

Sensing Dance: Finding Access Intimacy with a Dysmorphic Bodymind

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About the Author:

Krista K. Miranda, PhD, is an interdisciplinary artist/scholar invested in the nuances of embodiment, imagining better futures for queer and crip life, and recuperating the figure of the nonreproducing woman. Her in-progress monograph, *Playing with Your Parts: Dismantling Bodily “Wholeness” through Queer and Crip Performance* is grounded in performance studies, critical disability studies, and gender and sexuality studies. Her work can be found in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies*, *The Oxford Handbook on Dance and Theater*, *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, and *Pornographies: Critical Positions*, with a forthcoming publication in *Women’s Innovations in Theater, Dance, and Performance*. Miranda’s artistic practices are situated at the intersections of dance, experimental screendance, miniature installation art, poetry, and collaborative work steeped in radical care.

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What would you like? What do you need? Where would you like to go? We begin Alexandra Beller's weekly Bartenieff Fundamentals™ class—a somatic technique that facilitates functional, efficient movement—with permission to be bodyminds with a variety of needs. As we commence each class with a body scan,¹ Beller encourages us to approach our practice with a sense of curiosity without judgement. *What will my body teach me today?* Relinquishing her power as the pedagogical authority, or, more accurately, utilizing the power allocated to her due to the inherent power imbalances in the classroom, Beller gives us permission to listen to our bodies to cultivate our own embodied knowledge production.

Attending class from our home spaces due to COVID-19 lockdown, we sit facing our computers to breathe together. Beller reminds us that our chins are probably jutting forward toward our screens—a postural side effect of Zoom life. She brings our attention to the pelvis. I notice I have more weight on my left sitz bone. I feel the deep creases at my hips with my legs crossed in front of me, how the bottom of my front ribs protrude outward. I exhale to soften my front body which softens my back body, bringing me a little more upright. The process of noticing continues up our bodies. How, with my arms resting at my sides, the head of my right humerus bone slides partially out of the socket. I have to keep pulling it back into place. I notice the fold below my large belly, how I can feel the bottom of my stomach on my thighs, the bottoms of my breasts resting on top of my belly. As I inhale my stomach expands, something I allow it to do now. Many dancers my age who grew up in the studio being trained in techniques like ballet, jazz, and modern dance weren't permitted to breathe like this, full-bellied, unrestrained. We were taught to keep our stomachs in while our ribs expanded laterally as we inhaled. Accordion breaths.

Beller, whose in-person modern dance technique classes I took regularly in downtown Manhattan back in my twenties and early thirties, responded to the onset of the pandemic, like many movement practitioners, by offering online movement classes via Zoom. After my most recent extended hiatus from dance, I wanted to begin dancing again but had not been able to bring myself into a studio for fear that my eating disorders and body dysmorphia would be triggered as a now fat, middle-aged woman in eating disorder recovery.² Taking online movement classes at the height of the pandemic provided me with a safe way back into dance: at home, dancing with others in small boxes on a computer screen—I could even turn off my video if I wanted to, but I noticed that I never bothered to identify my particular box on Zoom. In this

essay, I begin by exploring returning to dance during pandemic lockdown to discuss accessibility in dance spaces in terms of chronic mental illness, specifically regarding eating disorders and body dysmorphia. By meditating on the experience of employing technology to dance together during the onset of COVID-19 (before access to vaccinations), this essay takes dancing during lockdown as a starting point to imagine practices in line with what Mia Mingus calls “access intimacy” (2017). Access intimacy, Mingus explains, “moves the work of access out of the realm of only logistics and into the realm of relationships and understanding disabled people as humans, not burdens” (2017). Mingus argues that instead of forcing disabled people to adapt to fit into an ableist world, access intimacy “*calls upon able bodied people to inhabit our world*” (2017, original emphasis). In other words, spaces and social dynamics are created by centering the needs of disabled people from their inception. Access is not an add on, but a way of life. It’s important to note that access is not just for disabled people, but for anyone on the margins of a particular environment like queer people, people of color, immigrants, parents, and, say, fat people in spaces that valorize thinness (Mingus 2017).³

Aside from good work being done by practitioners who attend to the reality that our bodies are bodies in difference and that a prescribed way of appearing will always be oppressive, I have yet to encounter discourse about coming back to dance as a fat body, a “twice the size than I used to be” body. Often when we think of access in dance spaces we forget about mental illness.⁴ Ifasina Clear of Get Embodied, which promotes access-centered Black cultural dance, acknowledges this gap in an Instagram post, stating:

I am observing and reconciling the reality that some people might have space to consider ways to change how they teach or create spaces that include disabled people, but not fat people. That size and fatness are hard for some people to center in their work on access and inclusion. That the dominant culture makes normalizing fat bodies and celebrating a wide range of fat bodies repulsive, uncomfortable, and outright terrifying. (2022)

What would you like? What do you need? I would like to feel as if my crip bodymind, my now fat bodymind that has been so many sizes over the years, is not an exception.

Aimi Hamraie, in their 2021 talk, "Disability Justice & Access-Centered Pedagogy in the Pandemic" with Mimi Khúc, argues that access should not be pathologized or medicalized because “we all have needs,” needs that are individualized and constantly in flux. We must, they assert, normalize needing. Hamraie conceives of access as an ongoing collective project where

structures are created to meet the needs of all students and teachers as a collective responsibility. Mimi Khúc offers us a collaborative approach to attending to this collective responsibility when she describes her commitment to a redistribution of power. Admitting that she believes her power as a professor is somewhat arbitrary, she finds ways to redistribute this power to give her students the space to fulfill their needs as humans and learners. This break from tradition may take a tremendous amount of trust on the part of the instructor. And with this change in dynamic there is also a radical affective difference between how energy is transmitted when teaching in-person as opposed to on Zoom or other virtual platforms. I'm thinking about how my body on this floor in Massachusetts cannot be seen by Beller's body on her floor in New York. About how Beller asks me to sense what my body needs, to notice without a visual—neither hers nor mine. About the ways her dexterous use of language guides me through class, allowing me to discover movement pathways in a permissive environment without being constantly corrected (unless I ask her for feedback) or being told that my body is somehow wrong. Beller is a mentor, an aide, not the type of authoritarian pedagogue that dominated so many of the dance studios of my youth.

