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BodyVerse

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Fine Arts in Dance, Hunter College
The City University of New York

2022

5/4/2022

Date

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Thesis Sponsor

4/28/2022

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Acknowledgements

I want to thank the following individuals for their invaluable assistance and guidance through the long processes of achieving my MFA thesis. I am truly grateful for the Hunter community, faculty and students. Many thanks to my adviser David Capps, for your creative insight, allowing me the freedom to explore the unknown and for being patient and flexible with my inconsistent schedule. Thank you, Maura Nguyen Donohue for your endless support and your insightful knowledge of art and dance; it is an inspiration. Thank you, Apollinaire Scherr for helping me find my voice as a writer, teaching me the art of research, and your tireless support editing my thesis paper. Carol Walker, thank you for offering me the opportunity to become a student again and unlock my fullest potential as a dancer and artist. President Rabb, the financial support provided through the college helped my creative visions become a reality.

And last (for I have saved the best) to my family. To my mom Shari, whose unconditional love and support is endless. To my partner, Christine, the challenges of returning to school were rough at times, I am forever grateful for your love, support and patience. To my daughter, Luna (no... a master's degree is not a karate thing) always follow your dreams and let the unknown spark curiosity and delight in your life. Through thick and thin, I will always love you all.

Visit *BodyVerse* ... <https://youtu.be/vq9QEW3RmWc>

(Viewing suggestions: Dim or turn off the lights in your space. Headphones are encouraged)

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Introduction

BodyVerse is a work that could not be held in a proscenium stage within the glow of theatrical lights. It is not a dance thesis stifled by the rigors of a dance vocabulary that may be found in ballet and modern forms that I¹ had learned in the past, such as standing in a ballet first position, legs rotated outward from the hips, or striking a Horton technique “lateral T” exercise to create the position resembling the letter “T.” My thesis project became a dance film because the pandemic pushed me away from making a live performance for the stage. The film centers around the exploration of body systems and our intertwining connections with earth’s natural world. One of its aims is to transfer that experience to the viewer, via film and through an embodied welcome via zoom, as opposed to live performance.

In this paper, I will investigate how, even when documented and contained within the frame of a screen, a body can express somatic qualities connecting us to what I think of as our greater home, the earth. As such, this research methodology interweaves autobiographical collections of dance and somatic knowledge, classroom experiences, my interactions with the environment, and the detailed process of constructing a film dance.

In the filming process, I used dance improvisation methods to collect film material, responding and reacting to feelings and sensations spontaneously as they bubbled up from below the surface of my skin. These strategies spilled into the film making and editing process. In the early stages of this project I experimented with camera angles—at one time I even strapped the camera onto different parts of my body—and discovered how proximity and distance accentuates, distorts, and reimagines the body. When I started working in the film editing process, I found that transitions, jump cuts and overlays supported the project’s themes. I often could only

¹ In an effort to evoke the immediacy of physical sensations in this thesis paper my writing strategies welcome the first person and make regular shifts between the verb tenses, as the temporal places of the making and the made are in a continuum for me.

describe my filmmaking technique as an intuitive one, having only had a minor exposure to the medium prior to the Covid-19 lockdown and resulting digital dance world.

In the filming, I followed unfamiliar movement pathways and tuned into my physical consciousness in order to "consciously alter movement habits and movement choices," as Dr. Martha Eddy, a somatic practitioner and founder and Director of the Dynamic Embodiment Somatic Movement Therapy Training program, puts it (7). I quieted the years of ballet and modern teachers telling me the positions to stand in or the poses to hold and allowed myself to sense the natural rhythms of my body's systems. This "found sense" was my guide; it helped me discover movement qualities and dynamics to record, as well as in the construction of the film itself. Both this journey of quieting and the quiet, often solitary, practice of filmmaking allowed me to engage in valuable culminating research during the isolated completion of my MFA degree work amidst a "remote" designation and in a location quite distant from the rush of New York City and Hunter College.

