

THE DEVELOPMENT, COMMUNICATION, AND EMBODIMENT  
OF A PERSONAL MOVEMENT LANGUAGE IN MODERN AND  
CONTEMPORARY DANCE

by

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A THESIS

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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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Modern and contemporary dancers throughout time have developed their own unique techniques, aesthetics, and styles which artists continue to study and practice today. The development of new movement is constantly occurring, and the fusion of styles and aesthetics is more present and readily available more than ever. Although modern dance aesthetics have changed, dance as a form of communication and embodiment continues to resonate. This thesis explores the process of how I use my values, interests, and history to develop, communicate, and embody my movement. My original choreography in the performance of *Resonant Body* directly explores how my movement values and aesthetics develop over time by depicting the exploration that arises from movement development, communication, and embodiment in the relationships among the dancers. In exploring movement development, communication, and embodiment, I examine multiple factors, including memorable movement experiences, influential teachers, and diverse communities, and reflect on their impact within my creative process.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Purpose**

The purpose of creating *Resonant Body* is to explore how I develop, communicate, and embody movement. The research I am doing is creative and compositional, and the supplemental scholarship is supportive and secondary to my choreographic research. This work is a personal reflection on my relationship to dance and movement. The choreography is a result of the process of my self-reflection, movement research, and collaborative process with my dancers.

**Film: *Resonant Body***

[https://youtu.be/h9rGP9pZIMk?si=dH\\_fgb2ec1VnVTYM](https://youtu.be/h9rGP9pZIMk?si=dH_fgb2ec1VnVTYM)

Choreography: Jessica Hovermale

Dancers: Emily Elbaum, Kara Fightmaster, Sof Fox, Marina Freeman, Anika Meisel, Devra Rayne, Darcy Rust, Georgia Tucker, Miriam Yousaf

Music: “Them” by Nils Frahm; “Introduction; Nothingness” by Hayden Calnin; “Life on Tape” by Freya Arde and Jens Heuler; “Artist’s Studio” by Michael Wall

Lighting Design: Olivia Ross

Costume Design: Jessica Hovermale and the Dancers

Filming: Samantha Joh and Chloe Montague

Editing: Jessica Hovermale

## **Context**

This research is a creative endeavor framed by the concepts of development, communication, and embodiment. I explore how these three ideas interact within a choreographic process and do not appear linearly, but rather, impact one another to influence and guide me as an artist. My personal history, cultural background, and movement experiences have shaped my artistic expression as a choreographer. These factors influence each step that I take in the creative process, impacting how I develop, communicate, and embody movement. My creative process in this work is in self-discovery and in exploring my own artistic voice.

### **Pre-College Movement Background**

As an artist, I am never creating and developing within a bubble. Instead, my personal and global influences guide me. My movement history begins as a toddler, dancing with my parents and sister in the living room to music from our stereo on “music nights,” typically on a Thursday. My parents enrolled me in gymnastics, tap, and ballet and I loved being upside down as a child. When I began studying at a studio, I danced at the Corvallis Academy of Ballet under a Vaganova syllabus taught by Jutta Hardison and Megan Skinner. After five or so years of ballet, I transitioned to training under Donna Blatt Irvin, focusing on the techniques of major modern dance figures. I learned the techniques of Martha Graham, Jose Limón, and Lester Horton, as well as postmodern contemporary dance influence from other teachers.

Modern dance was a huge influence for me. When I first made the switch away from ballet into modern, I felt silly. I did not understand the importance of energy in each individual movement—the grandeur each little thing held. I felt that the simplicity and the lack of complicated, intricate steps like I learned in ballet led me to question my abandonment of ballet. I missed the discipline of ballet, the order, the organization that dictated how I was meant to



move. I longed for the technique I knew. The freedom and radical release that the modern movement contained intimidated me. The abrupt switch from held, intricate, rigid, and romantic movement to expressing, shaping, contracting, and releasing was daunting. I was skeptical. I questioned what we were doing. I remember being so frustrated over a specific leap. I became determined to master the movement and aesthetic in modern dance that distinguished it from ballet.

As I grew comfortable in the movement, I found an appreciation for exploration and challenge. There was a level of control beneath the wild that I had not experienced before. In class, Donna offered autonomy in small ways. We received verbal prompts to introduce us to improvisation and choreography. We focused on the concepts of levels, negative space, textures, and accents. I was able to start coming into my own, exploring my dancing. Embodying my movement gave me authenticity and understanding of my movement. The autonomy I had in modern class gave me the ability to find myself in dance.

The factors that people pass down from their embodied knowledge and ancestry directly inform the choices they make and the preferences they develop, otherwise known as style. The choreographer of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, Ted Shawn defines style as the dancer personalizing their dance and movement. This development happens when a dancer's personal movement aesthetic comes through in their overall dance (despite what idiom they are performing), influencing the entire dance, "making it their own" as they maintain their own unique qualities within someone else's choreography (Brown 31). My primary modern dance teacher's personal movement style influenced my own dance style. Donna grew up in New York and between 1969 and 1977, she studied dance at John Dewey High School (a performing arts high school) and at New Dance Group Studio, Alvin Ailey School of Dance, June Lewis (Graham intensive), and the Martha

Graham school. At this time, her studies were heavily based on the techniques of Martha Graham and Lester Horton. She collaborated with guest artists in school but her primary studios in high school and college were June Lewis, New Dance Group, and Ailey. She grew up in what she considers to be a “dance candy store” (Blatt-Irvin). Her diverse experiences allowed her to formulate her own practice informed by those she trained with.

