Impossible Tasks

Nacera Belaza's Being Sound and Attempts at Writing Dance

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Rehearsal

Being Sound

I am making an attempt at "being sound."[1]

This is a task relayed from Nacera Belaza, a choreographer, to me, her dancer for a week. We are in St. Mark's Church in the East Village of New York City, the home of Danspace Project, in early March 2020. Nacera has been flown here from France to present a performance. To perform her work she has chosen seven people from her workshop held at Danspace a few months prior. None of us know each other very well, and I don't know Nacera at all.

1. This article draws from a short essay I wrote in 2021 for the Danspace Project Platform 2021 Catalogue (see Thompson 2021), especially the two sections of the text set in italics. This article was also the basis for a lecture-demonstration entitled "Impossible Tasks: Writing with/as Dance," delivered with my collaborator Chloë Engel at Wesleyan University on 12 October 2023.

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Before we even try being sound, *Nacera delivers a sort of pep talk as warm up, in English, a foreign language to her. She says: "You are voluminous, three dimensional, dense." She directs dancers to "release" and "let go" over and over in preparation. We practice* being wind, *attempting not to move, but, rather, to "be moved." We practice* being circle, *first riding imagined spiraling patterns with feet planted, but arms and torso heavy and swinging, then with our whole bodies, spinning continuously. The circle becomes the constant movement of the room around me, my vision continuing to insist on the roundness of my surrounds even when my body stops its turn.*[2]

When we are ready, a state determined by Nacera, we are called one by one to be sound. *I step into the center of the sanctuary, watched by those standing at the shadowy edges who wait their turn. The sound we are meant to "be" is Nina Simone's voice, which echoes through the high recesses of the church, singing "My Way."*

This task is, in Nacera's words, to "receive" the sonic cascade. But "don't dance," and "don't pretend to not dance," and "don't perform," and "be real," and believe "anything is possible." Nacera keeps raising her voice over the music to yell: "no interpretation, direct transmission!" Being sound *is trying to ignore any symbolism or narrative that bubbles up and instead embrace spontaneous abstraction. She warns, if you start "adding" anything, stop, and "wait to hear again." She urges, "give up, give up, give up!"*

This prompt has germinated in Nacera's body—petite and agile, middle-aged, brown-skinned—a body different from mine, from a place I have never been. She told us that her dance techniques began as a lonely child; she taught herself how to be wind, how to be circle, how to be sound, all within the confines of her bedroom. I later learned that she moved from Algeria to France at age five, and wondered about the specific cultural textures of that isolation.

Being sound, *from where I can sense it, by trying it, feels like speed meditation. It feels like trying to swallow a poem. Listen listen listen as mantra. Head rolls heavy. Lips sound out something but nothing. Fingers push up out twitch shift make room. Eyes wide closed. Trace vibration to its ends. Stop, listen again.*

Being sound *looks like a body swaying and bouncing and tattered with effort, and sounds like my softly labored breathing and Nacera's shouts, sunken into the blare of Nina Simone belting out the song. It smells like old wood and old carpet and my own sweat. It tastes like a dry tongue. It performs through me, on me.*

As being sound *enters the audience of my body, it gets complicated, latticed. It proliferates past its containment as an unadorned directive. Nacera has offered a prompt but has also uttered a promise. If we can transcend the way our bodies have been socialized and trained, shaking off habits and desires and self-consciousness, we can transmit, honestly. In her words: "you can be onstage without performing." Genuine, real. I wonder, not for the first time, what might be possible when I access this kind of authenticity? Freedom? Clarity? Something universal?*

I am reminded of other promises I've chased. I am taken back to trying to "leave myself at the door" as I enter ballet class, banishing personality from my body. I am remembering past improvisation teachers who spoke of detaching from habitual patterns and digging for some essential, natural version of my body. But I've come to learn that these promises to free the body of its past usually rely on an assumption of a universal, neutral body—an impossible ideal. I've come to notice that such "neutral" bodies, which many choreographers

2. All unattributed quotes and description are from my recollection and my contemporaneous written documentation of the rehearsal process, performance score, and movement directives from March 2020.