I will never forget when I was in ninth grade at my magnet high school, my beloved history teacher Mr. Wimmers said to our class, “The dancers are generally the best [academic] students. They are the military of the arts’ disciplines.” This was a compliment and we all knew what he meant. We were *very disciplined*. We were (for the most part) silent, compliant, and were not in a position to say “No.” It is laughable to think of the cultivation of access intimacy in those spaces, which generally requires speaking freely about your needs and vulnerabilities. In deep contrast to spaces that cultivate access intimacy, the dance studio was not a place where we were encouraged to voice our needs (or have them at all), but when we did, like when we had to “sit out” of dance class because we were injured or didn’t feel well, we got “that look” of disappointment. They weren’t even being mean necessarily. There was just no room for not dancing. There were no structures in place for injury or illness that were encouraged for saying “no” to dancing that day.⁵

Nicolas Shannon Savard (2023), discussing participating in Theatrical Intimacy Education’s “Consent in the Acting Classroom” virtual workshop facilitated by Kim Shively, reminds us of the “importance of recognizing the power dynamics between actors and director in theatrical settings and students and instructors in classroom settings” (63), because the power

imbalances embedded within these structures do not always avail students the capacity to say “no.” In the thirty-ish years of dancing before pausing as I was sucked into Ph.D.-land, I learned nothing about consent or agency growing up in studio spaces. The “militarism” my history teacher half-joked about that was emblematic of our training meant that our bodies were to be put to use by others, where the Other was the Dance Teacher in service of the overarching notion of Dance. If you did not do as you were told, you would not fulfill your potential (and, when in high school, your grades could suffer). You might be wondering why I don’t simply abandon Western studio, choreography-based dance classes altogether for the more forgiving, inclusive vibe of improvisation-based dance techniques. As I’ve gotten older, I have found myself participating more and more in forms of improvisational dance, especially when it comes to creating performance work. But truth be told, this is out of my comfort zone—learning choreography is my happy place. Improvisation-based classes give me anxiety. Because there is no blueprint for what is about to happen, I don’t know what I am saying yes to. Plus, the heart wants what it wants, and what my heart wants is for my bodymind to feel welcome and safe in the forms of dance that feed my soul.

I offer the following challenges to practitioners reading this essay: What would it mean for dance pedagogy to undergo a largescale reorientation that dismantles the hierarchical structures of both the teacher/student relationship and the ocularcentrism that tends to dominate our engagement with dance? What would it do to shift agency from instructor to student, and for the tyranny of the visual to be replaced by a more phenomenological felt sense? I argue that there are valuable resources we can gather from other access-centered practices, like audio description for blind and visually impaired people, that can be employed to create inclusive dance spaces for those of us with body dysmorphia.

Dance company Kinetic Light’s founder and Artistic Director Alice Sheppard expands the concept of “access” beyond the kind of “add ons” the general public is familiar with when efforts are made (hurray) when a disabled person shows up, or when building codes mandate structural inclusion: such as the hiring of an ASL interpreter who stands on the side of a stage during a lecture or performance, the addition of ramps, accessible parking, etc. Instead, Sheppard, speaking in the context of performance, explains how access can be utilized as a mindset and creative force that shapes the work itself, stating that access should be considered as “an ethic, as an aesthetic, as a practice, as a promise, as a relationship with the audience” (2022).

Access lays the groundwork for the contours of a work, its means of production, and the nature of the relationships between choreographers, directors, performers, and audience members. Access is not just about being able to get into the room (although that will always be essential), it's about relationships, about how my bodymind meets your bodymind. Access intimacy allows me to be vulnerable about how I'm feeling right now, in this moment, about what I can and cannot do, about my pain levels, about how much energy I'm willing to spare. *Access enables the conditions for consent.* Access is the starting point. This essay begins with an autoethnographic meditation on my experience taking Alexandra Beller's Bartenieff Fundamentals™ classes during the Summer and Fall of 2020 via Zoom, then discusses dance practices created in collaboration with blind artists, such as Jose Miguel Esteban and Devon Healey's duet "The Breath and Movement of Blindness" (2022) and Heather Shaw and Krishna Washburn's documentary screendance *Telephone* (2023). I argue that turning to the works and access practices, like the audio description of Esteban and Healey and Shaw and Washburn, as models can transform the way dance practitioners engage with dance as both an aesthetic and a pedagogical practice, thereby making it more accessible for chronically mentally ill bodyminds that are often neglected when we think of access.

Dancing the Floor

There are multiple Zoom gallery pages of us, our bodies small figures in tiny worlds, or "portal[s]" as Petra Kupperts calls them (2022, 6). A few bedrooms. A lot of living rooms. Furniture positioned along the perimeters in makeshift dance spaces. Some curious, attention-seeking animals make their presence known. A dirty plate left on the table from breakfast. A partner crossing the frame. I am in my "studio," a spare room with exercise equipment positioned along the walls. After three years in this house, I still haven't hung the fat, queer, femme art created by disability studies scholar Shayda Kafai to fill this room with bodies that are large, soft, and hairy. Their framed images line the floor against the wall, out of the way. A reminder.

We transition to our backs, knees bent toward the ceiling, feet flat on the floor, grounding. This class is what my bodymind experiences as "restorative dance" because of its ease of movement and emphasis on biomechanics instead of muscular effort. Most of the class is

spent lying on the ground doing floorwork: weight shifting, moving sequentially through our spine and joints, using momentum, attending to multiple forms of accessibility for my particular bodymind. Sometimes just getting out of bed feels impossible. Depression is flesh like lead, the weight of it yanking me into horizontal surfaces. Usually a couch. Right now, the wood floor. Anxiety is a tight ball of limbs pulled into the center. Dancing the floor, I've discovered, is a form of giving in to that inertia while exploring the possibilities within that space—of depression, of anxiety, of the chronic pain from a yet-to-be diagnosed set of illnesses—in an accessible way.

Arranging my computer, yoga blocks, and water bottle away from the center, I imagine the parameters of the space my body will take up. I underestimate. I am surrounded by home things I don't bring into a populated dance studio: a hot mug of tea, my phone, several abandoned dog toys. I'm in the clothes I slept in, have slept in for three days. I didn't put on a bra. My faded green hair is unwashed and messy. I have yet to brush my teeth or wash my face. This morning I woke up thinking, what can I let go of in this day?