After the era of Denishawn in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Graham and other artists focused on “Repudiating the glamour and exoticism that had given Denishawn much of its appeal, for they believed that dance should provoke, simulate, and inform rather than simply entertain” (Au 119). Artists in this era worked to codify something that was authentically American, and something recognizable that was different than the ballet. Graham wrote that, “While the arts do not create change, they register change. This is the reason for the appearance of the modern dance” (Brown 50). The search and codification for a movement separate from that of ballet sculpted the trajectory of modern dance. The development of this movement played a huge role in the movement vocabulary that New York exposed Donna to in her training.

She also studied Afro-Haitian dance with Jean Leon Destine, who was Katherine Dunham’s partner, and Louines Louinis. Between 1973 and 1977, Donna was a dance major at Staten Island College and Hunter College and a member of the Staten Island Dance Ensemble. She studied post-modern dance with Cliff Keuter and Elina Moody as well as African dance with Rod Rogers. Donna grew up dancing in a time when the arts were shifting culturally and physically. According to the book, *The Vision of Modern Dance: In the Words of Its Creators*, in the modern dance, “The Forerunners,” the “Four Pioneers,” “The Second Generation,” and “The New Rebels” make up the historic eras (Brown). Donna grew up dancing primarily in the time of “The Second Generation” and “The New Rebels,” where people were questioning what dance

was, challenging innovative ideas, and developing movement in unusual ways. During this time, dance was becoming more experiential, process-based, and person-oriented as the art form grew more inclusive. Donna experienced an ever-changing diversity of experiences that contributed to her growth as an artist, which she passed on to her students. Like Donna, my own movement history and the circumstances surrounding me continue to influence my movement research and development, as these factors inform how I interpret and generate movement.

In 1978, Donna moved to Corvallis and danced with Carol Soleau and Oregon Dance, a Limón inspired group. In 1980, she began teaching African Dance through the Oregon State University Experimental College and at Linn-Benton Community College. She eventually started teaching Modern Dance through Parents for Education Plus, Primary Palette, and Corvallis Park and Recreation. Donna's personal movement history directly informed her teaching philosophy and practice. In her move to Oregon, she brought her diverse understanding of dance, cultures, and community to influence the program she began in Corvallis.

In the development of modern dance, artists explored breaking away from what came before, and redefined how dance served as means of deeply personal exploration, expression, communication, embodiment, and natural movement. Donna carries these values through in her socially motivated choreography and embodied movement. Embodiment, defined by Sondra Horton Fraleigh, is the lived body experience where consciousness and intention assume the unity of the body, mind, and soul. She notes that dance is an aesthetic expansion of our personal embodiment. "My dance is my body as my body is myself" (Fraleigh 32). Donna embraced this philosophy in her teaching style. She adapted her lesson plans to fit the students in the room, allowing her students to speak and give input, while still being steadfast in her beliefs as she

offered her opinions and corrections. She provided the space and expectation for students to rise to the occasion while offering support.

Donna's foundation in the Graham, Horton, and Limón techniques have seeped into the movement knowledge that lives within my body. This muscle memory lives within the structures of my being so that even when I am not consistently training in modern dance, the movement patterns feel familiar and natural to me. The emphasis on breath, contraction, and release exists within my movement. Martha Graham, often referred to as the pioneer of modern dance, held onto these ideas through expressing raw emotion of the psychological state. She pulled influence from ballet, Greek mythology, and other dance idioms developing around her to develop and codify her own technique that paved a direction away from ballet (Au 121). In contrast to Graham paving the way for modern dance in New York City, Lester Horton codified and developed a technique on the West Coast. Pulling from foundations of jazz, ballet, and Native American dance, his technique focused on fluidity, the contraction, and energy in an athletic approach to dance (Au 130). José Limón, who danced with Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, developed a movement vocabulary that emphasized gravity and the use of weight in the fall and recovery to create powerful and emotionally driven performances. He emphasized dramatic storytelling and would draw on inspiration from literature and folklore (Au 126). The storytelling and historic ideas that these choreographers pulled from influenced the movement themes and thematic storylines that Donna would implement in her choreography. The diverse array of dancers that these pioneers of modern dance were working with, choreographing on, and dancing alongside helped individualize and stylize the movement. These subsectors of modern dance and others all influenced Donna's embodied knowledge which she then translated into me and her other students through her teaching.

Communication plays a crucial role when dancers move together in practice and performance. Movement is a language with the purpose of speaking to one another without spoken words; as Martha Graham wrote, “The function of the dance is communication” (Brown 5). Developing movement is like establishing a language and often precedes language itself (Brown 6). In Donna’s teaching, she communicates through physical example, descriptive language, and assisted corrections, wanting to facilitate embodied understanding of concepts. I remember her giving rich imagery, inviting us to “imagine we were painting the ceiling with our entire arm” to help us understand the intention and initiation of the movement. She would weave stories about certain combinations, steps, or teachers into class, so it became a part of our oral tradition. She would share wisdom about the structure of our class and various pedagogical strategies, depending on our focus at that time.