Figure 1. (previous page) From left: Kati Payne, Nora Raine Thompson, Christopher Unpezverde Núñez, Jamaal Bowman, and Bianca Paige Smith in Nacera Belaza's La Procession. *Danspace Project, New York, March 2020. (Photo by Ian Douglas)*

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have attempted to unearth and critics have tried to identify, tend to be white, cis, thin, and able—bodies that have been afforded the fictional luxury of sloughing off their specificity.

But in the room with Nacera, I can only sense an unnamed resistance to her shouts: "don't dance!" "don't perform!" "don't lie to yourself!" I am flinching at her call to "empty yourself!" I can't empty myself, drain myself of my organs. And I want to try, because it can't be that simple.

This is an impossible task.

A Note on Method

From here on, what *being sound* does or means splinters in many directions. Will it render bodies see-through, clear? Will it blur boundaries of selves, fracture assumptions? There are diverging risks and potentials that are implicated in setting up such an *impossible task*—Nacera Belaza's impossible task, as filtered through my attempts to do it, write with it. Donna Haraway and Karen Barad, among others, have demonstrated the importance of this kind of plural inquiry in their methodologies. Barad builds "diffraction apparatuses" to study difference from an entangled, relational place, a moving place—I argue, a dancing place (2006:73). And Haraway asserts that "the political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point" (1991:145). Following their illustrious moves, I suss out the pitfalls and possibilities of an *impossible task*.

Transparent Bodies and Unnamed Aesthetics

I didn't always flinch at such demands. I have, like many dancers, long been interested in authenticity and vulnerability. Despite the ambiguity of these goals, I thought I could reach such illusive states through being honest and transparent. Growing up, I didn't like when I couldn't understand my own emotions. I often struggled as a kid to know why I was crying, and later as a fearful teen, I taped a handwritten sign on my wall, a quote from a favorite Jonathan Safran Foer novel—"There's nothing wrong with not understanding yourself"—to try to assuage this fear. I wrote my college admissions essay, in fact, on the spark of goodness that I claimed I could see in every person I met. I believed in my capacity to see *into* others, like I thought I needed to see into myself. In college, I reveled in trying to strip away my previous ballet training with improvisation, hoping I could peel back layers to find something elemental. And I made dances about secrets, attempting to reveal my unintelligible parts surreptitiously. I was cheered on as I moved through these phases; my white body was encouraged by teachers and peers to let go more, to try out something "pedestrian," to bare it all. I wonder now how these hopes to become a transparent body affected how I see through, or don't, practices and people.

Transparency, as defined by Édouard Glissant, has provoked a particular reading of *impossible tasks* for me. I turn to Glissant as well as to Sylvia Wynter because they situate the construction of selfhood and visibility in its colonial and racialized history—a necessary positioning to consider the dynamics at play when an *impossible task* is transmitted from body to body, in this case, from brown body to white body.

Édouard Glissant, in his 1990 book *Poetics of Relation*, conducts a deep study of language, identity, and relation in the context of Caribbean and decolonial studies. Throughout the book, he imagines a mode of "Relation" that can account for difference, a "unity-diversity," challenging dualistic conceptions of self and other, center and periphery ([1990] 1997:79). He argues that imperialism rests on domination through language that travels from "center towards the peripheries," from colonizer to colonized (29). In his essay "For Opacity" in *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant theorizes "transparency" as the process of "understanding people and ideas" from the "perspective of Western thought" through measurement, and thus a "reduction" (189, 190). An assumption of "transparency" posits that everything and everyone is know-able, can be made clear. A "right to opacity," on the other hand, accepts that there are some things that cannot be reduced (191). Whereas transparency portends a smooth and logical route to "discovering what lies at the bottom of natures"—a measuring, visualizing, or flattening of difference—a right to opacity would bring an end to the "very notion of the scale," the tool that measures difference, generates hierarchy (190).

Glissant's description evokes the overemphasis on visuality that transparency requires. I imagine a figure standing at what they believe to be the center of the world, looking to the peripheries with binoculars, seeing. I imagine a panopticon, possession. Glissant also offers a spatial, tactile description of the aim of transparency, describing hands grasping and bringing in, a "gesture of enclosure" (192). "Relation," as Glissant imagines it, would not rely on transparency or grasping, but rather would ensure this "right to opacity" and abolish "the very notion of center and periphery"—it would produce a different spatial logic (190, 29).