As a dancer I have traveled through various training methodologies of dance such as ballet (Bournonville Method–Danish Style; Cecchetti Method–Italian style; and Balanchine Method–American style) and American modern dance forms (Graham, Cunningham, Horton, and Limon). Of course I have been influenced by these forms, but over the years I have also worked to discover movement patterns that feel comfortable to me and derive from a more personal investigation of movement. But for my fifteen minute film, *BodyVerse*, I aimed to evoke the viewer's own inner response; to get the viewers under their own skin. By using various editing techniques, shifting perspectives from close up to far away, playing with time from slow to fast, framing of individual body parts, layering of various images of sand, water, tree roots, and body parts, including establishing shots that couple my body with nature, and

creating a soundscore by isolating and manipulating the audio tracks from the video clips, I strived to build a visual experience that resonated deeply into the viewers' bodies.

My primary modes for developing movement for *BodyVerse* were dance improvisation in the lineage of somatic principles developed since the 1970s. Both this specific mode of improvisation and somatics as an experiential research into bodily sensations mobilized imagery, sensation, and groundedness to turn my attention to my inner and outer body systems. I used these perspectives to craft a non-narrative dance film that deploys metaphorical images and sounds of nature to suggest my body's inner and outer shapes and textures, and their links to the earth. By using technology to shift the traditional, proscenium perspective for dance from the three dimensional stage to the virtual world's two dimensional screen, my hope was to ground the audience not just in the eye but in the entire body. Through film editing techniques, I played with time, speed, physical effort and changing body configurations to stimulate the spectator's movement sensations. One of my aims for this work was for the audience to have an inner body experience as they watched my film.

This process of responsiveness is known as kinesthetic empathy. To help the audience become somatically aware, *BodyVerse* is bookended by audience participation. The prelude (before the viewing of my film) is a guided warm-up that incorporates touch, breathing, and movement to help the audience sense specific inner and outer body systems. After the film, a brief meditation follows to incorporate personal body awareness into the absorption of an aesthetic experience.

Defining Somatics

Soma is a Greek term for the living body, which is the root of somatic practices. This wide variety of experiential practices involve performing movement as you focus on your

experience and expand your internal awareness. Somatic practices can be recreational, like dance, yoga, aikido, pilates and massage, or focussed on movement education like Alexander technique, Feldenkrais method, Body Mind Centering, and Laban movement analysis. In a 2006 *Dance Magazine* article, Nancy Wozny, who has been writing about somatics in dance for two decades, describes somatics as the “study of the body experienced from within” (1). Glenna Batson, who was on the Dance Committee for the International Association for Dance and Science (IADMS), reminds us that somatics can be “referred to as body therapies, bodywork, body-mind integration, body-mind disciplines, movement awareness, and movement (re) education” (2).

Proto-somatics visionaries such as Francois Delsarte (1811–1871), Emile Jaques Dalcroze (1865– 1950), and Rudolph von Laban (1879–1958), moved away from the rigors of physical training toward bodily cues arising from breath, touch, and motion (Batson 2). These concepts grew into somatic techniques we see today, such as the Feldenkrais method, developed by Moshé Feldenkrais (1904-1984). He was a physicist and Judo master, who created a somatic method to help people increase their range and economy of motion, improve flexibility and coordination. Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen is a dancer who developed Body Mind Centering, which focuses on specific approaches to the personal embodiment of our cells and body systems. Thomas Hanna (1928-1990) was a philosopher and movement theorist who proposed that negative health effects are due to what he called “Sensory Motor Amnesia,” a phenomenon in which individuals lose both sensory awareness and muscular control of certain parts of their body. He coined the term *somatics* in 1976. All of these techniques help people tap into the assorted systems our body houses.

Somatic techniques utilize a range of “tools” for accessing these systems, such as sensory prompts, touch, imagery, breath work, hands-on guidance, and meditation. During the 1960s and '70s, a time of political and civil unrest, many Americans united as one “body” to resist the Vietnam War as well as conventional social, political, and economic principles. This countercultural impulse shaped dance practices as well. A small group of choreographers in New York City challenged American modern dance forms based on narrative, expression, and formal stylization, and favored ordinary movements, gestures common to daily life, and spontaneity. One of these notable dancers and choreographers was Steve Paxton. As a way to break away from conventional modern dance forms, Paxton used dance improvisation to move the body in a “free” rhythmic style. His motto was: “Start moving and let it happen”(Paxton Documentary, 2:18). This motto was a source of inspiration for this project as I resisted following any kind of choreographed movement style and allowed my movement to flow freely from my body.