As I got older, I began taking classes with Donna’s former students. Their experiences after training with Donna were in a more contemporary movement style that developed after the post-modern dance movement in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The exposure to offshoots of post-modern dance contributed to my autonomy, understanding of music, and creative ideas by seeing new possibilities of movement within a baseline of training in modern dance. This autonomy started to fuel my own ideas and creative impulses that exposed me to fresh perspectives on what contemporary dance was.

### **Pre-College Movement Impact**

Blended group dynamics, global politics, internal and external support, and the dances and movements we explored in classes and rehearsals shaped my experiences in Donna’s studio in Corvallis. The literature on movement development reflects these themes which recognize communication, embodiment, authenticity, and breaks in tradition that continue to influence

movement ideas. Movement research informs movement development through embodied understanding. Author Ann Cooper Albright defines movement research as finding a sense of physical mindfulness. She explores the ideas of movement resounding with people both physically and intellectually (292). When someone is researching their own movement, they are developing their own personal dance based upon their embodied knowledge and understanding. The world that surrounded me under Donna's teachings has been a critical influence on my movement development for these reasons.

The demographics of the group that I danced with has contributed to the power movement now holds for me today. Working in a group that was all women reinforced this norm for me: people value what I have to say as a woman. This environment felt empowering. Understanding the influence of women on the modern dance evolution and deconstruction of codified ballet technique to center an empowering ownership created a solid foundation for me as a person and dancer. Dancing in a group of people with different races and socioeconomic backgrounds exposed me to diverse perspectives and helped me understand alternative points of view. Dancing and learning among multiple generations made me feel heard and respected from an early age. These experiences formed my commitment to knowledge, communication, and understanding amongst various identities, including gender, race, age, and more.

The group environment felt naturally familial. I was able to connect with others who had trained with Donna previously and their career paths and choices inspired me. I felt the power of Donna's legacy in her former students and realized that my voice, too, had value. The group entrusted me with the oral history and movement that had developed over time. Support felt like encouragement in choreography and self-exploration, but also challenge, push, and motivation.

Attending high school between 2016 and 2020 was a tumultuous time globally and politically. Within the supportive environment Donna fostered in the dance studio, I felt like I could talk freely, which allowed me to understand and learn more about what was going on in the world. I developed my critical thinking skills, perceptions, and responses to global issues because our art reflected and reacted to our environment. Donna gave us the agency to create and respond based on our experience. The setting allowed us to talk about charged issues like race and socioeconomics in a real and relevant way.

The physical movement as well as the choreography played a huge role for me in what I took with me into the world. I resonate with the female-centered undertones that came out of the modern dance movement, the opportunity to take part in politically focused dances, and the drive to create my own meaningful and inquisitive choreographic statements. Having autonomy and being able to speak up and offer thoughts gave me this inspired support that has stuck with me, and I aim to cultivate this within all spaces I exist and take part in. From my training with Donna in modern dance, I have gained self-assurance, support, respect, and genuine care.

### **College Level Dance Experience**

As I began my collegiate dance experience, I had a challenging time moving away from the idea of myself as a modern dancer into something else that I was not sure how to define. The COVID-19 pandemic cut short my final experience with consistent modern dance training, and I struggled moving away from something I loved into something new, simply because I was not ready to let it go. I struggled with my identity in dance, confidence in movement, and self-assurance in both dance and in other areas of my life. Movement is a vessel of expression that a dancer's personal movement history informs. The article "The Construction of Authenticity in the Creative Process: Lessons from Choreographers of Contemporary Dance" details how

choreographers stay authentic by embodying their movement histories while taking inspiration from others. Choreographers create authenticity through developing their material by pulling inspiration, aesthetics, and expression from various dance idioms but implementing their own movement histories (Tamar 22). The dancer that allows their histories to show through in their movement conveys authentic embodiment. A part of me still felt deeply rooted in modern dance, and I kept up a personal practice for quite a time in college. However, allowing myself to delve further into the exploration of contemporary movement and letting myself sink into the questions that my professors were asking has helped me explore myself within the realm of contemporary movement.

In college, I began dancing at the university level under professors with diverse backgrounds and specialties that have all influenced my movement. Their movement languages (from jazz, to ballet, to Hip Hop, to classical modern) and teaching styles have all come together in my body to inform my own dancing and understanding of movement. According to Fraleigh, the choreographer has a considerable influence in communicating movement and its aesthetic to the dancer as their perception and aesthetics influence the space. Simultaneously, the dancer must embody the aesthetic in the movement with the intention the choreographer intends to create (35). My experiences in technique classes as well as classes in composition, improvisation, somatic practices, and theory have all heavily influenced the movement I embody. I now consider myself to be more of a contemporary mover as opposed to a modern dancer.