Sylvia Wynter also expertly charts the construction of selfhood via the making of central and "peripheral zones" through colonialism in "Ethno or Socio Poetics" (1976:81). She argues that there has been a cleaving of Man and Nature, a turning of Nature into exploitable "land," and therefore a cleaving of Man and Other, a process that might allow Man to conceptualize, observe, see through, and anthropologically see *into* Nature/Other at the peripheries (1976:82). Wynter goes on to assert that "Western man" has enacted this separation crucially through racialization and a "penning up" of the Other—I am reminded of the image of enclosure and grasping that Glissant evoked (1976:83). She adds that Western man "did the same [penning up] with whole areas of his Being" (83). Wynter intersects with Glissant explicitly in a later essay, where she links his investigation into the specific and the particular with the possibility of refuting "the premise of an acultural and absolute model of the human" (1989:645). Through Glissant, Wynter points to specificity as evidence of the impossibility of this universal, maybe transparent, model of humanity, this model of the self that requires the enclosure of "the Other."

This self/other binary has been constructed through various techniques to shape, train, and categorize bodies over centuries. The production and performance of dance is one realm of making meaning of bodies, deciding which bodies can be considered subjects, which can be enclosed, which can be seen through. Who decides?

On 4 December 1983, Bill T. Jones and Steve Paxton performed improvised solos at the Movement Research Studies Project in New York City. They subsequently engaged in a dialog moderated by Mary Overlie, sharing their perspectives on performance, aesthetics, and improvisation. This 1983 conversation is cited across dance scholarship as a rich exchange that served to expose the rifts within the postmodern scenes, especially along racial lines (see Goldman 2010:107). In it, Jones claimed that Contact Improv wasn't as inclusive and democratic as Paxton had made it out to be, and Paxton repeatedly implied that his own work was more original because he wasn't using "quotes" from other traditional dance forms, referencing the way Jones did an arabesque—a ballet move—in his improvisation (Jones and Paxton 1984:31). Amidst this back-and-forth, there was a brief but salient misrecognition, a moment where Paxton presumed he could see through Jones's performance:

> PAXTON: You're working on that kind of literary level where the quotes are instantly known and you're playing with, it seems to me, dance movement rather in the way you played with the poem that you read...
>
> JONES: No, I wasn't reading it, I was improvising it.
>
> PAXTON: Really. Well, anyway [...S]o one got used to a kind of vocabulary and saw its dimensions and the kind of play that you were doing with it. But there are *new* things to be discovered which, when presented, will not be a language yet. And can thereafter be quoted. But first the quotes are going to be indecipherable. (Jones and Paxton 1984:33)

In this fleeting yet pivotal moment, Paxton believes he can spot what improvisation looks like or sounds like, assuming a text was planned (quoted) rather than improvised (new). Although Paxton claims that his improvisation is aimed at creating "new" aesthetic markers and does not utilize specific dance vocabularies, he clearly has an idea of what, aesthetically, improvisation is *not*. This misunderstanding seems undoubtedly connected to the way whiteness and its aesthetic outputs have been claimed as "acultural" or neutral, and the way the white gaze presumes authority and transparency.

I first learned about this exchange in the final year of my undergraduate degree, after a few years of eagerly exploring improvisational forms with the goal of denuding my body of its learned dance techniques, making myself new. In that moment, I realized my privilege-inflected naivete and the impossible ideal I had been chasing.

In thinking with both Wynter and Glissant and recalling this moment of dance history that shifted my perspective, I wonder what happens to the Other who is forced into impossible transparency? The Other whom we might claim to know. And what happens to the Man who denies his own specificity or opacity, his own history? Who claims to be acultural or absolute? Where and when does the possibility for resisting such absolutes emerge?

When asked by Belaza to *be sound*, and thus, in her words, "be real," I noticed myself prickle, wondering if I was being asked to assume some objective, shared truth of realness. Belaza, as choreographer, was the arbiter of that truth and its measurement. To me, she felt like a magnetic center, the seven of us hovering around her to try to deduce what truth might look like, this unnamed aesthetic.