The steps I take and the moves I make for *BodyVerse* are unbound by a traditional notion of choreography and the choreographer's eye. When I reach my arm over my head, touch my foot or pound my chest, these actions are improvised, guided by an intuitive sense of moving that reach into the principles of postmodern dance of the '60s, which Ann Dills and Ann Cooper Albright, authors of *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*, regard as “focusing on the...experience of moving...” (409). These principles inspired me to move intuitively. The force of my breath's inhalation lifted my chest to sky and the energy of a southwest wind influenced the directions I faced and how I changed levels. Experiencing movement as well as the world around me in this way deepened my perception of my body as well as the world: the systems that live within me and outside of me can effect how I move and feel.

Yvonne Rainer is another dancer-choreographer rooted in the 1960s' resistances of the established expressionist approach to dance art, who pulled the body away from narrative, idealization, and conventional techniques to show "the body as muscular fact" (Lambert-Beatty 5). Art historian Carrie Lambert-Betty describes it this way in her dance history, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s*. Rainer had dancers hoist, climb, and roll over each other in her 1970 work *Continuous Project—Altered Daily*. I use this idea of "muscular fact" to strip away lights, costumes, make-up, lavish sets and fancy feats – fast multiple spins and high flying leaps – to home in on a viewer's direct perceptual experience of the body before them (mine, in this case) and around them (theirs).

In *BodyVerse* there are moments when I slow the film down to accentuate joint and tendon movement. Slow motion, observes Karen Pearlman, author of *Cutting Rhythms*, foregrounds "emotion or action [that] is in progress." Movement "portrayed in slow motion...automatically [has] more 'emphasis by duration' " (208). By slowing down anatomical movements, such as extension, flexion, rotation, adduction, abduction, inversion and eversion, the film heightens the importance of the movement and invites time for the viewer's eyes to focus on the skin's textured landscape: skin, hair, veins, tendons and joints as well as the actions of the internal structures that are the actual source of the movement.

Rainer says "I love the body, its actual weight, mass and unenchanted physicality" (Lambert-Beatty 6); I do, too, and as a way of accentuating my body's quality and energy of movement, I slowed down a swinging torso action "so time becomes a sort of cushion of air holding [my] body up as it moves"(Pearlman 209). When my body appears to strain against time and gravity, my muscles appear to intensify their effort. The cage of my ribs, which protect the contents (such as the heart and lungs) of my thoracic cavity, slowly floats to the underside of my

skin and presses on it enough to be seen. These slow motion moments remind the viewer that there is more to the body than skin. There is muscle, bone, vessels and lymph nodes.

Touch

Skin is one of the largest single organ² systems of the body and the primary organ of touch. It has different functions, both protective and communicative, and sheaths the body from head to toe. Throughout its life, skin continually informs our impressions of what exists external to and what exists internal to the body. Deane Juhan, a movement therapist, bodyworker, and author of *Job's Body*, refers to skin as the “interface between [the] body and the world” (34). In *BodyVerse*, when I move, touch, rub, shake, and squeeze my skin, I am not making contact because it feels good, I do it to enliven the worlds beneath my skin. The friction that I generate warms my skin and the warming sensation moves underneath my skin and changes the characteristics of my connective tissue³ through a physiological occurrence called thixotropy.

Juhan describes connective tissue's solvent states and its various forms of chemical transformation as a “fluid crystal, a largely non-living material that can be adjusted over a wide range from sol (liquid) to gel (gelatinous), here watery, there, gelatinous, here dense and elastic, there hard as a stone” (66). Similar to the way that jello solidifies while sitting in the refrigerator and melts when whipped vigorously or exposed to low heat, I raised my temperature and energy levels through penetrative touch and movement to create a greater degree of fluidity and ease of movement as I danced. Being in this state opened up my body and allowed me to feel like I had space to move between my muscles and viscera; the muscles between my ribcage were free to expand and contract effortlessly.

² An organ is a collection of tissue that structurally form a functional unit specialized to perform a particular function” (National Human Genome Research Institute)

³ Connective tissue surrounds each individual muscle and bone. It encases the organs and lines the body cavities, tendons and ligaments.

This awareness of space in my body moved beyond me as well. In the filming I saw the clearance between trees, the cracks in and between rocks, and the space between blades of grass. They invited me to dance with earth's spaciousness, and connect me, according to somatic movement therapist Linda Hartley in her book *Wisdom of the Body Moving*, to my "greater home, the earth" (xxi). If we allow ourselves to engage with nature in this way, it broadens our definition of a home. It is not just a seven hundred square foot apartment in Brooklyn, NY, it is the land outside, untouched by paved roads and streets, the grass, the trees, wildlife, and the sea.

