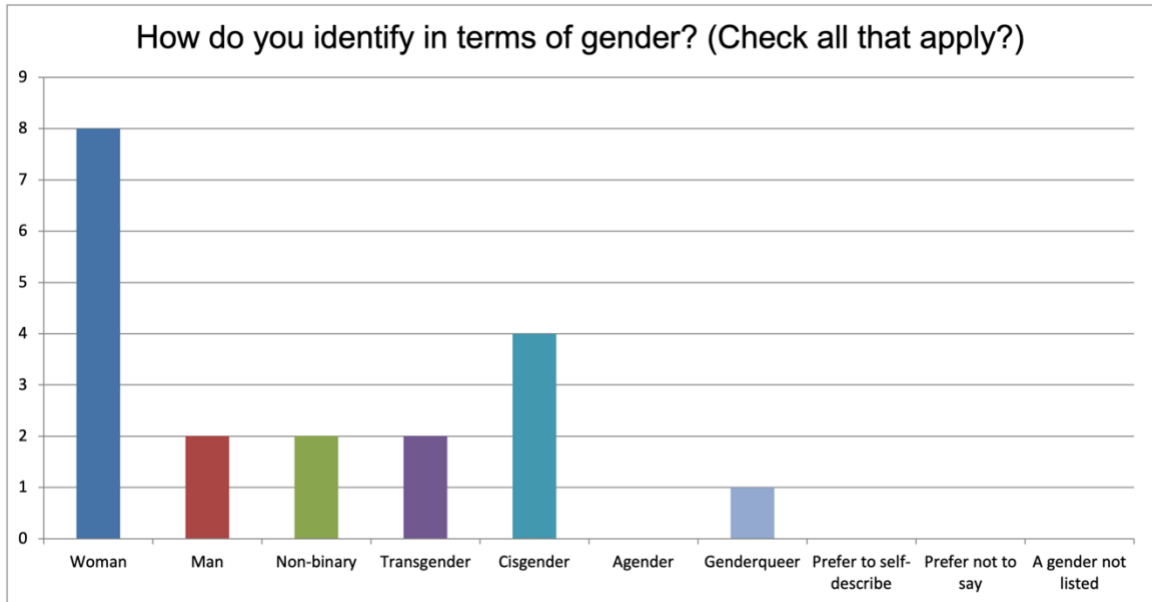


Figure D.1: Participant Genders

Appendix E

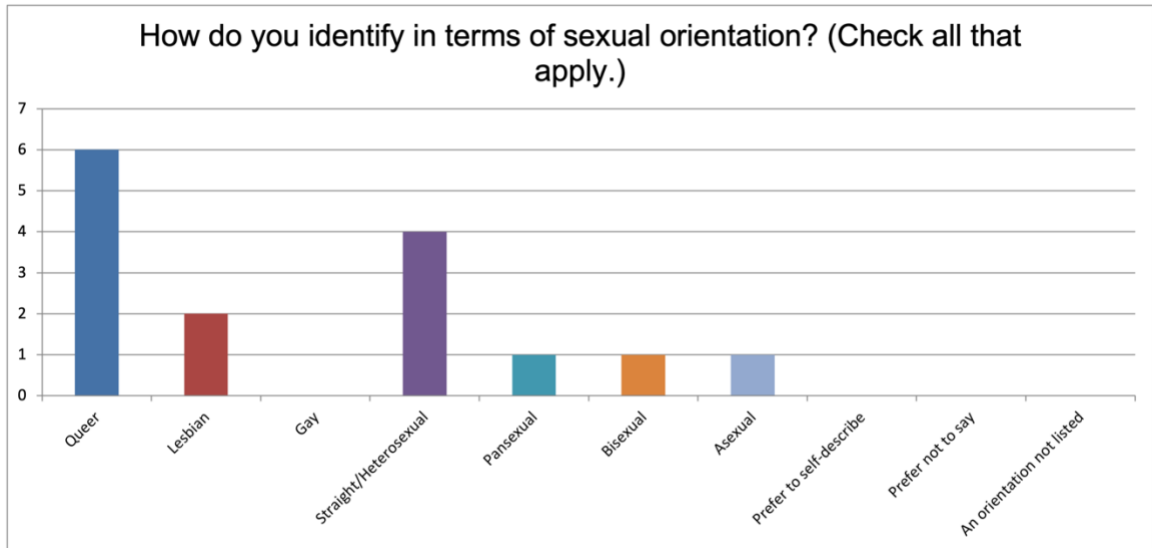


Figure E.1: Participant Sexualities

Appendix F

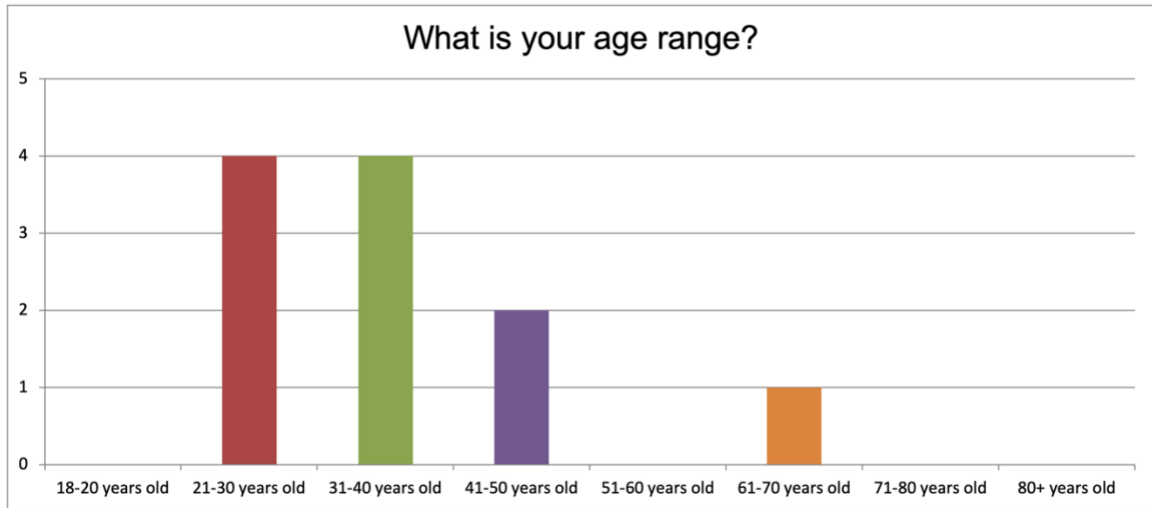


Figure F.1: Participant Ages

Appendix G



Figure G.1: Participant Social Justice Practitioner Status

Appendix H

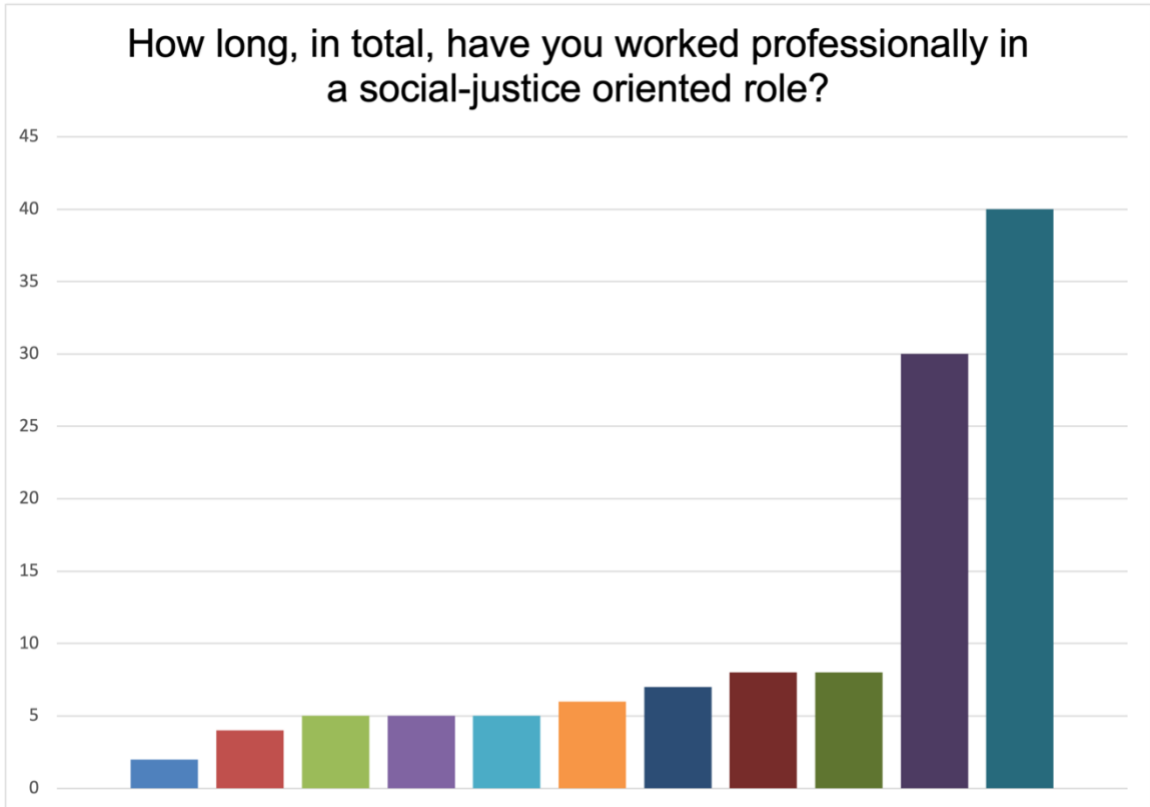


Figure H.1: Participant Social Justice Practitioner Years

Appendix I

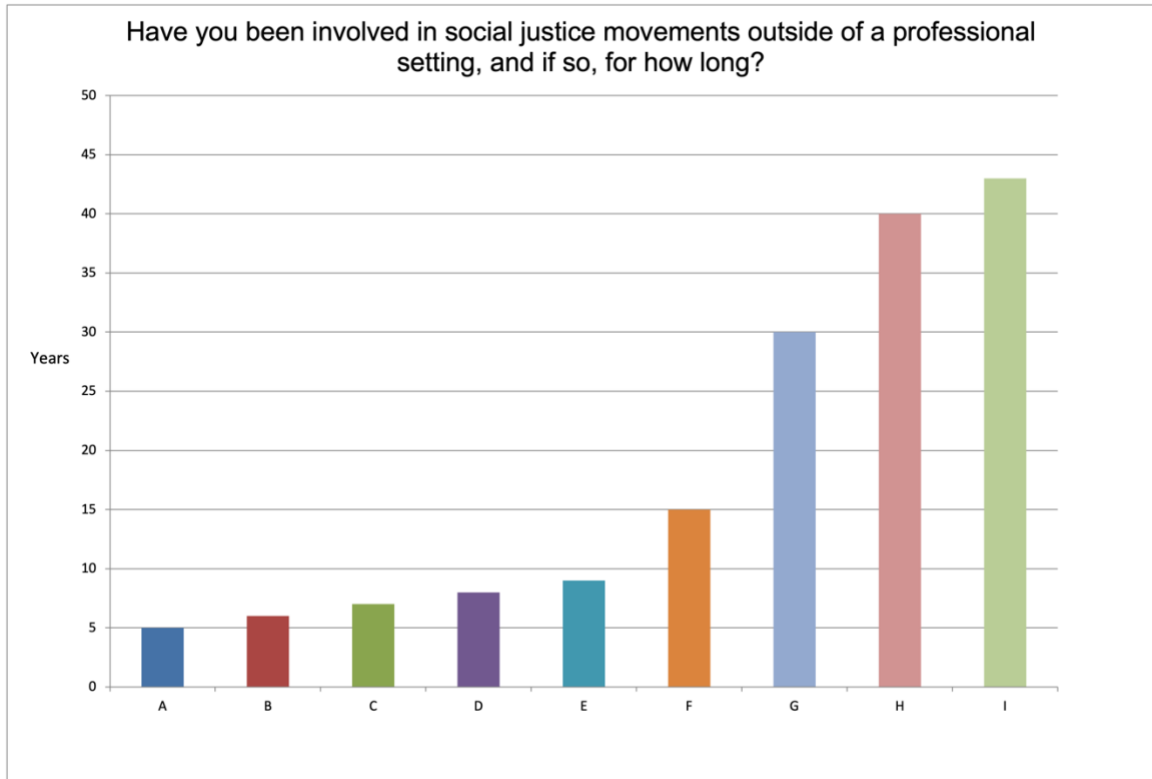


Figure I.1: Participant Social Justice Nonprofessional Years

Appendix J

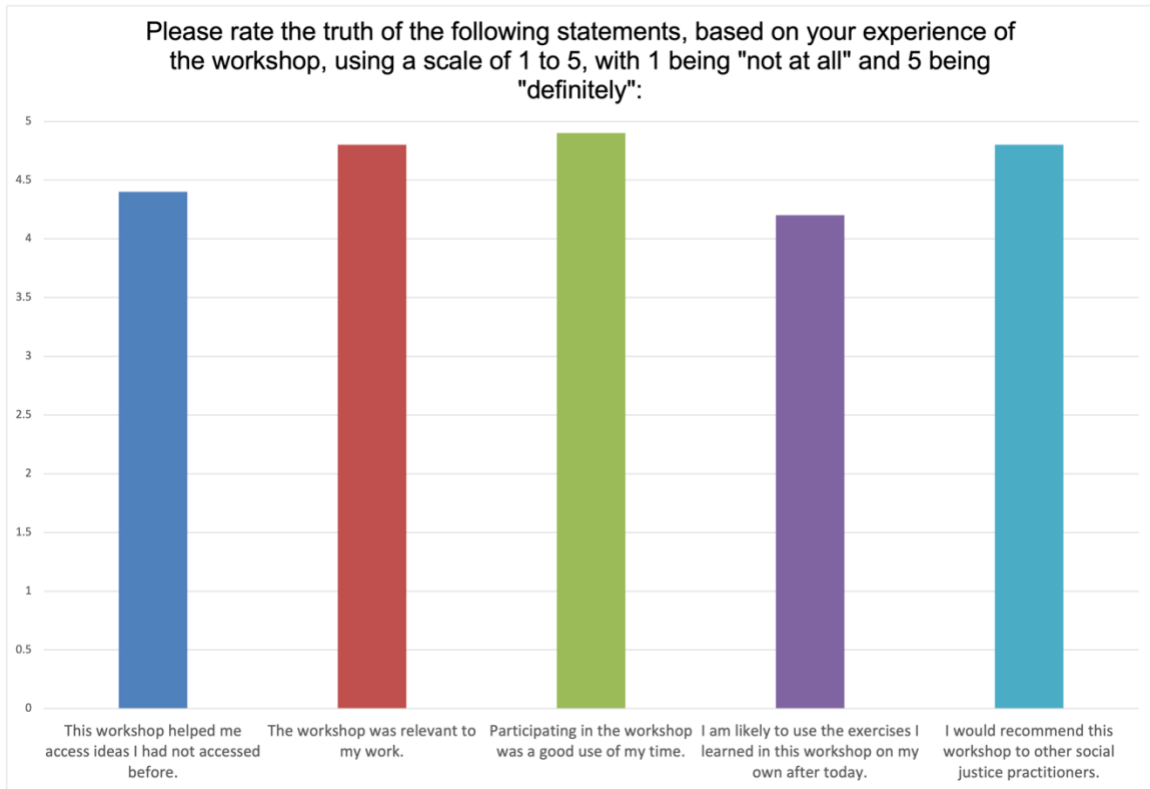


Figure J.1: 1-to-5 Statement Rankings

Part 2