Consistent experience and shared understanding develop movement languages over time. The article “The Empathy and the Structuring Sharing Modes of Movement Sequences in the Improvisation of Contemporary Dance” argues that dancers with similar upbringings and



dancing experiences share a movement language and collective understanding that informs improvisation and movement development. This shared understanding of movement transcending words to communicate plays a critical role in teaching movement and emphasizes a sense of knowing from different qualities in the dance (Ribeiro 75). I found this shared movement language to be something that I had trouble finding again when I entered the college dance setting. I was uncomfortable in the movement language that engulfed me; the new concepts were so foreign.

Reception of communication by the dancer from a choreographer leads to true understanding and embodiment of movement. Rachel Rimmer-Piekarczyk discusses the importance of dialogue in dance in her article, “Self-somatic authority: Exploring the cultivation of somatic intelligence through a dialogic approach to self-reflection in dance technique learning.” She argues that the dancer and teacher allowing space for observation and conversation creates a personal connection and focuses on mind and body connection. The opportunity to witness others in dance spaces influences a dancer’s embodiment of movement through experiential and developmental learning (Rimmer-Piekarczyk 99). When a choreographer can foster an environment where the connections among artists have clear, communicated intent, they create a space that encourages authentic embodiment of movement. If this choreographer also includes embracing a dancer's movement history within their environment, the dancer can embody the movement as a means of communication. In college, I found that my exposure to a variety of movement styles, professors, and dancers influenced and expanded my investment in movement exploration.

## **Extracurricular Dance Studies Influence**

In my time in college, I have made the effort to seek out training opportunities outside of the university setting to expand my movement vocabulary and skill and delve further into my movement research. Through studying with dancers, choreographers, and artists in different settings, I now understand what movement aesthetics I prefer and what sits in my body in a way that makes sense to me.

In 2022, I attended the Northwest Dance Project summer intensive under director Sarah Slipper. Through this program, I had the opportunity to take ballet and contemporary classes as well as explore improvisation. We learned company repertoire and were also part of a creative process session. Being a part of this program gave me a first glimpse into contemporary dance on the concert stage where I explored improvisation, partnering, shaping space, musicality, and relationships within movement.

I began 2023 with Ballare Carmel at a weeklong winter project with the Carmel Dance Festival. Lillian Barbieto was the director of this program and I got to dance with choreographers Alex Ketley, Nicole Hennington, and others. Barbieto founded this program to foster a professional dance community in the Carmel, California area and develop a space for creation and support by uplifting young dancers and choreographers. This experience gave me the opportunity to connect with individuals of diverse ages and backgrounds in distinct phases of their careers. This program allowed me to see the possibilities of working in the professional dance world and gave me the exposure to dance with a variety of people and take ballet, contemporary, partnering, improvisation, and more. Even today, I pull tools from this project, including choreographic and creative movement development techniques.

During the summer of 2023, I had the opportunity to participate in the Dark Circles Contemporary Dance Desert Peak Arts Lab with Joshua L Peugh. This program pushed me out of my comfort zone both in movement and the demographic makeup of the program. The program consisted of a small group of dancers with only a few women. The company is based in Las Cruces, New Mexico and helps demonstrate to all people, especially young Latinx boys, what dance and the arts can provide. This purpose and intention of the program differed from anything that I had ever experienced previously in my dance background. Getting to play with music from a culture I was not a part of and moving and partnering with bodies different from the female majority I was familiar with had an influence on my understanding of my movement knowledge and background. The movement vocabulary was upright, fast, hard hitting, sharp, and had influence from Mexican music. The experience stretched me creatively because the movement vocabulary challenged me.

Most recently, I was able to take part in two short intensive programs. In Winter of 2024, I attended the Winter Space Camp with Openspace under the direction of Franco Nieto. The studio has a heavy emphasis on the individual and is based in the Portland art community. Being able to experiment with unfamiliar floorwork was a great learning opportunity. I loved the challenge of developing my toolbox. We did partner work, and it was great to get to work with such a wide variety of individuals in such a short amount of time. I also was able to attend the Flockworks Winter Intensive in Seattle where I was able to learn from and dance with Alice Klock and Florian Lochner. Alice and Florian met at Hubbard Street Dance, a contemporary dance company in Chicago. They are a performing and choreographing duo that travel across Europe and the United States, setting work and leading workshops. They focus on partnering, emphasizing breathwork and connection throughout their movement. From this workshop, I

improved implementing breath into my movement and loved getting to experiment with listening to my partners.

Throughout my college experience I have been able to partake in a variety of American College Dance Association (ACDA) conferences. I have participated in ACDAs in Oregon, California, and Utah, which have been wonderful opportunities. At these conferences I have taken a wide variety of classes including contemporary, modern, ballet, improvisation, African, Gaga, and others. These conferences have allowed me to connect with dancers and artists in various locations and explore areas I am interested in that my university does not offer. Learning more about the choreographic process has also been beneficial to my creative process in understanding how other artists approach choreography, view work, and give and receive feedback.

### **Influence of College Era Dance on my Movement**

I have learned what I value in a process as well as in movement itself. I have found that in the process, I value listening and learning from everyone involved. I resonate with the practice of not making assumptions about a dancer's background, skill, or knowledge. In terms of movement, I have found that I enjoy improvisation because I can take ownership over my movement in this process. In physical movement, I value shaping the space in the body and with the body, movement that feels good and familiar, as well as challenging what is physically possible and working at something consistently. I enjoy digging into my past understanding of movement languages and techniques and then intentionally pushing boundaries and rules to expand my exploration. I love playing with speed, levels, and texture, inspired by a variety of sound scores and music.