Touch is associated with emotions as well. We use words like "touched" or "moved" when affected deeply. Scenes in the film of myself touching different parts of my body reflect back to the viewer their own bodily experiences and perceptions. As they observe *BodyVerse* my hope is that, to quote psychologist and author of *Fruits of the Moon Tree* Alan Blearkley, "in this mirroring [they] learn about those parts of [themselves] that are unacknowledged and unexplored" (6). When I touch my shoulder it might summon the viewer's memory of a past shoulder injury or when it was a shoulder (for a friend or loved one) to cry on... brushing the length of my legs might move the viewer to notice the size and shape of their legs or the experience of climbing a tree or mountain trail. This mirroring is not a true mirror that reflects an optical image; it is an invitation for viewers to experience themselves physically and emotionally.

Time-Space-Movement

The sun comes up each day and, from an earthling's point of view, moves across the sky before descending below the horizon. Often we are not aware of the sun's subtle changes until we look up to see a sunset's spectacular orange, pink, blue, red... Breathing is like the sun because it carries on whether or not we pay attention. Whether we move or are still, and whatever the

quality of that rest or activity, we breathe. Breathing occurs unconsciously, but sometimes we become aware of our breathing: sprinting while huffing and puffing, trying to catch a bus, trying to catch your breath after getting the wind knocked out of you because you fell flat on your back, or taking a Vinyasa yoga⁴ class and focusing on sustained breathing with each movement.

In the film I guide my movement with my breathing so my body can embrace both expansiveness and compactness. There are moments when I drop my torso below my pelvis as I exhale so I can soften my muscles and fold deeply from my hip joints. And when I inhale it's as if I am inflating my body and extending further into space. The most active agent in breathing is the diaphragm. It attaches to the inside of the rib cage and lower spine and has the shape of a lopsided mushroom. There is a spatial rhythm to the diaphragm's changing shape. With every inhale it drops down and flattens like a pancake, then expands and opens up like a parachute when you exhale.

Mabel Elsworth Todd, founder of Ideokinesis⁵, writes about the diaphragm in relation to the body and time in her book *The Thinking Body*: “In this mechanism [of the diaphragm] must reside the accurate time-keeper of the changing rhythms of the various systems involved in living” (217). The body systems—circulatory, lymphatic, musculoskeletal, endocrine, respiratory, and nervous—rely on diaphragmatic breathing to assist and support them. Likewise, *BodyVerse* is not dependent on a musical composition's structured tempo for its own structure. Instead it relies on the occasional sounds of breathing in the score to give the camera work and changing scenes a sense of time. Deep and controlled inhales and exhales are synced with scene changes while sharp and shallow breathing speeds up the camera work. For Body Mind Centering (BMC) practitioners, dynamic movement qualities manifest as the movers discover the relations

⁴Vinyasa yoga strings postures together so that you move from one to another, seamlessly, using breath.

⁵ Ideokinesis is an approach to improving posture, alignment, and movement through guided imagery that uses metaphors.

between their bodily experiences and anatomical systems. The body systems (musculoskeletal, circulatory, lymphatic, nervous, and endocrine) are expressed and revealed in movement qualities and patterns.

As I danced in *BodyVerse*, I played with movements that drew my attention toward and away from the earth. In BMC these movement patterns are associated with the parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems. For example, parasympathetic movements have “less awareness of and attention to the external environment” (Hartley 251), such as when the front of my torso and face pull toward the center and into my body. The sympathetic movements are outwardly focused and oriented, such as when my back arches and chest and eyes face the sky “to meet the environment” (Hartley 251).

The way I move revealed the actions and energies of my inner body systems. As Linda Hartley observes, “ We are expressing or initiating [our movement] through some aspects of the...systems” (238). As I improvised for *BodyVerse*, I did not take the time to see, make sense of, correct, or judge my movement. I allowed myself to experience my body and “simply move in a natural and unselfconscious way.” (Bainbridge-Cohen 64) With each second and minute, I moved within and beyond these body systems as a source for bodily awareness and to convey dynamic movement qualities, such as slow or fast, light or heavy, flowing or staccato.