Before learning the movement phrase, we use the pressure of our feet against the floor to rock our bodies along the axis of our spines, allowing our skeletons to respond to the repetitive movement. I feel the delayed wobble of my belly shifting with the transfer of weight. My shirt rides up. The cool air on my skin is a form of permission to the exposure it rarely gets. But I'm home, and it's allowed here. I'm allowing it here. Not only is no one here to monitor my body, but I am also finally giving my belly room to, well, exist, out in the open. Sara Ahmed describes "familiarity" as a function of how "spaces 'impress' upon bodies" as "an effect of inhabitance" (2006, 7). The familiarity of my surroundings exposes a path for extension and expansion, allowing me to return to old loves that have felt out of reach—right now, my dancing bodymind. In a traditional, in-person dance class, like a ballet or modern or jazz class, traveling across a studio floor had always been a welcome form of taking up space; but that kind of choreographic expansiveness had often been accompanied by a version of "holding," as in, holding *in*, holding my body in just the "right" way, shaping myself into the "correct" body. Even with a capacious movement vocabulary, for many of us, the space of the studio is constricted by the figure of the Dancer's Body.™

My relationship with dance studios is not uncomplicated. There are few spaces that bring me more joy, even if that joy comes with a certain amount of trauma. I grew up in dance studios. I figured out who I was as a person in dance studios. When I walk into that space, I want to run across the floor and fling myself into the air like I did when I was a kid. Or instantly lie on the ground and noodle around, limbs soft and searching, spine snaking to create space between each vertebra. My parents put my ever-moving baby body in dance class at Judy Nelson School of Dance in Miami, Florida when I was just two and a half—the combined ballet/tap classes typical of your neighborhood studio. I began jazz and acrobatics at the age of five or six. After switching studios at ten, I basically lived at Peaches School of Dance; here, contemporary dance was eventually added to my list of disciplines. Being a jazz dancer was my identity until I was introduced to modern dance—Cunningham, Limón, and Graham techniques—when I became part of the first ninth grade class at New World School of the Arts, a magnet high school in downtown Miami. While New World prioritized ballet, modern, and jazz, we also studied West African dance, forms of Spanish dance, tap, body alignment, and a little bit of composition and improvisation. At New World we had a dress code: leotards and tights only for our Western-based technique classes so our teachers had unimpeded visual access to our bodies. (Most of us piled on layers of sweatpants and baggy t-shirts during rehearsals.) In undergrad, while studying literature, creative writing, and math, I kept dancing: mostly modern, but when I couldn't find a modern class I wanted to take, I went back to ballet. This was the basic theme of my geographically diverse adult dancing life: I was devoted to modern, post-modern, and dance-theater, but would take ballet sporadically (my weakest form of dance) or if I couldn't find anything else to take that I liked.

In my twenties and thirties, when I took breaks from dance that spanned from a couple to, at one point, several years, it was generally not due to physical injury but because of some version of mental illness: “I’ll get back into class once I’ve lost weight.” The first phase of eating disorder recovery from its most extreme expression in my teens meant I finally had meat on my bones in my twenties, something that was hard for me to process. I became actually fat in my forties when chronic illness radically changed my bodily life, a time that happened to correspond with my full commitment to eating disorder recovery (this meant quitting dieting for good). For the majority of my life, I had this idea that my “dancer body” looked a certain way, and I could

not enter the studio until I achieved that size again, or at least a smaller size than I currently was. Anxiety and depression were always part of this constellation of bodymind affects which shaped, or controlled, my relationship with dance. For instance, once I started my Ph.D. in Performance Studies, the anxiety tied up with perfectionism would not let me carve out time to take class. I could not imagine taking a day off of grad school work; I only did so when I crashed from burnout. This particular break from dance, while I was physically non-disabled and living in New York City, where there are countless teachers I would have loved to learn from, is, without exaggeration, my greatest regret in life. The years that followed would be marked by what felt like a massive shrinking of possibilities.

Years later, when COVID-19 took hold of New England requiring self-quarantine, I was admittedly, selfishly, a bit relieved for this massive re-orientation of bodily life and immediately began mourning what I imagined would be an eventual loss of the expansion of accommodations for being homebound. You would think us crips would be filled with gratitude because simple access requests were finally being granted. But these new widespread accommodations were not extended because of a shift in how the U.S. treats its disabled community, they came into being because non-disabled people and money-making industries needed accommodations due to a public health crisis. For instance, I had been asking for a telehealth option for therapy for years because by the time I had arrived at my therapist's office in Boston proper (I lived in the suburbs of Melrose) my body was wrecked from the commute via public transport. My yet to-be-diagnosed chronic illnesses left me breathless, woozy, and limp on my therapist's couch, needing to spend the first handful of minutes of each session simply trying to collect myself. I was refused accommodations because their billing system was only set up for in-person sessions. Once COVID hit, telehealth was widely and indefinitely available.

In the early months of the pandemic, feminist media scholar María Elena Cepeda posted on Facebook that "Pandemic Time is Crip Time." I would add that Pandemic Space is also Crip Space. Mass self-quarantine meant I was given permission to be home, and because I no longer expended so much energy being out and about, I spent the first several weeks of quarantine being more productive than I had been in years⁶ and less anxious than I can remember in my entire adult life. I put a lot of care into creating what I lovingly refer to as my biosphere, a home that fulfills most of my day to day needs via my personal accommodations. Ahmed states that "[I]oving one's home is not about being fixed into a place, but rather it is about becoming part of

a space where one has expanded one's body, saturating the space with bodily matter" (2006, 11). Home, if we are in fact privileged to live in a space that permits us to feel "at home," allows us to extend and expand more effortlessly throughout our space, leaving us with more spoons.⁷ It also gives us permission to just be. A bodymind in a space that is not "at home"—such as a queer bodymind in heteronormative spaces or a crip bodymind in inaccessible spaces—is forced to find more circuitous ways to navigate, requiring more spoons. This may not be worth the effort, or may not be doable at all.

In "My own Private Dance Studio," Biba Bell describes how dancing in the Anna Scripps Whitecomb Conservatory on Belle Isle, a non-traditional studio space in Detroit, conjures the "strangely narcissistic characteristics of a dance studio, all mirrors and sprung floors [, ...] strategically designed for the arousal of life energy, a well of creativity" (2014). Biba is a friend and colleague from my Ph.D. days at New York University. I've seen her dance in hallways and bathrooms. Bell makes a studio out of every space. No. Bell dismantles the studio, shows us the manufactured and colonized nature of its parts. In her article, Bell invites us to see "the studio as snare [...] to critique the cube, its whiteness and geometry [...] The sterility of its surfaces" (2014). Bell is well known for dismantling the cube by creating site-specific work, dancing with and among her environment, acknowledging the context of her locations and their histories. Alternatively, the flat surfaces of the studio, razed by settler colonialism, produce a "neutralizing" effect. In the Western dance traditions in which I was brought up, we, as dancer bodyminds, were shaped through repetitive, homogenizing discipline. Individual artistry finds its way through the uniformity of our machine-bodies created by corrective training. Maybe I'm just being dramatic, but you get the idea.

Arc into a body half, internally rotate the bent right leg to put the sole of your foot on the floor. Pelvic shift forward to sequence through the right side body and roll to the left side fetal position. Sweep the right arm along the floor overhead to sink the left then right scapula into the floor, pulling the spine then pelvis then legs then feet back into the floor, returning to the starting position. Pet hair accumulates against my sweatshirt sleeves as I swipe my arms up to a high V initiated from my shoulders dropping toward my feet and leading with the thumb-side of my wrist toward my ears, then down to a low V by initiating from my elbows. I hear my dog Zuppa whining impatiently downstairs. Home. (It is impossible to dance the floor while impeded by dog

love.) Sometimes a kitten attacks my feet. Home. My knees falling toward each other during pauses. My sense of timing. Home. The style of my retrograde from sitting upright to slinking back down to the floor. The way my body responds to the music variations by affecting the quality and timing of the phrase. Home. My fat belly falls out of the bottom of this shirt as I slide from back body to front body and back again. Home.