The works and choreography that I have been a part of have all influenced my movement and identity. When people ask me what dance style I primarily do, I lean towards saying contemporary. Although this feels true to me currently, it feels strange to explain, to articulate what is known in my body's understanding of movement. From my experience dancing in college in primarily ballet and contemporary classes along with African, improvisation, and Hip Hop, I most identify as a contemporary dancer. Contemporary dance exists in a space where I can explore and fuse what I most resonate with in music, floorwork, classical modern ideas, and shaping the space in both moving and creating choreography.

People interpret the term “contemporary dance” in a variety of ways, encompassing a great scope of ideas and concepts. The article “When Is Contemporary Dance?” by SanSan Kwan questions the concept of what contemporary is and when it exists. The article discusses how “contemporary” reflects the artist's attempt to encompass the art happening now that has grown from movement development prior to itself. The term carries different meaning in all contexts, whether that be in the concert, commercial, or global worlds. Due to its subjectivity, the term “contemporary” is less of a defined idiom, and more of a statement to describe a current style and aesthetic used by a variety of different dancers, choreographers, and artists (Kwan 48).

This definition directly informs how I reference my identity in contemporary dance, as I feel that my backgrounds in different areas have come together to inform my movement and identity as a dancer. Contemporary dance is a contested and subjective term depending on the perspective. To me, contemporary dance allows for the creator to use their background in movement to explore an idea that questions something in the world. When I am looking at works of others, I see the choreographers' and dancers' movement backgrounds and the questions that they are investigating all working together to inform the performed work. In the works that I am

moving in and am creating, I focus on using my own movement history alongside the dancers' to inform my exploration.

## **In Process**

I began a focused study on my movement development for this project in the Fall of 2022. I started with a personal improvisation study where I would film my improvisation and study my movement. I looked for familiar movements and aesthetics to explore further. I experimented with different music to see how my body responded and tried to challenge myself with the intentions I would set before a practice. I focused on embodying my movement whether it was comfortable or not, and aimed to work in a way that allowed me to explore. I also listened to my impulses, both personally and creatively. I let my emotions lead the movement, seeing how this would impact my practice. In getting to move completely on my own volition, I felt a greater sense of ownership and resonance with my movement that I had lost when I was taking classes from so many other influences. I felt a sense of freedom and autonomy that inspired me to move more.

I also found a greater sense of my identity in dance. I saw in myself a conglomeration of my movement background and outside influences that have all come together to impact me as a dance artist. I could pick out common movement patterns and ideas that I would lean on and general ways that I would listen to music or respond to different prompts. I discovered that I like to contrast fast and slow movement as well as different textures and sizes of physical movement. In watching videos of myself, I see more fluid and grounded movement, a result of my collegiate training. I can still see moments of balance and sculpting the space that stems from my modern training, but there is a more contemporary undertone to my movement now.

Based on my personal improvisation study, I created a solo for myself based on the movement that felt good in my body. I began by listening to a sound score that inspired me and then outlined spatial pathways, textures, and energies. I played with contrasts in speed, texture,

scale, and connection with the music to help create engagement for the audience. In creation, there were moments that came so easily and flowed from my structure, while I struggled in other moments.

I then took the choreography that I had created and set it on Miriam, one of the dancers who volunteered to be a part of the process. Because I had created this movement with only myself in mind, transferring this movement onto another dancer was a unique experience. When I choreographed the movement without considering the dancer, adapting it to her was more difficult compared to when I choreographed with the dancer in mind, which was easier because I would allow her movement background to inform the process. I was curious to see how the dancer took on my prompts and visual cues and interpreted the movement in her own way. In a way, I felt like her personality became lost in the movement because I designed the movement on and for myself, rather than her. As the process continued, though, I collaborated with her and eventually adapted and changed the work. I allowed myself to let go of how I originally wanted certain movements to work and reworked them, so they fit more adeptly to her body. In observing her make choices in the timing, breath, gaze, and intention of the work, I saw her connect with the movement and make it her own.

In teaching my movement to another person, the experience taught me a large amount about how I hear music, where my impulses lie, and how I relate to space. I listen to music in a responsive way, listening more to my body than the initiation in the music, but still letting the music live as a guide. I found myself letting go of original expectations and desires in the work and grasping onto other intentions when transferring it onto her body. In seeing her take ownership over the dance and make choices in how she would take on certain movements, the dance became her own as it grew into what it was meant to be.



There are a variety of ways to generate movement and engage in a choreographic process. In *The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance: Identity, Performance, and Understanding*, McFee argues that the role of the dancer is crucial and sets dance apart from the other arts because “the embodiment of the dance depends on those dancers” (McFee 168). Because of the value the dancer has in the creative process, their feelings and connection are crucial in movement development and embodiment because they must understand and embody the movement, they are doing to communicate the intention of the work (McFee 168). In the process of teaching another dancer movement I designed for myself, it was challenging to adjust my mindset, which showed me the importance of collaborating with the dancer directly. I learned how to communicate what I want to see. My personal understanding of what the movement is reveals my movement values.