If you were to watch an excerpt of George Balanchine’s *Divertimento No. 15*⁶, you would see a ballerina perform a solo that mimics Mozart’s fast tempo. Rather than let her quicksilver movements skim across the eyes, deepen your viewership of the solo through the BMC lens. Imagine that the dancer is expressing blood flow. Her quick, sharp, and attentive, with a dash of fleeting pauses and sustained poses, communicates arterial flow (blood moving

⁶ *Divertimento No. 15*, was made in 1956. I reference a 2018 excerpt (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3BfT-SiKLk>)

away from the heart) – a “lively rhythm of alternating rest and activity, contraction and release of muscles synchronized with the heartbeat. The attention is alert and actively touches the environment; the direction is outward from the heart center, through the limbs and senses toward the external world” (Hartley 274).

Eiko and Koma are two Japanese-born choreographers that have been creating work together since 1972. They infuse a “relentless stillness that subverts and transcends our everyday notions of space and time” (Eiko and Koma Website). In their work *River*⁷, created in 1995, Eiko and Koma move in a body of water, their own bodies half submerged. They move so slowly that it appears they are still. Placing *River* under the BMC lens we see “cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) being expressed.” The brain, spinal cord, and spinal nerves are bathed in CSF’s clear and colorless fluid, similar to water. Eiko and Koma’s slow movements and environment can seem to be initiated by “the movement of the CSF...very slow, almost imperceptible..timeless flow, of suspension in time and space” (Hartley 281). The two contrasting movement qualities in *Divertimento No. 15* and *River* are examples of how variously expressive our body systems can be. As a dancer/choreographer it reminds me that the body is capable of expressing movement deeper than muscle and bone and as a filmmaker it reminds me that the body is a creative source for crafting film structure.

In *BodyVerse*, I expressed both blood and CSF fluids. I used quick arm extensions and fast spine undulations in one scene and then, in another scene, my hand slowly moving across the screen. The independent nature of these dynamic movements are not only beautiful to look at, but they also emphasized the film’s fluid nature. I did not stick to shooting one scene; I changed scenes multiple times, mirroring my body, always moving, never still.

⁷I reference their 1996 rendition

The Earth With and Within Me

In the filming, I placed my hands in cool damp sand, and the holes I dug in the sand were shallow or deep. This moment increased my understanding of the earth, that it is a living system and we have a responsibility to protect it. When I danced in the filming, one of my musings was that the earth with and within my body reminds me of humanity's regard or disregard for the earth. We have the ability to disrupt, displace, and destroy, as well as maintain, sustain and preserve it.

Jennifer Monson has made the urgency of our power and abuse of the natural world the focal point of her work. Monson is an American dancer and choreographer, who has been making groundbreaking work since 1983. She has explored animal navigation and migration, and human impact on natural sites, among other ecological and biological issues. In a 2013 interview, at the Chicago Humanities Festival, she spoke about her own experience witnessing the ever-changing habitats and ecosystems of her hometown as it urbanized, “turning into malls and big box stores” (Monson Interview 28:40). Urbanization has re-visioned our place in the ecosystem to the extent that we have alienated ourselves from the rhythms of nature. The flood of New York City’s lights dims twinkling stars in the night sky, motorized vehicles drown out the sounds of bird calls, and the soft rustling sounds of tree leaves in a breeze have been replaced with street signs, cell towers, and light posts. In the same interview, Monson talked about using technology as a tool to “make visible what is absent”: to document and archive the absences of habitats and ecosystems (Monson Interview, 28:25).

In this spirit, I utilize technological devices such as crossfades, fadeouts, and foreground/background contrast as a way to dig into the film making, giving *BodyVerse* a multi-dimensional feeling. A couple of examples of this are when an image of my body dancing

energetically crossfades to an image of moving water and continues my body's energy, and when the sound of breathing in a fadeout gives darkness a feeling of bodily life. As multidisciplinary artist Ana Sanchez-Colberg tells journalist Erin Brannigan, these devices (listed above) allow for "a game with time and space which challenged the linear, syntactical approach favored by most theatrical dance" (Brannigan 5). In other words, in dance film, time and space are ours to create and reorder. For instance, I displaced the sound of wind and my hands clapping and thumping on my body from one image to another clip. I distorted the sound of water. I also did this with images – water and tree branches over my body – so that sensory information is rearranged from the "actual perception." The use of editing and locations allowed me to create a sense of altered reality in which to immerse the viewers.