Please rate the truth of the following statements, based on your experience of the workshop using a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “not at all” and 5 being “definitely”:

1. This workshop helped me access ideas I had not accessed before. ____
2. The workshop was relevant to my work. ____
3. Participating in the workshop was a good use of my time. ____
4. I am likely to use the exercises I learned in this workshop on my own after today. ____
5. I would recommend this workshop to other social justice practitioners. ____

Part 3—Demographic Data

How do you identify racially and/or ethnically? (Check all that apply.)

- American Indian or Alaskan Native ____
- Asian ____
- Black or African American ____
- Latinx, Latina, Latino, or Hispanic ____
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander ____
- White ____
- Another race, ethnicity, or origin ____
- Prefer to self-describe _____
- Prefer not to say ____

How do you identify in terms of gender? (Check all that apply.)

- Woman ____

- Man ____
- Non-binary ____
- Transgender ____
- Cisgender ____
- Agender ____
- Genderqueer ____
- Prefer to self-describe _____
- Prefer not to say ____
- A gender not listed ____

How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation? (Check all that apply.)

- Queer ____
- Lesbian ____
- Gay ____
- Straight/Heterosexual ____
- Pansexual ____
- Bisexual ____
- Asexual ____
- Prefer to self-describe _____
- Prefer not to say ____
- An orientation not listed ____

What is your age range?

- 18-20 years old ____
- 21-30 years old ____

- 31-40 years old ____
- 41-50 years old ____
- 51-60 years old ____
- 61-70 years old ____
- 71-80 years old ____
- 80+ years old ____

Do you consider yourself to be a social justice practitioner? [Yes ____ or No ____]

How long, in total, have you worked professionally in a social-justice-oriented role? [Answer in years ____]

Have you been involved in social justice movements outside of a professional setting, and if so, for how long? [Answer in years ____]

Is/are there a social justice issue(s) that is/are of particular concern to you?

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