Every couple rounds of repeating the combination I run into a piece of exercise equipment. I keep shoving objects further away from the center of the room. In my home, I take up more space. I'm not fixing my clothes. Or pulling my stomach in. I engage what I need when I need it for ease of mobility. Actually, I don't think about engagement. I think bones and vectors and momentum. I keep touching the edges of my perimeter, I keep pushing objects closer to the walls. I'm getting bigger here. That is the point. To take up more space, all the space I need. All the space I'm afraid to want.

I take my glasses off, which makes me feel vulnerable in any other space, but there is nothing here to see. Sometimes I float off into another dimension, but am led back to my body, into my room, into this class by Beller's lulling voice. I often close my eyes, only looking up at the screen when confused, and let my body be guided by Beller's well-described instructions spoke-sung to the cadence of the movement phrase. I am moved by sound and by the certainty of the floor underneath my body as I slide, roll, skim its surface. I dance by hearing and feeling. This displacement of senses is a radical shift for my dancing sensibilities. I worshipped the mirror as a young dancer. It aided my balance, helped me critique my shapes. But here, Beller reminds us: *There is no goal, no end result*. Dance is about the process, the fascination with biomechanics, the attention to the places where there is friction then a smoothing out. Dance is these *inside* things, a phenomenology of movement sensations *in addition to*, actually, *more important than*, the external visual trace it leaves for *someone else*. Dance is the pleasure in the way my sacrum releases after I propel myself diagonally in space by pressing the sole of my foot against the floor. Dance is my ability to remember what comes next. Dance is me milking my favorite part of the phrase. Dance is my clothing covered in dog hair.

Dancing Breathing

The first time I publicly grappled with a version of this work was at the Society for

Disability Studies Annual Conference in April 2021. I was particularly excited to be placed on a panel with Jose Miguel Esteban and Devon Healey, presenting first, on a dance they co-created titled, “The Breath and Movement of Blindness.” At this point in the pandemic, virtual conferences were the modus operandi, but this was the first time that technology failed me during a presentation. I was not allowed access to “the room” by the moderator because Zoom was only identifying me as a set of numbers. Because the conference was low staffed and virtual, there was no one for me to call, no doors to bang on, but Esteban and Healey had provided a link to the dance on which they were presenting as advanced accessibility material. With nothing to do but wait, I clicked the link, tried to be present, and danced with my co-panelists who I had yet to meet while sitting in my office chair in my flowy presenter dress and bold red lip:

Inhale. Exhale. My ribs. My ribs. Imagine your breath. My ribs. It gets lost in the... out. Expanding. I feel it. I feel it. My exhale getting trapped. It’s a cage. A nervous energy. Inhale. Exhale. Sitting crosslegged. Hunched. Open. More space to inhale. [Sound of breath in, out]. Pulling of the cage. Making space bigger for the air to slide through. My chest expands like a bird. Wings. Inhale. Arms open. Rolling. I’m in the breath. Through our voice, share a gesture. I am in this with you. (Esteban and Healey 2022)

The text—bright white for Healey, orange for Esteban—flows across a black screen, their voices clear, slow paced. I close my eyes. We are not directed to begin with our bodies in any particular position. I get to choose what works for me, what feels good for my bodymind in this moment. “Moving within the exhaled breath. Swimming, rolling. Into the exhalation of each other’s breath. Floating in the exhale” (Esteban and Healey 2022). My body was in a lot of pain that day, but breathing was accessible. Breathing is accessible. I lean back with my bare feet propped on the little stool under my desk and let Esteban and Healey guide me, surrendering to a dance of respiration. My ribcage resists, stuck together like a block of concrete—it tends to do that—restricting my intake of breath. Esteban and Healey remind me of intention, leading me through the expansion of my ribs and the fascia between them:

The spaces between my ribs. Extend up and drop into the exhale. Tightness. Tightness. Lift our arms. Wrists back. Negative space. Spiral. Negative space. Inhale exhale. Swimming with you. I gather the air and push it into my nose. Push. Propelling the air. Push. Push. Gather. Pull the air. Push out. Wanting to pull in your breath. I push my breath to share. (Esteban and Healey 2022)

Sing-speaking the language of dance, Esteban and Healey create a world of collective movement through the textual space of the screen, joining me in my office dance as they present on this

same work elsewhere. Eventually Catherine Vrtis, attending the panel, reached out to me through Facebook Messenger because they were concerned about me due to my absence. They then contacted the moderator on my behalf and I was finally admitted, twenty minutes late, near panic, but a little less frantic than I would have been had I not experienced the shared moment of guided dance with Esteban and Healey, breathing together, unraveling the hard knot of my bodymind.

Esteban and Healey published “The Breath and Movement of Blindness” in *Liminalities* with an artists’ statement that speaks to the type of reorientation of the senses which I am invested in for my own forms of access:

This work does not understand sight as the sole choreographer of movement. Blindness has always-already been on stage moving, doing, performing...dancing. And yet, the reverberation of this dance is restricted on the stage of sight. Wedging open this restriction is what grounds our exploration. Our performance entangles us, one sighted and one blind, in a pas de deux. (Esteban and Healey 2022)

Esteban and Healey displace the visual from dance’s hierarchy of senses, creating a form of interconnection through breath, through sound, through their curiosity about their own and each other’s respiration. Removing the visual imperative fully propels me into an alternative mode of sensing dance without the impediment of fighting the urge for a mirror to adjust a limb or critique a part, or simply wondering what I look like, because there is no looking in breathing. This is “dutiful dance student” deprogramming. Here Esteban and Healey invite me into a new (for me) way of engaging with dance through sound cues and breath and text that have nothing to do with the way my body looks but everything to do with the way my body feels. The phenomenology of “The Breath and Movement of Blindness” reorients our dancerly priorities, allowing us to dream of other possibilities. The dream of the expansive inhale. The ecstasy of the collective exhale.