Belaza seemed to have a movement style. Through trial and error, my fellow dancers and I learned when we were closer or further from what she wanted. The movement that she deemed "real" in us seemed constituted by a fluidity and looseness in the joints, a dynamic smoothness that allowed for changes in speed but no sudden sharp movements or complex "moves" that would require previous training. The head should be weighty on the neck, muscles should let go to allow for bounce and momentum. Eyes should rove, never focusing on one point for too long. Certainly, she was not interested in "quoting."

At one point, what this style was *not* became exceedingly clear. A day before the performance, one of the dancers was trying to *be sound*, attempting to embody the same Nina Simone song we'd heard 15 times. She tiptoed across the space, stiff with focus. Belaza, clearly frustrated, stopped the music and said something like, "Forget your fantasy of being a dancer. Forget trying to 'not dance' too. I see you pretending. Let it all go!" Although Belaza seemed to be trying to help this person achieve a way of moving that wasn't rooted in a logic of "dance," her words, to me, felt reductive in their vagueness, as if a particular truth could be willed out of any body with enough "letting go."

Glissant's theory of transparency clarifies the impossibility of this moment of "truth" for me: "it is impossible to reduce anyone, no matter who, to a truth he would not have generated on his own" ([1990] 1997:194).

Like me, this dancer was a white woman in her twenties, trained in Euro-American dance forms and part of a downtown New York City dance scene that has strong ties to a Judson-era postmodern lineage of artists. I wondered if, like me, she had an image of herself that had once assumed the possibility of a coherent, transparent self. I wondered if our fantasies of subjecthood were becoming foggy as we were told over and over that we were doing it wrong. We weren't *actually* listening, we weren't *actually* being clear.

I resented Belaza's insistence on the possibility of being completely "real," but I was simultaneously unsure of my own assessment of her wishes and intentions. So, I pledged to learn more about Belaza, research her work and her words, and talk to her to attempt to understand this relentless practice and the theory it rests on.

In Her Words

In my review of various interviews of Belaza over the past decade, I found that she sometimes explicitly insists upon ideas of selfhood that reify this tricky universalizing or emptying rhetoric, while in other moments, she emphasizes the specificity of her own body and practice as defined by "two clashing cultures" (Belaza 2022). In various written sources over the years, Belaza's language consistently contains confounding terms, just like her rehearsal voice. She speaks not only of "being sound" or "being wind" as she did with us dancers, but also of becoming a "receptacle of emptiness" (2014:90). She even claims that "we must leave the body" (in Grondin 2020).

In a 2022 interview in which she discussed her travel through the Southwest of the United States, she lamented not being able to visit Native American pueblos because of the pandemic. She shared that she had "always felt close to these people in a certain way," drawing a connection to "something we find in Algerians," and a shared experience of "brutal colonization" (in Bourgois 2022). She later referenced this connection in her work, using a recording of a Northern Cree song, titled "CMT" and composed by Shane Dion, Marlon Deschamps, and Conan Yellowbird and performed by Northern Cree, in her dance *L'Onde*, which was created in 2020, premiered in 2021, and toured through 2023. She stated in a 2022 interview:

> I only include in my creations what's already in me, what speaks deeply to all I'm made of. This chant was a kind of cry, with a single drum noise, and cries, lots of cries. I used it in my most recent work, *L'Onde* ("The Wave"). I naturally wondered how Native Americans would perceive this use of one of their traditional chants, whether they'd see it as a form of appropriation. But there was logic in it, a powerful need for me to use it, because this chant formed an extension of another play, *Le Cri* ("The Scream"), from 2008, which paradoxically didn't include any. I do so with great respect—it's really relevant in my work. (in Bourgois 2022)

I feel troubled by Belaza's sweeping use of the term "Native American" as well as my own lack of experiential or embodied knowledge of the Indigenous and Algerian histories at play here. I also feel uneasy about the potentially appropriative use of this music, which Belaza admits to, though the 2023 program notes for the touring production of *L'Onde* indicate that Northern Cree had "allow[ed] their singing and drumming to be shared" in the production (Wesleyan 2023). Still, I wonder how a song like this can be transmitted or transplanted as simply (or as complexly) as sound to body? Grasped or gathered up or filtered through? Absorbed and evolved? While I sense an impulse in Belaza to promote some sort of unity or commonness that merges difference in her work, I also notice her effort to recognize, in her words, "all I'm made of," in various places and practices. I cannot know all she is made of.