Both the human body and the earth– a planetary body– exhibit sound, temperature, texture and shape. These are attributes through which I receive the expressive earth and the earth receives me. The breath of the earth is wind and it moves in between my hair follicles, touches and cools my skin. As I dance, the earth's surface receives my weight and energy. Andrea Olsen, performer, author and Professor Emerita of Dance at Middlebury College, emphasizes the interconnectedness of the body and earth. Olsen proposes that the body and all its underlying systems can help people experience the earth and in return deepen their own self-awareness. The muscles in our body "pull, they never push" (128). I am aware of this kinesiology, and with every reach of my legs, arms and hands I pull into my environment as well as my body. With every movement and breath, I engage with nature's texture, shape, smell, and color, and open possibilities for metaphors. I take on the shape of a rock with the curving of my back. The soft dirt and grass under my feet inform me of the supple toes and tough tendons that live underneath the skin. Veins in my hands are the veins in tree leaves. Tree branches and roots innervate

different parts of my body, evoking the nervous system. Digging into the earth's skin⁸ I move and dig into sand and imagine that I am reaching into my body to feel its dense muscular tissue.

There are various somatic techniques that can serve as passageways into one's body systems. In Olsen's book *Body and Earth*, about discovering connections among our bodies and the earth, there are "To Do" exercises for the reader. Some consist of meditations to connect with the body and place. I tried a "To Do" called "Place Visit: Body Scan"⁹ (10) that had me lying in a constructive rest position, with my head and back on the ground. With my eyes closed I drew my attention to different parts of my body, starting from my face and skull down to my toes. I took a different approach for *BodyVerse*. I use images of nature overlaid on my body to build similarities and connections between body and earth. Rather than have the audience search around in a room with their eyes closed for bodily connections, I use visual metaphors. They give meaning when bodily events can not be adequately described straightforwardly (Bleakley 29). Sand might represent skin; tree roots and branches overlaid on a body evoke a body's circulatory and nervous system. These scenes suggest a one-ness with nature as well as encourage us to "reconnect with stones, trees, and animals, through the mineral, plant and animal part of ourselves..." (Bleakley 150). Many of us are urbanized people who need reminders to step outside of the concrete jungle, step away from our technological devices, and step into our bodies and discover what we are truly made of: organic life. Although created with technology, *BodyVerse* is a reminder.

My film is a kind of aide-mémoire with a future focus, in that it enlightens the viewers to discover the self and the environment rather than recalling a memory of it. It is about discovering a connection: through the body we experience the earth and through the earth we

⁸ Olsen refers to soil as the skin.

⁹ Olsen informs the reader that this exercise is a variation of a Buddhist practice called Vipassana Meditation.

understand our body. It is about discovering exchanges: when we inhale we take in the outerworld and it becomes apart of our innerworld and when we exhale our innerworld becomes a part of the outerworld. It is through discovering interactions such as these that we come to know ourselves.

The Camera as a Creative Medium

I used my smartphone camera as a tool for creating *BodyVerse* simply because it was the available technology. If I was inspired at a moment's notice by the warm sun on my hand I recorded an improvised a hand dance. Sometimes rain falling on tree leaves or bird songs moved me to record the sound. I was conscious of not using my phone's video camera capabilities to replicate images or videos in the way that many Instagrammers do. I wanted to make a film that felt authentic and not "sacrifice my own unique self in this era of reproducibility" as podcast host Steven West of *Philosophize This!* discusses in an episode about art in the age of digital reproduction (*Philosophize This!* 22:10).

I was dancer, camera operator, and editor in the making of my film. More common is the approach used in *Nine Variations on a Dance Theme* (1966), by American documentary filmmaker and pioneer of time lapse photography Hilary Harris (1929-1999). The camera work in *Nine Variations on a Dance Theme* is smooth and direct, Harris "trains his [camera] lens on Ms. de Jong (performer)" (New York Times) like a choreographer directing a dancer. Rather than keep my phone's camera in a linear position, I used my phone's camera as an extension of my body, as a mobile limb. Swirling, scooping, twisting and turning my phone's camera, I framed my body and the space around me in unconventional and disorienting ways. You see a close up of my chest then a transition down the front and side of my torso down my leg, landing on my foot on a bed of grass, then out onto my hand in front of tree leaves. My

unchoreographed camera movements felt rich and liberating, freeing me from what American philosopher and psychologist John Dewey describes in his book *Art As Experience* as the “dry stiffness of a straight line” (104) typically found in the “selfie”¹⁰.