Telephone and the “Why” of Performance

Michelle Mantione enters the dance studio from the street, describing their movements in real time:

Okay, giant step, right arm right foot, left foot, left crutch. Walk, enter. Reach back with left arm, close door. Cars passing in background. Put my stuff down and get ready to warm up. Tote bag on table, crutch leans against wall. Fire extinguisher and sink in

corner, drop sink in the corner. Next crutch. Right arm, left arm, backpack off. I made it! Arms up in the air, fists clenched. Yay! Wave arms slightly, side to side overhead.
(*Telephone* 2023)

Performing the art of self-audio description, Mantione makes choices about what information is relayed to the audience, a practice in agency and consent in which dancers rarely get to participate. They tell us how to direct our attention; with their self-audio description, they are in control of shaping our engagement with them, as opposed to the choreographer or director. Delighting in their gesture of celebration, Mantione laughs as bowed instruments initiate the sound score. The screen goes white, then black. From the quiet of a dark expanse, the voice of blind dancer Krishna Washburn asks the central questions guiding her philosophies behind successful audio description⁸ practices for dance: “What is performance? What is performance for?” These are the opening moments of *Telephone*, a documentary screendance⁹ directed and produced by Heather Shaw and Krishna Washburn. *Telephone* is an aestheticization of access intimacy, for the film is created “for everybody, but [...] especially for [...] blind and visually impaired folks” (2023). Washburn speaks directly to the audience members often excluded by performance practices, like dance, that are generally deemed a predominantly visual art form: “We made this for you. You are not going to be missing anything” (*Telephone*, 2023).

Washburn, who serves as narrator throughout the film, asks us to consider a performance we’ve seen long ago that remains with us: “Why do you remember that performance [...]? What is it that sticks in your memory? Is it a specific sequence of shapes that the performer or performers made? Or was it how the performance made you feel?” (*Telephone*, 2023) These opening prompts signal Washburn’s call to dismantle the ocularcentrism that dominates both the approach to audio description in dance for its discriminatory effects, and, by extension, the way we think about dance in general. In an audio description workshop I took with Washburn from January through February 2024, she explains that “successful audio description for blind and visually impaired audiences [...] de-centers sight as its origin point.” Dance for blind people like Washburn, she explains, “is not a visual art form. It is an art form about sensations of the physical body, and how it connects to emotion, narrative, and our natural human empathy for one another” (2024b). As a sighted, middle-aged, now fat dancer in eating disorder recovery (there is no end to recovery) who suffers from body dysmorphia, I am encouraged by the access

possibilities of engaging with dance as something other than a visual spectacle. Dance is a sensation.

Telephone's concept came from Shaw, who began a "game of telephone" by creating a movement phrase in her apartment during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, filming it, then passing it along to an audio describer; their description was then given to dancers to interpret in their own style of movement. The dancers filmed their phrases then passed them along to another audio describer, who transformed the movement into language, then passed along their audio descriptions (Burke, 2023). The film is composed of a series of dance scenes which take place in home and studio spaces—all audio described, captioned, and with sign language interpreters—with fifteen disabled and non-disabled dancers of different genders, races, and sizes interspersed with Washburn's narration, culminating in a montage that revisits the dance scenes throughout the film.

The moments I feel illustrate the concept of the game of telephone most explicitly are the split screen duets with a single audio describer. Here we observe how dance is sonically and linguistically relayed to the dancers, whose individual movement interpretations alternate between synchronicity and idiosyncrasy. My favorite duet is when Davian "DJ" Robinson, in a living room with his service dog, Charlie, and Lillian E. Willis, in her bedroom, dance together via split screen. Willis also serves as audio describer in a separate sound track, her voice propelling the dance along with a sense of urgency:

Crossing the room dragging our feet with an upright posture, we lift our right arm then our left, to cover our mouth, pensively. Now center, we lift our right leg and balance. Our foot hits the ground like a small explosion bringing us to camera with twisting leg and arm. Our body relaxes. We walk forward, shoulders tense, face alert. We walk smoothly in a circle to our left. Right hand following against the surface. It explosively initiates movement above our head and in our torso. Our limbs release before contracting in with one knee lifted. We pause. Then decidedly push our knee outward, arms stop side with flexed hands. We balance, then push the knee down and turn to our left now at attention. Turning back, we look over our shoulder intensely. We take another step initiating smooth swaying shoulders and hips, continuing in a circle with our head gazing over the shoulder, we skate on the carpet, moving energy up from the ground into our hands and torso and OUT. A push lunge to the corner, arms outstretched, we pause, pleased. Decidedly, we come back to attention, standing tall with a proud chest. We gently hang over our right side, resting. Flowing, arms initiate a light push lunge to the back. Our arm and foot pull our body upright. We walk off the way we entered, dragging our feet. Something's different. (*Telephone* 2023)

Willis's audio description¹⁰ anchors the screendance, creating the foundation for the gestural and emotional possibilities to be discovered through the vehicles of Robinson and Willis's bodyminds. Washburn shared with me that Robinson and Willis were close friends when they studied at U.N.C. Charlotte together, and that Robinson, a blind dancer, and Willis, a sighted dancer, "had a dynamic of Lillian giving on-the-spot description of what they were dancing together in classes," (Krishna Washburn, email to author, March 29, 2024) which Shaw and Washburne sought to replicate onscreen. In order to film their section, Robinson listened to Ogemdi Ude's audio description; Willis audio described Robinson's movement, then danced to her own audio description, which is what we hear in the film.

Audio description is not simply a dictation of a series of movements, but an artistic expression in its own right, which is why I chose to include the language of this dance here in its entirety. What cannot be captured in writing are Willis's rhythm changes, her various tones of voice, the way she lengthens her vowels when the movement calls for extension, her emotional tenor. In fact, I'd like to amend my statement above, calling this a duet. It's a trio, with the third dance found in the voice of the audio describer (or a quartet if you count Charlie contrasting his human's vigor with the dance of rest). Toward the end of the film, Washburn emphasizes the artistry of good audio description, stating, "Audio description is art. Audio describers are artists" (*Telephone*, 2023). This point is driven home by the poetic choices Willis makes, such as ending the dance with, "Something's different."

But what exactly makes for good audio description? For audio description to be successful, Washburn explains in her workshop, a sighted audience member and a blind audience member should be able to discuss the performance afterward and feel as if they've experienced the same work. Washburn offers three criteria to consider when listening to audio description: "Can I dance it? Can I visualize it? Can I feel it?" (2024c). While not everyone can visualize dance, the true test of good audio description is how it affects the bodyminds of the audience. Can you sense the dance? Are you squirming in your seat? At one point in *Telephone*, Washburn encourages the audience to dance as well: "No need for proper audience behavior—if your mirror neurons are sparked, feel free to move. This is not art to be experienced passively, this is a game you can participate in." *Telephone* is an invitation. Dance is an invitation.

Washburn is deeply invested in the mirror neuron response she mentions above—how a dancing body can move a witnessing body. She explains that “according to the NIH, [mirror neurons are] a specific class of neurons that discharge not only when we move, but when someone else moves” (2024a). They can be activated by watching someone dance, or execute a gymnastic routine, for example—the body senses the movement it takes in visually. In other words, my witnessing body (as a sighted person) feels the movements of your performing body. But mirror neurons can also be activated through language. In this way, audio description is an access aesthetic that offers “an invitation to inhabit the dancer’s body, and to experience the dance in a visceral way” (Washburn, 2024a). Maybe sensing leads to visualization, maybe not. I’d like to argue that the performativity of dance,¹¹ is about *being moved*. Dance is being moved.