In 2023, I interviewed Belaza for *Movement Research Performance Journal*, hoping to push more on the theory of her tasks. Belaza first maintained that the directives she gives her dancers are in fact possible—to be totally real is possible, to be sound is possible—and that the work is ruined when dancers start to "pretend" (in Thompson 2023:53). In the same breath as she asserted the task's possibility, she admitted that "we can't perfectly reach it" (53). She said that to achieve this state, like *being sound*, one needed extreme "vigilance" (54). I asked her where this vigilance and her certainty about the fragile place of realness comes from. She answered:

> This is a bit more personal, but I have faith, so I know there is something bigger than me: I am not the center; I am not the end of the thing. And I know that in this work, you may touch it today, and it may be gone the next day. That is why you must be vigilant, and how you become humble. [...] You can never master this. I know there are dancers who dream of mastering it, but even after many years, they are beside the thing. (in Thompson 2023:54)

Despite all these words and the new information I gleaned about Belaza, her intentions are still opaque to me. She claims possibility and impossibility at once. She demonstrates specificity and asserts universality at once. She has a spiritual world I cannot know. She has an embodied experience of colonization that I cannot know. Again, I face the fact that I cannot know all she is made of, all that makes up her dance.

Glissant, at the close of "For Opacity," tells a brief story of Victor Segalen, a European anthropologist who could not make sense of his anthropological objects and died mysteriously in the forest ([1990] 1997:193). Glissant acknowledged that Segalen's death could be attributed to something like "consumption," but he goes on to suggest that Segalen suffered and "died of the opacity of the Other, of coming face to face with the impossibility of accomplishing the transmutation that he dreamed of" (193). In this parable-like story, Glissant calls attention to both the utter impossibility of total transparency and the way opacity powerfully disrupts the Western concept of selfhood.

If Westerners (and maybe me?) can only relate to another through a project of transparency, equivalency, and reduction, perhaps they (I) become "heroically consumed in the impossibility of being Other" (Glissant [1990] 1997:194).

By locating myself in this history of trying to see and grasp, I notice how, during my short process rehearsing with Belaza, and my subsequent critical musings, I may have not been affording her a "right to opacity" (190). In trying to *be* something else and sensing its impossibility, I had begun to assume I was seeing it all, while admittedly consumed with and confounded by her methods. I was putting Belaza at the center of Glissant's theory, without hearing her insistence: "I am not the center" (in Thompson 2023:54). By transplanting her process into my white body and thinking it in relation to my history, including my own path to critiquing a US postmodern dance ethos, I projected my own self-criticality of transparency onto Belaza.

This initial textual investigation, then, did not clarify Belaza for me. But the process of musing and researching did precipitate another reckoning with my presumptions around the ethics of *impossible tasks*, which, in turn, moved me to write further about my experience of the detailed materiality of the dance, without trying to make it clear.

Performance

Being Sound

As we approach the day of the performance I relent to the task. I admit to myself that Nacera's belief in her process is alluring and, ultimately, I want to please her, I want to be a "good" performer. I make my attempt, accept the paradoxes.

The curatorial questions that shape the context for Nacera's performances (as part of a series of events entitled Platform 2020: Utterances from the Chorus, *at Danspace Project in Spring 2020) are bouncing around in my head before the performance. "How do you sustain vulnerability in an exchange that becomes public?" (Hussie-Taylor et al. 2020:37). This question is also central to Nacera's challenge as we try to take the work onto the stage. For her, to sustain vulnerability is "to be generous onstage and let go."*

I notice that despite not knowing my fellow performers well, Nacera has created a strange world where we are "intimate strangers" (Iduma 2020:70). We have witnessed each other try to surrender control. We have stabilized each other when getting woozy, or tearing up, or stumbling. And the seven of us seem to arrive at the performance in this shared space of risk, ready to strive for realness, spill out some truth, and accept that we will likely flounder. We get serious, quiet, careful.