Some people use their smartphone cameras with an orientation toward conformity and repetition. They dress as others dress, dance as others dance, and pose in similar landscapes as others. If you scroll through Instagram to connect with brands, celebrities, family and friends, you might come across an Instagram page called *Insta Repeat*– it is a social media platform where people can post replicated images: the same pose in similar environments. Why does this happen? Although Margaret H’ Doubler, who created the first dance major at the University of Wisconsin and developed a vibrant dance pedagogy, wrote *Dance: A Creative Art Experience* over fifty years ago, her writing about the psychology of conformity still rings true: “Although secure in individual freedom and opportunity... [w]e feel safe in conforming, in being like others" (28-29).

Even in our land that purports to value individualism, many people’s energies replicate an image for the comfort of a “like,” fending off criticism. Images on *Insta Repeat* remind me of skin in a way, in that they are only surfaces. They reveal textures, shapes, forms, and play with light, but they do not go beyond that, below the surface. There is no feeling of muscle or bone because many of the images on *Ista Repeat* are concerned with pleasing aesthetics, stylish clothes and beautiful landscapes. As a viewer, the many repeated images do not entice me to sense or notice my body - they only please my eye.

I used the camera to engage with the spectator below the skin-deep surface, through what is termed *motor empathy or kinesthetic empathy*. Matthew Reason, a senior lecturer in theatre and the head of MA Studies in Creative Practice at York St. John University in England, and Dee

¹⁰ *How to Take a Good Selfie*, Allure Magazine: <https://www.allure.com/story/how-to-take-good-selfies>

Reynolds, professor of French at the University of Manchester co-wrote, *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*. In their book they explain that *kinesthetic empathy or motor empathy* is “sensory responses, movements in film (both the meta-movements of the camera and the depicted movements of objects and subjects) [that] generate an effective internal kinesis in the spectator” (98). *BodyVerse* was made to elicit this kind of bodily response.

Improvisational Filming and Editing

I did not spend time planning each and every shot; I did not have a clear idea of what I wanted as I embarked on the filming phase of the project. The only thing that was clear was my desire to film nature and myself. So I set out into the world, walked around and filmed what inspired me.

As I walked by a beach my eyes were drawn to its sandy shore. With my camera in hand and arm extended out over the sand I took long, overhead shots to describe its smoothness. Without thinking I laid the side of my body on the sand, pulled my arm close to my chest, and angled the camera in my hand about a quarter of an inch from the sand. Bringing the camera this close to the sand revealed its granular rocky material. Then I started digging in in the sand and slowly reached my hand and arm, moving the camera into the sand to describe its depth. Each shot was an impulsive response, leading me to the next shot. The filming process felt quick. This approach to the filming shaped the editing process as well.

After filming, I compiled all the clips I had filmed and stored them onto my computer. With plenty of footage to choose from, I threw each video clip into iMovie’s film editing application and began to play around with ordering and manipulating the footage. A shot of my back moving felt bare, but I saw the potential for an overlay of a film clip of grass over my body.

The contrast between movement (of my back) and stillness (of the grass) felt flat, it did not feel right. I removed the grass and overlaid images of tree branches and the sky over my body but it made the scene feel airy and light, it still did not feel right. Eventually, I overlaid a clip of water moving on my body. The counterpoint of my body's solid shape contrasted with the water's shapeless form, reinforced my project's body and nature theme. This process of discovery made me recognize that just like dance improvisation, filming and editing can be improvisational as well.

Without using a storyboard or storyline I felt my way through the making of this project. I did not pre-plan what shot would go where and instead of being content with original footage I looked at several ways to establish a new sequencing order and at times mixing together multiple video clips together. For example, an arm reach at the end of a video clip was edited and placed in the middle of the footage, an image of me walking toward the camera at the beginning of a scene was put at the end, and a close up shot of my torso from one video clip was mixed into another clip. In the spirit of improvisation, not being tied down to the original footage's chronological order gave me the freedom to cut it up, rearrange sections and kept me intuiting what was to come next. Being a novice in film making and film editing, but with my history in dance improvisation, I tapped into dance improvisation's intuitive spirit to create and develop structure and order in *BodyVerse*.