I then began creating a work to explore these ideas of movement development, communication, and embodiment on a group of nine dancers during Fall of 2023. Holding a practice with this amount of people made me come to terms with how I was going to develop and communicate movement to a diverse group. Within my practice, I wanted to create an atmosphere that recognizes the individual and allows for clear communication and comfort, but also pushes the dancers physically with dynamic movement. I focused on being open with my cast and asking for questions, thoughts, and feedback throughout the process. My primary goal was to create a work that was reflective of the exploration itself, creating a physical depiction of the ideas in developing, communicating, and embodying movement.

In the initial stages of my choreographic process with the group, we worked on structured improvisation. I gave verbal cues so the dancers could find comfort in their bodies and space. This offered me the opportunity to study their movement further, examining their preferences

based on my prompts, their response to music, and how they use their bodies as extensions of themselves. In my rehearsals early on, I focused on teaching and drilling familiar movement as well as modern vocabulary that remains in my personal movement language. This allowed me to get a feel for what was possible with the group. It also helped cultivate a specific kind of environment among the dancers. I aimed to end rehearsals with a circle, giving us all a moment to lead a stretch, and coming together to help center the group. While this process sometimes felt a little silly, it grounded us and helped further a physical connection among the group. Although I have not continued executing all these practices throughout my process, I feel that the foundation I built directly informed my movement development and focuses within my choreography.

In working with a group, the experience of creating movement directly on the individuals versus with them influenced the work and rehearsal process. Once I had a feel for the group and more of an idea about what I wanted to create, I found sound and outlined how I would go about connecting the work visually with the music. I selected “Them” by Nils Frahm, “Introduction; Nothingness” by Hayden Calnin, “Life on Tape” by Freya Arde and Jens Heuler, and “Artist’s Studio” by Michael Wall because I felt like they communicated the energy I was seeking. I went section by section, loosely designing what I wanted to happen to help aid the flow.

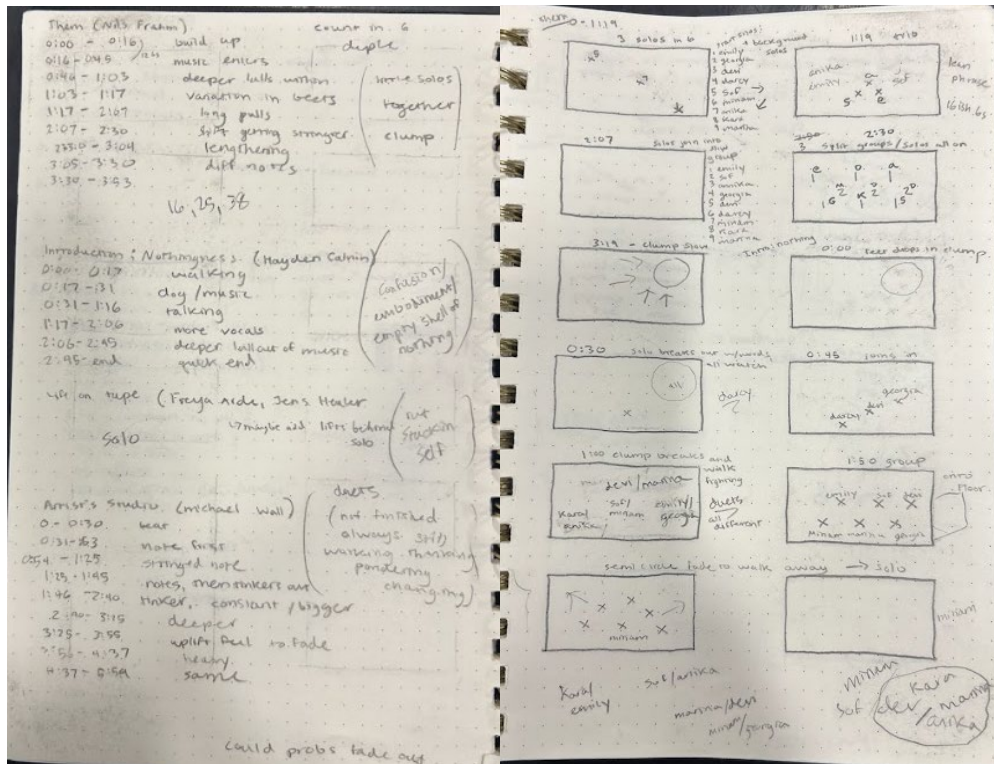


Figure 1: Choreography Plan for *Resonant Body*

This image is from my notebook in the planning process in outlining how the choreography would align with time stamps in the music, along with how the dancers' spatial relationships would interact with the sound and with one another.

I aimed to design the dance in a way both choreographically across the stage and in the actual movement, which would shape and adapt the space the dancers were in. I would ask the dancers for input and feedback on how they felt about the flow of the work which influenced what I chose to keep versus stray from in the process. In developing phrase work, I would sometimes come in with material I had made up on my own, and other times pull from inspiration I got from the dancers and create on the spot. I also developed solos on each dancer by giving them similar movement to play with but encouraging them to adjust it in timing, size, and intention to fit their bodies and artistic expression. In creating partner work, I would often produce general ideas of how I wanted something designed but had to collaborate very closely with the dancers to determine what was possible and what would make sense within the movement vocabulary and

physicality of the dancers. The work evolved with the dancers as it developed and formed to adapt to everyone alongside the dancers developing and adapting their movement and form.