We take our places standing outside the church for over half an hour before the official start time, beginning before the beginning. Eventually, we walk at a glacial pace into the space, hopefully seeming as if we are gently pushed by a breeze. When we reach the inner sanctuary, we stand in a line, theatrical fog hanging around our feet, donned in layers of intentionally loose T-shirts, sweatpants, and socks, the contours of our bodies faded. We embark on an improvised score, beginning with being wind *to blow our bodies across the stage, then* being circle *to become seven vortexes, at first stationary, then eventually spinning out to turn round and round ourselves and round and round the space and round and round each other. Finally, we step, one by one, into the soft light shining onto the "center" of the church floor to* be sound, *each only for a verse or so of Simone's song, and then, for the last chorus, all together.*

We feel wind and each other, arrive at a threshold. We teeter on the edge of performance, expanding our internal worlds with effortful abandon until they swallow each other up, holding each other in corners of eyes, bumping shoulders, shifting, breathing air. We are dense, voluminous. We are wind, drifting past each other. We are circles. Submerged in the soft peripheries of stage light, why does it feel like there are only edges, no center? We are sound.

I let questions of clarity and realness fall away. Only in this tiring motion of togetherness do I begin to sense what I need to do to be onstage with some semblance of honesty. This realization is a mist, seeping into me as my vision blurs from spinning. In the action, in the performance, I forget my assumption that I ever knew what she wanted. I accept the imprints of my past on my body and yield to the unknowns that may or

Figure 2. From left: Kati Payne, Peggy Cheng, Imani Butler, Christopher Unpezverde Núñez, Nora Raine Thompson, Bianca Paige Smith, and Jamaal Bowman in Nacera Belaza's La Procession. *Danspace Project, New York, March 2020. (Photo by Ian Douglas)*

may not reveal themselves. I somehow keep listening to the other bodies around me, as well as the technicolor sound of Nina Simone—ready for failure. In a dizzy trance, I accept the risk of the labor of this dance, accept the precarity of my relation to Nacera, to my fellow dancers, to the audience. I hope the leap is worth taking nonetheless.

Relational Bodies and Listening

This kind of relation—layered, fraught, affective, exciting work—was unfamiliar to me. It challenged my notions of a bounded, transparent self, of how to know other people and know myself. How did *being sound* create, or at least lead into, this way of being?

After realizing I could not make Belaza's exact intentions transparent to me, I moved to reflect on the task itself, to *be sound*, and sought out others who have attempted to do the impossible within the realm of the sensory and sonic—those who have focused on action and sensation. I turn to Tina Campt, who was curatorially linked to this performance—one of a few scholars chosen to engage in that spring series at Danspace Project. I bring her in here probably for the same reason they did: she is an expert listener.

Campt is "listening to images," per the title of her 2017 book. In this quest, she theorizes sound as "an inherently embodied process that registers at multiple levels of the human sensorium" (2017:7). She stretches the meaning of sound beyond initial observations of rhythm, tone, pitch, and even perceived emotional inflection. Rather, she insists that "sound consists of more than what we hear," and still has everything to do with "vibration and contact" (7). Campt argues that one can sense the sound of music, sure, *but also* the quiet sound of a discarded passport photo, which might contain a chord of capture and the "hum" of fugitivity (2017:26). She describes these sounds as ones that are felt rather than heard (18). Listening, then, "is an ensemble of seeing, feeling, being affected, contacted, and moved beyond the distance of sight and observer" (42). It is a practice of more than one, of overlapping and blending sensory experiences that evade clarity.

Is Belaza's *being sound* listening? Drawing from Belaza's writing, she is certainly invested in the body's ability to "listen like a sensor" (2014:90). From the perspective of the dancer, and now the ruminator, *being sound* does feel like an ensemble of "seeing, feeling, being affected, contacted, and moved." It does require great attunement, while also resisting straightforward or obvious terms of measurement. Perhaps that is why *being sound* seemed to elude description. Perhaps, that is why Campt's concept of "hapticity" came up in an essay included in the Danspace Project catalog for *Platform 2020*. Campt writes:

> Hapticity is not empathy. It is not "feeling for" another. It is labor. It is the work of feeling precarious or feeling precarity in relation to differentially valued and devalued bodies in the absence of any guarantee of respite, respect, or recognition. It is a gamble that will likely end in failure that is worth taking the risk nonetheless. (2020:55)

I wonder if listening to images (and perhaps *being sound*)—a task that blurs the bounds of a self and complicates the possibilities of sensory experience—can produce something like hapticity. *Being sound* required that I attempt to feel *with*, a precarious mode of relation that necessitates acknowledging difference rather than erasing it, letting that difference, that input, affect me, move me. Acknowledging that one is not the center. In this framing, the rigorous, ungraspable, potentially futile work of *impossible tasks* might be generative, proliferating ways of being together.