Let me correct myself once more: I initially said Robinson and Willis dancing together on screen was a duet (let’s consider Robinson’s dog as an audience member), then trio, where Willis’s voice as audio describer is the third dancer. Now, let’s imagine the sound of Willis’s audio description again. I would like to suggest that this split screen moment is in fact a quartet, with the dance that you, the audience (and perhaps even you, the reader) feels, in whatever way you feel dance, as the fourth dance. This is *your* dance. I spend a lot of time these days dancing in my head. I did this constantly in my youth and young adulthood, rehearsing phrases I learned in class to master choreography, or simply making things up to the music playing in the car. I often danced in my head without even noticing. Sitting on the 4 train in my twenties, dancing through Beller’s choreography from class that week as my body vibrates from the subway car’s friction on the tracks. This practice means something different to me now. It’s a way for me to access forms of movement that are no longer available to my crip bodymind. Or, and, a choreographic extension beyond the confines of my skin. (What is a body, anyway? But that’s for another project.) It’s also a form of curiosity, through stillness, to explore how I might dance within my capacities in a satisfying way without using up my spoons. Sometimes I make up movement vocabularies with my crutches, extra limbs with no joints, a new bodily frontier. Dancing the first draft. Sometimes it’s just a way to soothe my soul. It was not until my adulthood that I learned that “dancing in my head” was still an embodied practice, for visualizing movement affects your nervous system because it activates your motor cortex, the part of your

brain responsible for voluntary movement (Knierim 2020). Sensing dance is still dancing. Thinking dance is still dancing.

When I witness *Telephone*, what I experience is possibility. There is an openness in the way that dance is performed for the audience, in a variety of registers—both visually and sonically/linguistically—that allows one to imagine an infinite number of variations of each phrase with the dancers on the screen, with the bodyminds of the audience invited to join in. Let's return to Robinson and Willis's duet/"quartet:" the differences in their interpretations of the audio description produce the tension that creates the real magic in the pairing. How the reverberation of Willis's "explosion" is a continuous sinuous echo from feet to knees to pelvis-ribs-ribcage-right shoulder punctuated by the right elbow; while Robinson's is more staccato: a twist-twist of the right leg, knee out then in, right arm opening abruptly with the rotation then softening to lower. Or how Robinson's "pause" after the release of limbs "before contracting in with one knee lifted" is an upright stance, body and face open to the camera with arms outstretched to the side, palms flexed; while Willis looks as if she's been punched in the gut, her body at an angle to the camera, pelvis reaching backward, arms-fingers-head-neck diagonally forward and upward, chest caved in.

Both dancers perform the "true" dance. And, importantly, both bodies are the "correct" dancing body. When I think about how dance pedagogy often begins with a visual example, and focuses on a visual product, one is, perhaps even just subconsciously, presented with an ideal: "This is *the* dance you are meant to dance." There is a gap between your bodymind and the example that, through repetition and rehearsal, you attempt to close. You may never (will never) be able to close this gap simply due to the nature of anatomy, biomechanics, let alone personal style.¹² By celebrating the art of audio description, *Telephone* brings attention to the questions I am most interested in when I go to a performance or watch a screendance: What does dance look like in *your* body? Let me try this again: How does your body interpret this gesture? What is the quality of your pelvis? The nature of your ribcage? Can I sense your breath in the way you travel across the floor? I want to learn about your life in the movement of your hands.

And since this film is made first and foremost for blind and visually impaired audiences, how these dancers look is inconsequential. Let's be honest: the way this movement would look on my body is going to be different than the way it looks on your body. The way this movement

looks on my body today is going to be different than the way it looks on my body next week, month, decade. This is still *me* dancing. What would it mean to not have to replicate the you you once were? Or some dancer example that we all know you will never be? (What would it mean for us, as dancers, to realize that we have the power to decide who gets to have the honor of borrowing our bodyminds to perform our unique, one of a kind portrayal of a vision that can only be realized through our embodied interpretation?) As a student in dance class, I am invested in texture, dynamics, biomechanics, intension, the “why” of things. What if we consider the visual to be just an aftereffect, or yet another point of interest in an assemblage of aesthetics? I want to be guided through movement exploration without the image of someone else’s body impeding the pathways that are available within my own bodymind. I want to consider someone else’s dancing body as just another possibility. Dance is an array of possibilities.

When Mingus describes how access intimacy feels “like an unspoken, instinctual language between different people, like an entirely unique way of being able to communicate and connect” (2011), I cannot help but think of the language of dancers; here I am not speaking of being in on the jargon, but of the way people who move through the world *body first* have a tacit understanding of what it’s like to exist as a fleshy collection of cells made for expression. In many Western studio-based dance spaces—this does not include hip hop, social dancing, etc.—being dancery is highly exclusive: the training (the access to which is a privilege); having the right body type/shape/size/gender/race, etc.; being “talented” or “skilled” (which is highly subjective). The gatekeeping and elitism are endless. And yet, in *Telephone*, a film that includes disabled and non-disabled dancers of different genders, races, sizes, and abilities, Shaw and Washburn illustrate how audio description, which specifically decenters ocularcentricism to emphasize *dance as a feeling*, can create multiple forms of access intimacy, not only for blind and visually impaired people, but for those of us traumatized by the rampant body policing often associated with dance training. *Telephone* as a screendance was created with access as its foundational philosophy, as its aesthetic, and does the work of access intimacy by “challeng[ing] able bodied supremacy by valuing disability—not running from disability—but moving towards it” (Mingus 2017).

Telephone is a screendance that leaves itself wide open by asking you, whoever you are, to join the dance because it gives you all the tools you need to dance along with Mantione and

Shaw and Washburn and Cole and Ude and Robinson and Willis and Pavliska and Morton and Núñez and Ospina and Reis and Rodriguez and Mann and Meléndez and Patterson and Wethers and Lord and van Veldhuizen and Klugherz and Brown and Osborn and MacNutt and Zavitsanos and Ronkina. Which dance will you dance? Are you dancing with me right now?

Crippling Ballet: Finding Access in Unlikely Places

I was a regular weekly Bartenieff Fundamentals™ student of Beller's until the end of 2020. My dietitian, who I refer to as my "eating disorder therapist," had to give me "permission" to stop exercising because it clearly caused me so much unexplained suffering, which eventually led me to pause all forms of movement work, no matter how gentle it was, for a couple years. It would take a move back to New York and a new team of doctors for me to learn that I was dealing with the onset of a cascade of chronic illnesses, most of which are triggered by movement, especially postural changes. Although the Bartenieff Fundamentals™ classes feel delicious at the time of execution, once I come to uprightness when the class is over, I am met with an intense headache (that can stick around for days), dizziness, lightheadedness, nausea, and incredible fatigue. In 2023, after diagnoses and medication that gives me some relief, I met privately with Beller as she composed five to seven minute phrases for me to play with on my own.¹³ It was *something*, but it was not the same as losing myself in movement for an hour (which is dangerous for my bodymind), or dancing in community.