Rehearsals always felt a bit chaotic: chatting as group input and dialogue among us filled the silence of the studio. Feedback and working with the group played a critical role in how I developed movement for the work. Asking for feedback on how different movements felt influenced what I eventually chose to invest in or develop further. It was helpful to hear what the dancers themselves thought because it allowed me to take a step back and determine what the actual intention of a movement was. Sometimes a dancer may question what I was looking for in a certain design of a step and I would realize that it did not make sense to even exist in the work. When the dancers would ask questions about the work, it was useful to reflect on what I was trying to accomplish with certain movements or sections of choreography.

This creative process has also taught me about challenging issues like uncertain attendance and involvement. Because this was a voluntary project with my friends and peers, I did not want this extra time and effort to add to the stress of their schedules. Due to the reality of being college students, I consistently dealt with separate groups of dancers at various times and constantly shifting plans. I found this challenging and sometimes frustrating since my work centers around group relationships and interaction. I developed strategies for collaborating with individuals who were there the most and I designed the spacing to be adaptable around who would be able to come to each rehearsal. Dealing with fluctuating schedules forced me to become more adaptable, which allowed me to create movement I may not have otherwise. This situation also allowed the dancers to take care of themselves inside and outside of the studio.

This rehearsal process felt like a reflection of relevant existing and creating in an uncertain world. My choreography is reflective of my own life, whether I realize it or not. My

movement history from my time with Donna and modern dance to my experiences in collegiate dance, along with the situations I am dealing with in school, inform my work. Therefore, I found the process of developing choreography with an inconsistent group while also feeling unsure about my next steps for my future after college to be telling of my experience. The movement and space designs allowing the dancers to make their own choices, at times getting stuck, lost within the group, or breaking away and coming together causes these emotions and themes to come through. In my own life, I was surrounded by my own indecision and uncertainty which seemed to be appearing in rehearsal. Allowing this to come through in the choreography has helped me become more comfortable in embracing the questions.

Throughout this process, my development as a communicator in dance has evolved and expanded verbally and physically. I gained skills in being able to put words to the physical movement I was asking for as well as descriptions of the aesthetic and energies that I wanted the dancers to embody. The dancer's interpretations, questions, and interests helped me define the movement and my development and understanding on my own movement and communication of this, allowed my embodiment to inform their intentions. I found a shape that I enjoyed aesthetically in the arms that I felt had an intention behind it. I began by teaching the basic movement, but throughout the rehearsal process, I communicated more about the initiation and intention of the actual movement and emotion. I developed skills and am still growing in my ability to cultivate space with movement and communicating to create a positive rehearsal environment. I also saw the dancers develop in distinct ways over the course of the rehearsal process. Overall, the more we rehearsed, the more ownership I found them to be taking of the movement; once I gave them the movement, it became their own to take on for themselves. With time and rehearsals, their confidence grew and expanded to take over the movement and make it

their own as they began to sit within the dance and push what it originally was, making it individual to themselves rather than like the dancers around them. When I am embodying movement, I am not questioning the purpose of why or how I am moving, and the dance feels good in my body. I do not know whether it is possible to tell when someone is fully embodying movement but when someone is feeling the dance I think looking into their eyes and seeing their lost and wonderment in the exploration can be telling.

Working in this setting as a choreographer while also still learning how to be an artist requires thought and reflection over my own expectations and the reality in front of me. Understanding what is physically possible and being adaptable to what we are capable of while still challenging ourselves by exploring our limitations and quandaries was interesting and curious to explore. As the rehearsal process has continued, I have loosened my expectations of what the work may look like and have aimed to focus on being curious about what the outcome of the work will be. I choreograph movement that feels good on my body and have held onto certain aspects. The box shapes the dancers make with their arms, a role in a large group section, and certain arm patterns are all part of my personal movement knowledge. I let go of certain ideas, too, in seeing how different bodies experienced the movement (in an over-the-back roll, for example) in a partnership. I have realized that this choreography reflects the process and research that I am doing and allows the piece to live organically helps the process evolve.

## **The Work: *Resonant Body***

The term “resonant body” acknowledges how consciousness plays a role in the physical and emotional health of a person. In the journey of creation and existence as an artist, I feel like I am constantly developing consciousness and awareness of my existence, my impact, and my choices. The selection of the term “resonant” makes me feel whole, echoing, voluminous, and full. The idea of resonant as a deep, clear, and continuing sound or ring emphasizes how our movement is a constant existence within our bodies. Pairing the term with that of a body allows me to think of myself as a being of existence over anything else. I am a conglomeration of cells, but my mind and body are one to fulfill my being and energy. In the existence of my dance within myself, I can take on my movement as well as communicate it to others. To me, this title feels like the understanding and awareness that we are all beings, and exist, as a whole entity.