In that strange universe of performing Belaza's directives, I came face-to-face with the impossibility of accomplishing transparency, maybe like the anthropologist Segalen, the star of Glissant's cautionary tale. But this did not kill me. Facing the impossible in this way—dancing towards and feeling with—allowed me to admit what I did not know, afforded us all the right to opacity, and further, perhaps, generated the mysterious and powerful labor of hapticity in those dancing moments.

Attempting to *be sound* reminded me again "that there are places where my identity is obscure to me," that there is nothing wrong with not understanding yourself (Glissant [1990] 1997:192). And welcoming the unknown, dancing and writing alongside it, might introduce new forms of relation.

Another Note on Method

Writing Dance

This plural methodology I utilized, although initially affirmed for me by Haraway and Barad's examples, is also aptly aligned with Belaza's oscillating, unfixed approach. In a 2014 essay, Belaza acknowledges that although her pieces are typically planned, she is adamant that one must remain "in a sort of state of permanent 'floating'" (2014:94). These states of suspension, she goes on to specify, "give us the feeling, for a short moment, of hesitating between two roads" (94). As this inquiry continues to expand and complicate itself, I am assured that I must keep floating along and between multiple roads, taking in different views, opening to ambiguous possibilities. Belaza adds that this state of being is "one of the most complex things to share," wondering, "How to tell the other that she must never rely on what she knows" (94). I appreciate Belaza's attempts to share this complex thing, provoked to never again rely on what I know.

I take this provocation into my ongoing paradoxical and perhaps *impossible task* of writing dance. Paradoxical in that dances are often made to be dances because their content cannot be expressed through words. Impossible in that dances evade capture or direct translation. Dances like Belaza's are especially slippery, because they eschew narrative and instead consist of dancers slowly and subtly entering altered states of being and moving. But also, writing dance feels impossible in a similar way that *being sound* is impossible. Impossibility does not mean we cannot make an attempt. And in both *being sound* and writing dance, we must attune to the senses and sometimes make up circuitous personal routes to get at and around and beside the thing. Writing dance requires simultaneous acceptance of opacity and willingness to connect and engage. In writing dance, where we can't discern meaning and intention, we can carefully attend to detail and trace the impacts and aftermaths of dance in our bodies. If we can't write what dance means, we can attempt to write what dance does.

P.S.

This investigation contains the specters and premonitions of paths untaken, ones I hope to sidle down at some point. There is a murky idea lingering amidst this writing that begs for even more linguistic deconstruction of the simple phrase, "being sound," and questions of translation. There is likely the need for an analysis of the grounds—the material conditions, the land—of this practice, tending to the histories of the places it originated from and the places it traveled to. There is a shadow of Denise Ferreira da Silva's critical approach to witnessing art she calls a "poethical reading" that might actually dissolve the "transparent I" that experiences and judges and perhaps attempts to write dance (2018). Additionally, and importantly, the sound we were attempting to be was a recording of Nina Simone singing "My Way." A song popularized by Frank Sinatra as a kind of ode to autonomy. Joshua Chambers-Letson, among others, has argued that Simone's performances represent "vital means through which the minoritarian subject demands and produces freedom [...] at the point of the body" and that her improvisational practice works within constraint to "make the impossible possible" (2018:4). What might an *impossible task*, like *being sound*, then, make possible through acting with and through Simone's voice? What operations were at work in my body as I tried to receive such a song? What happens to that sound as it is triangulated among these different, plural bodies concerned with freedom? Whose freedom?

I float amidst these questions, plotting my imminent return to the unknown, joining Belaza in the fascinating, tiring work of "see[ing] how everything gets transformed by [...] trying to reach something impossible" (2023:53).

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