This conflict between what is and is not accessible within my own bodymind at any given moment reminds me of what J. Logan Smilges (2023) calls "access friction" (20). When Smilges discusses access friction in their book *Crip Negativity* (2023), they refer to, for instance, when "two people's needs rub up against each other" (61). Regardless of our best efforts, it is simply not possible to meet the different access needs of a diverse community at all times. And, for someone like me, our access needs are not static, can change at any given moment, and sometimes are even in conflict within our own bodyminds, especially for those of us with a multitude of chronic illnesses. This is yet another reason to shift agency to a student-directed experience in pedagogical spaces. Only I can make the choice that is safe for my bodymind.

Having to stop taking Beller's classes was devastating, not only for my musculoskeletal system, but also for my dancerly wellbeing. I keep hoping that my specialists will eventually let

me increase my beta-blocker dosage or find some other solution to ameliorate the symptoms of my orthostatic hypertension, potentially allowing me to do floorwork again. But I know better than to have specific expectations regarding rehabilitation. To say that it is disorienting that the various forms of somatic work that I've always turned to when I needed to slow down, to heal from injuries, to be gentle, have more or less become inaccessible to me because they trigger my cranky circulatory and nervous system symptoms is an understatement. My movement life now remains in a state of perpetual experimentation and curiosity, which is equal parts frustrating and exquisite. This process has involved creating crip community both in-person and online grounded by practices of access intimacy to support this often perplexing new version of dancery/bodily life.

After spending two months in Washburn's audio description workshop, I did something radical and signed up for her Introduction to Ballet class for blind and visually impaired people (Washburn allows some sighted people into class, but we are not the intended audience). If you grew up dancing with me, you'll understand that this is wild behavior—ballet has always been my least favorite *and most inaccessible* form of dance, yet I took decades of it. I was always told, if you want to be a dancer, you have to take ballet, this is your foundation. Ballet and I were frenemies. I have terrible turnout (external rotation from the legs at the hips), my extensions are not great (how high you can lift your legs), my lumbar spine is hyperlordotic (a slopy C-curve that is undesirable). I decidedly do not have a "ballet body," aside from having the kind of feet that even some of my ballerina friends envied (they are quite pointy). In ballet class, especially once I began training at my magnet high school, I was corrected non-stop, and I was grateful for it—this is what I needed to be a great dancer, right? You see, if you are not being corrected in dance class, it means that you're being ignored, it doesn't mean you are doing everything right. Being a dancer, you come to believe, means being reshaped, over and over again, from the outside in. Even while feeling absolutely brutalized by ballet, I always came back to it until my late twenties. Why? Because in all of my moving around due to graduate degrees and life changes, when I struggled to find a modern dance class that was my cup of tea, there was always a ballet class to take somewhere and at least I knew what to expect from it. Sometimes access comes in the form of predictability. And in my current crip state, ballet's uprightness is safe for my orthostatic hypertension, as long as I can take lots of sitting breaks. Ballet is programmatic

and, critiques aside, allows for an unexpected form of consent as someone who tended to dread ballet class: I always know what I am saying yes to.

The space Washburn creates for her audio description workshop is a decidedly crip space, meaning, the class is taught by and for disabled people and we are expected to center the needs of our bodyminds first and foremost. While her Introduction to Ballet class is not intended for someone like me (I am a sighted person with extensive ballet training) I knew it would be a safe space for me to experiment with what ballet could feel like in my crip body at this stage in my life. Plus, during the Q&A for the online screening of *Telephone* I attended in late 2023, as I expressed my desire to be part of this community, she encouraged me to take class. When I communicated my hesitation—“I’m physically disabled, I can’t stand for long, I haven’t taken ballet in forever”—she said, “I’m a blind teacher, I can’t see you. If you did nothing the entire class, I would have no idea” (paraphrased).¹⁴ In Washburn’s crip ballet space, I can have my stool nearby to sit while learning the combinations. I can try and fail at using my crutches at different moments if I desire. I can take breaks. A lot of them. And importantly, there are no mirrors for me to obsessively stare into, or desperately avoid. Washburn gives me the permission I need to “play around” with (as opposed to mastering) ballet, knowing that no one will judge me, correct me, or even see what I am doing. What would it feel like for ballet to not be the boss of me? To take a dance class for disabled people, taught by a disabled person who does not have visual access to correct my body in pain, but instead be available to answer questions at the end of class?

Washburn began our first class together, which assumes no prior knowledge of dance, by having us sit on the floor for an anatomy lesson to acquaint ourselves with our bodies and the movement concepts fundamental to ballet. We felt our sitz bones on the solid surface beneath us as we experienced the sensations associated with external rotation for “turnout.” We then spent several minutes with our hands touching our ankles and feet to sense how when we point our feet we feel our calf muscles engage, our achilles tendons jut up into our calves, the knuckle bones of our toes push through the skin (Washburn, March 1, 2024). Within the first ten minutes of class, Washburn already exploded my brain when she spoke about where our weight should be in standing, which went against every ballet teacher I’ve ever had (in your heels, she said!), and I

was already thinking about how that information could have radically changed my sense of balance.

Washburn's extensive understanding of anatomy and biomechanics¹⁵ creates an "inside out" approach to conveying movement intention, as opposed to an outside in approach of coercing the body into a certain shape, which makes little sense when no two bodies are the same, and when individual bodies have a tendency to change. I am not saying that there is never a time or place for attending to the visual in dance class. But I do think that it's time that we do away with the tyrannical hold it has on pedagogical practices in many dance spaces as *the* way for people to teach others how to move. And let's be honest, once the visual takes precedence, then so do the appearances of the bodies inhabiting dance spaces.

When Washburn read a draft of this essay, she said that she clearly remembered coming across Cepeda's "Pandemic Time is Crip Time" post and "[feeling] an amazing sense of optimism" due to the crip possibilities that came with COVID-19 quarantine (Krishna Washburn, email to author, March 29, 2024). Although Washburn has a Master's in Education, a prolific performance career, and extensive education in biomechanics, it wasn't until the pandemic that she was finally able to get her online teaching career, which takes the form of the Dark Room Ballet, off the ground with regular weekly classes (Krishna Washburn, email to author, March 29, 2024). The discrimination against a blind person teaching dance—*but how are you going to fix people's bodies?*—again, comes down to dance's tendency toward ocularcentrism, as well as a lack of trust in students' ability to "evaluate" their own bodies. These impediments were ultimately undermined by the widespread access needs brought on by a worldwide pandemic. During my intake conversation for the intro class, when Washburn confided in me about the discrimination she faced as a blind dance teacher specifically regarding her inability to "correct" bodies that were not in the proper shape, we both wondered aloud, is that really the best way to teach *anybody*? As someone who has spent decades taking ballet classes from dozens of teachers, I continue to be astounded by how much I am learning from Washburn's expertly described movement and biomechanical approach to ballet, and how much bodymind healing I experience in a space that centers the needs of disabled people. A space that is not about looking.