### **Section One: “Myself”**

*Resonant Body* begins with section 1: “Myself”. The dancers begin on stage, in their own state, where they are all practicing movement on their own. The movements are all similar motifs of movement throughout the piece, but each dancer is articulating the movement with different energies, intentions, focuses, and adaptations. Although the movements they are performing are similar and related, they are all individual and personal to the dancer. As the energy shifts and a trio begins, the dancers become swept up into a blur that initiates a group swell. They go in and out of doing the same combination in different facings and try on one another’s movements, dancing together yet allowing for this exploratory feeling. In their exploration of themselves and the discovery of others, the feeling and understanding of movement grows as the dancers explore within themselves and one another. The overall energy of this section centers around movement

development, examining how we find our own movement based on sensations, our backgrounds, and how we allow the people and movement happening around us to influence us.

### **Section Two: “Nothing”**

The second section of my work, “Nothing,” explores confusion and uncertainty. This section begins at 3 minutes and 55 seconds. In my experience, I have experienced a lack of understanding or ownership of my movement. This confusion has led me to feel disembodied, despite still being a dancer. I explored communicating this confusion through diverse interpretations of the same movement in a canon. One dancer is separated from the rest and witnesses the other dancers. They are pulling from movements within their solos, and all have their own interpretations with timing and texture. As the solo dancer leaves the stage, three duets begin with different facings, emphasizing the empty space, playing with dimensions that guide the viewer’s eye, and encapsulating the idea that even in emptiness, or nothingness, there is something meaningful happening. These tactile duets where the dancers move one another explore feelings of disembodiment. As dancers, it is easy to feel lost and ungrounded in movement when you lack understanding and embodiment. Through verbal and physical communication, we can try on learned movement practices from others. The dancers come together, sense each other in unison, and find solace in their shared understanding of movement. One dancer breaks away, feeling stuck in the movement that the others are doing. As the other dancers realize her panicked movement, they allow her to journey past them as she works to travel into her own sense of embodiment, and they leave her alone on stage.

### **Section Three: “Cycles”**

The third section of the work, “Cycles,” starts at 6 minutes and 58 seconds, and focuses on the idea of someone being stuck inside themselves, struggling to get out of their own



movement patterns because of the limitations they are experiencing from the outside. This solo brings the audience in to look closer at the state of the dancer. The dancer is stuck in a rut, stuck in herself doing one thing that she cannot get out of. She finds herself bringing her hand to her face, letting it fall to the ground and resetting, as well as in a backwards walking pattern. But she allows her surroundings to inform and impact her movement and lets herself feel and experience her impulses, truly embodying the movement she is finding within herself, even if it feels stuck and unsure. She begins in a repetitive reverse walking pattern and breaks into a fast panic of motion where she continuously struggles to break free. As the music releases and the movement becomes more impulsive with the sound cues, she starts to find this freedom and liberation in her own embodiment of feeling as the rolling, low, flowing sensational movement becomes smoother and holds qualities of flow and rotation.

#### **Section Four: “Studio”**

“Studio” begins at 9 minutes and 15 seconds with a duet where a dancer comes in and breaks the soloist out of her rut. The dancer that walks on tries to dance with the soloist, hoping to build a connection, but because she is so inside herself, it takes time to get to a state where it is possible for them to comfortably embody the movement together. As the duet progresses, we see the soloist give in and change her intention to allow herself to dance *with* her partner, rather than around. A second duet moves into space following this same trajectory—fueling the idea that we are always ever changing. This second duet mirrors the first, demonstrating how we are continuously changing, pondering, and exploring innovative ideas with unique movement qualities. As the second duet leaves the space, a trio steps on and from the get-go, they connect with one another. They notice and take care of one another while investing fully in the movement. They are allowing one another to exist as they are and supporting one another, which

is something that I aim to make clear in the choreography. As people, we are always embodying who we are; we are living, breathing entities who are always evolving. As the dancers enter and assist one another in their movement towards the end of the piece, they are supporting one another in finding their movement and a space to exist fully as unique movers. The dancers shift in their roles from supporting one another and helping them dance fully to being the dancer who is trying to dance as their full self but is needing support from their peers. This section explores the ideas that we are always changing and evolving in ourselves and movement, always embodying ourselves. The piece ends as the dancers come together on the ground with an energy of respect, understanding, acceptance, and support.

## Conclusion

This research explores my personal creative process in movement development, communication of movement, and movement embodiment through a lens of my personal history. My background and experience in modern and contemporary dance, from my childhood influences on my collegiate dance experiences, to my self-selected extracurricular studies, all play a role in how I develop movement that feels authentic to myself. My values and interests influence my movement development, communication, and embodiment. These factors heavily influence how I, as a mover, communicate with other dancers physically, and as a choreographer, communicate movement vocabulary, intentions, and aesthetics. In setting movement, certain prescribed steps would remain as I gave them, but others adapted and changed based on how I cued the dancers to respond or take them up under their own interpretation. My background and surroundings also contribute to how I embody movement in influencing comfortability, natural movement patterns, and authenticity. In exploring my personal movement development, communication, and embodiment, I have found that my dance history, values, and surroundings directly impact my creative process. My research exists within the field of dance research as a point of view in how looking at how our backgrounds directly inform who we are as artists in the creative process. If we have an emphasis on this in creative research, we further our empathy, understanding, and ability to communicate.

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