Zoom as a Performance Platform

BodyVerse premiered remotely, via zoom. I engaged with the audience in a pre-viewing warm up before they went off to watch the film. I guided the audience in touching, squeezing, holding, and tapping their bodies, and with their eyes, studying the rivers of veins in their hands.

I then gave them the link in the “chat” to view my dance film in their own space. Darvejon Jones, a first year MFA candidate in dance at Hunter College, expressed his appreciation for the warm up, in a written review: “I...found that the veil that usually separates viewer and artist was obliterated in our participation” (1). Audience engagement was a focus of post-modern dance artists. Yvonne Rainer experimented with audiences moving around and through her work (*Continuous Project-Altered Daily*, 1970) as a way of “activating” (Lambert-Beatty 218) the audience. In this spirit, my pre-viewing warmup functioned as a threshold for the audience to step through and into my work.

As a way for the viewer to be somatically aware of their bodies in a unique way, I suggested the audience dim their lights and wear headphones while watching my film. These prompts encouraged the viewer to settle into the work, be in touch with the space around them, their bodies, to disregard time, and to be “in the moment.” Creative movement practitioners Caryn McHose and Kevin Frank highlight a student’s report on space in their book *How Life Moves: Exploration in Meaning and Body Awareness*: “I felt calm and noticed I was less worried about the time and how long we were going to be here. I felt a smooth sensation in my chest and belly (10). Similarly, Jones commented about the showing of BodyVerse “I noticed an increased sensory and nervous system response in a way I have never before experienced while viewing a dance performance” (Jones 1). These statements ratify my decision to enact pre-viewing prompts in that they not only provided a viewing experience for the audience but they created a soothing atmosphere for the audience to experience any physical sensations that could arise within themselves from the experience of viewing the film.

Conclusion

Through this work I found that film technology challenged me as much as choreography. Dance film is not a pale comparison to live concert dance—it has the ability to offer a rich viewing experience. I negotiated my moving body in space within the center and distal edges of the video camera's frame, my body appeared at different scales, from the infinite to the microscopic, color filters were used to define different parts of my body or the environment, overlaid images gave my body a sense of depth and inwardness, and timelapse, slow and fast motion helped the audience relish a moment before being thrown into a high paced visual moment.

Achieving and mastering steps and choreography is something I am good at, and it gives me a sense of pride. Dancing with others on stage and in front of a live audience is an exhilarating experience. The physical training that is involved in dance has helped me be a confident person and comfortable in my own skin. I have met amazing people and made friendships through my years in dance. As I considered my relationship with dance and began to develop my thesis project, I knew I wanted to make a work that gave meaning to movement and an unconventional view of the body. When I entered into the dance graduate program at Hunter in 2019 I had every intention of making a thesis project for a live concert dance but Covid-19 mandates pushed me to create a dance film for zoom. Inspired by body systems, the natural world, and how by I move and feel in real life, the images, visual metaphors and movements in *BodyVerse* involved a new set of creative rules for me.

Making a dance film simultaneously gave me many opportunities and presented its own unique challenges. One of the biggest struggles I faced was just the planning of the film. Since I didn't have a great deal of experience creating dance films, it was hard for me to figure out how to execute my vision. I spent a lot of time playing around with filming and editing, and while the

experimentation was really helpful it was incredibly time-consuming and inefficient. I look forward to being able to streamline this process in the future. At the same time, I recognize and honor the improvisational approach to filming and editing that I discovered in this project. Though I put a lot of work into this piece and am proud of it, there were some things I wish I could have done differently. If I could go back and do it again, I would dance in the woods to capture a wild environment rather than dancing in a backyard with a manicured lawn, and I would have asked a videographer to reshoot specific moments to get multiple camera angles of me dancing. Regardless of the outcome it was an amazing learning experience, and now I know what works for me and what not to do moving forward.

In reflecting on the totality of this project's process and the product, I feel I created a beautiful art work. I have received responses from those who attended that affirmed the lasting impact of that encounter. People verbally expressed an appreciation for the intimacy and calm encounter they were able to have during my thesis event. I hope the film accomplished my larger goal of enlivening the viewers' experience of their personal physical beings in relation to our earthly home.

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