Washburn closes class by teaching how to use tape on the floor to orient oneself in space, which evolves into a graceful circular walk while she guides everyone along with her movement cues. As if part of the choreography, she reassures us, “You belong here... You belong here... You belong here.”

After just one of Washburn’s classes I found myself googling ballet barre classes online, because I wanted more, but it took some serious effort for me to find a space that, even if not specifically crip, operated on the principles of access intimacy. I found what I was looking for in Ballez Class Everywhere, an intentionally queer community cultivated by ballet dancer Katy Pyle. In the introductory class, populated by people of different sizes, races, sexualities, and genders, Pyle asks the dancers to share a problem they have with ballet. Their responses include struggling with ballet’s insistence on “perfecting shape” as opposed to the more nuanced approach of “feeling things from the inside”; “the sense of needing things to look a certain way”; “the emphasis on conformity”; “seeing the same body type over and over and over again”; and “the roles assigned to people, usually based on gender” (Pyle 2019). What these grievances have in common is the oppression applied by ballet’s tendency toward ocularcentrism, which leaves little room for the felt sense they, as queer people (like myself), find joy in as dancers.

Pyle cultivates this joy—a joy for dance, a joy for queer community, a joy for showing up as your full self, a joy for 80s and 90s music—to create access intimacy for her online community. The inclusive care work Pyle enacts as embedded within her queer community is reminiscent of what Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha calls “a form of radical solidarity called love” (2018, 75). Here we see how access is not an add on, and certainly not a burden, but a means to build connection and create a refuge for people to practice the art they love, *because dance feels good*. Like the culminating refrain Washburn left us with at the end of our first Intro to Ballet class, Pyle too creates a space that reminds us: *you belong here...you belong here...you belong here*.

¹ I like to think of “body scans” as a meditative way of taking inventory of how my body feels, in that moment, part by part.

² I intentionally use the pathologizing language of body dysmorphia because I want to own the extent to which this particular form of mental illness has shaped my crip bodymind; my way of moving, and not moving, through the world; and the way that it affected my relationship with my beloved, dance. But I

also want to bring attention to the fact that our relationships with our bodies do not exist in a vacuum. In a different world, in a world (and an art) devoid of fatphobia, in a society, at a time that does not worship thinness, I believe things could have been radically different for me.

³ This is because in Western, neoliberal society, most environments are created for and cater to White, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied/minded, thin or not-fat, citizens (who are usually men, but that is for another essay).

⁴ To be clear, to be fat is not to be mentally ill. I am not here to pathologize fatness. Here I am referring to those of us with body dysmorphia and/or eating disorders who struggle to live as bodies *of any size*. For some of us, recovering from eating disorders means gaining weight and possibly becoming fat (if we were not already fat). Additionally, just the body changes that can come with aging, going through menopause, becoming ill can trigger relapses in ED mentality and behavior or body dysmorphia. I want to emphasize that it is extremely important to demystify the very incorrect notion that people with eating disorders are thin—most aren't. It just so happens that I used to be thin, and now I am not.

⁵ One of the practices that was often required, depending on the teacher, when a dancer “sat out” was taking notes on a dancer or dancers—in other words, writing “corrections” for them. When I sat out, I would ask my friends who would like notes and what kind of feedback they were looking for, cultivating a practice of consent out of an assignment that felt like penance. Having a great deal of skill with these articulations along with having a keen eye gave me a reputation. I ended up being the rehearsal assistant to not only one of my choreographer friends but also to one of my ballet teachers, Gerard Ebitz, a former Joffrey Ballet dancer. “Sitting out” was actually an extremely productive exercise.

⁶ I want to note the internalized ableism in this statement. It is difficult to cleave ourselves from the notion the we must be productive to have worth; however, there is also labor that we love that brings us joy like writing, dancing, and cooking. It's important to honor the complexity of these contradictions.

⁷ Spoon theory was developed by Christine Miserandino to explain how people with chronic illness and disability only have a finite amount of energy (represented by spoons) in a day (and not the same amount each day) and must choose how to spent their spoons. Christine Miserandino. 2003. “The Spoon Theory.” *But You Don't Look Sick? The Stories behind the Smiles*. <https://butyoudontlooksick.com/articles/written-by-christine/the-spoon-theory/>.

⁸ Audio description for dance is a form of accessibility that involves verbally describing dance for blind and low vision people. This section will expound on what *good* audio description entails.

⁹ Screendance is a hybrid genre involving dance specifically made for the camera that is generally site-specific and utilizes film editing as a choreographic tool.

¹⁰ It should be noted that in *Telephone*, audio description serves as both an access aesthetic and choreographic tool, whereas in Beller's class her verbal description serves as a means of instruction for “technique.”

¹¹ Here I am referring to the performance studies concept of “performativity” where an event, in this case dance, has a force, a ripple effect, beyond the performance of the thing itself (the execution of bodily movements).

¹² This is not the case with Beller's classes, both in terms of her somatic Zoom Bartenieff Fundamentals classes and also in the modern technique classes I took back in my able-bodied days. When Beller demonstrated, she always presented herself as a possibility and offered up other students' interpretations as illustrations to ponder.

¹³ You might be wondering why it took so many years for my conditions to be diagnosed. I maintain to this day that medical fatphobia is the primary reason. Doctors—from a variety of specialties—focused on my weight gain (which occurred *after* I became sick) as the source of my suffering; they all suggested that I would feel better if I just lost weight. Once I left Massachusetts, my new team of neurologists in New York City honed in on the cause of my illnesses within several months. It should be noted that fatphobia is by no means the only impediment to receiving proper health treatment (especially when

dealing with a healthcare system like in the U.S.). Classism, ableism, racism, sexism, etc., are all obstacles so overwhelming that people often give up on the process altogether when navigating the medical-industrial complex.

¹⁴ Not only is this hilarious and totally disarming, but it also points to a shift in power dynamics from teacher to student that allows for students to continuously make their own choices about their bodies, with Washburn's suggestions.

¹⁵ Washburn studied traditional biomechanical science through the American College of Sports Medicine, where she earned certifications as a Personal Trainer (CPT) and inclusive fitness trainer (CIPT), while also studying Exercise Science and Kinesiology extensively.

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