

# IMAGINING

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EVA YAA ASANTEWAA, EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

**There are years that ask questions, and years that answer.**

– Zora Neale Hurston

Well, as I write this to you, it's the first Saturday of January 2023.

Already too late for me to say, "rabbit, rabbit, rabbit" for good luck—and especially so, since you are reading this in March!

Arguably too soon for me to stop saying Happy New Year if you and I haven't seen each other since December. Remember December? When we walked Manhattan streets in 60° weather?

Definitely time for me to stop laughing my ass off while Republican chickens come home to roost. Oh, I know Kevin McCarthy finally got elected Speaker of the House. I woke up to that news today. Of course, now that you're reading this, you already know McCarthy got those votes by promising he'd serve only during years when February has a 31st day.

But here we are. As it happens, come Lunar New Year, we will enter the auspicious Year of the Rabbit. Would it help if—and I know I'm wildly mixing cultural traditions—I say, "rabbit, rabbit, rabbit" first thing on January 22nd?

Yep. I'm going to try that. People of the March 2023 Future, did it work? Is there any hope?

Also, come January 18th, Mercury—which had the bleeping nerve to go retrograde at the end of December—will have finally turned direct. Folks, did that help?

Maybe it would help if—as mentioned in a hilarious TikTok story time—we start calling these annoying, periodic blips Mercury in Microwave. Maybe take a retrograde and make something tasty and nutritious of it? Lip-smacking good!

Work with me here. I'm just trying to get a grip on these 2020s. And I'm hoping that, by March, you all will have figured out a few things and you can share with me what you've learned.

Because, here in January 2023, I have no clue.

**Eva Yaa Asantewaa**

Founding Editorial Director, *Imagining: A Gibney Journal*

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# **IMAGININGS**

**BY ANNA SPERBER**

Moving out of this time is like moving away from any other crisis. Like around the time when someone close to you dies, everything is heightened. There is a shift in all of the flavors and sounds and sensations. The air around us is a little different. And as we move farther from the event we move back into the rhythm and patterns and autopilot of the familiar. A bit of a relief to move on but also bittersweet. When enough time passes, this intensity fades, and we start to move away from the heightened feeling that has filtered everything, but part of you wants to stay there. During the pandemic lockdown, we contended with the surreal uncertainty of when we would be able to return to dancing together. The possibility that we might not have live performance in our future. The thing we had dedicated our lives to. To being a part of. Our work. Our community.

Now, back in the thick of it, with opportunities for real live witnessing, I feel a desire to hold on to the renewed magic of returning. After the refuge of so many videos of dancing solo in living rooms and backyards during lockdown, offering intimate and resourceful ways of connecting and sharing with each other, I am grateful for the experience of our bodies together in shared space.

At this strangely epic time of a hopefully dwindling but lingering pandemic we are back to live performances indoors. Some COVID precautions are still in effect. But we are back in rooms together.

I'm making a new dance now, and in the daily process, we slip away from that intensity of time that the lockdown had us all blanketed under. Back in rehearsals. In process. Indoor dancing. Wearing masks, but generally back to process as the before times. Sometimes we slip and say things like "when we were in the pandemic," or refer to things now as "post-pandemic." It's still lingering, but we are in transition.

As our daily rhythms slip back. Can we hold on to what has shifted? What has shifted?

A few things I have come across recently have conjured up parts of my own personal dance history—things I loved and strived for when I was a younger dancer and person but have since moved away and in some ways distanced myself from. Seeing them through this new lens, through the aftermath of pandemic lockdown, they almost shone brighter.

In November, Irene Cara, who played Coco in the movie *Fame*, died. Across social media, people posted memories of how she inspired them to dance and be performers when they originally saw her in the film. Watching the dozens of posts of videos of her singing and dancing felt like time travel.

I was on a flight last year. Traveling after not having been on a plane in two years (double-masked with a supply of hand sanitizer in my carry-on), I scrolled through the movie options and came across *Fame*.

I started watching then realized I'd never seen the whole movie--and yet, somehow, it had been a big part of my consciousness. The dancing. The striving. The joyfulness. Growing up in New York in the '80s, the landscape of the film was vividly familiar to me. The movie holds up in an unexpected way.

### **Hot Lunch Jam (Fame)**

There is a section of the piece I worked on this fall that I started to refer to as "knee vibrations." Talking about this material in rehearsal, saying these words out loud, I remembered an exercise from the Graham technique classes I took as a teenager. It was called "knee vibrations." Though it was completely unrelated to the movement material I'm rehearsing now, I found [this video](#) to share with my dancers.

When I was a high school student on scholarship in the late 1990s at the Martha Graham School, I'd taken classes in this same studio. A few of the young dancers in this 1975 film were teaching there at the time. I remember my 14-year-old self intoxicated by being in class with a room full of women diving into the demanding, intense physicality extracted from these teachers. The spirals and sweat and muscular passion. Images of spiraling shells, of sex, anger, mythological characters. Things I only had a glimpse of experience with at that point in my life.

In one class, we were doing contractions across the floor with one leg extended out to the side. As we danced across the floor in pairs, a

guest teacher shouted, "Ladies! CONTRACT! CONTRACT like it's your first penetration!"

At just 14, I used my imagination, watched the women dancing around me out of the corner of my eye and did my best approximation of their intensity in my interpretation.

Watching these films--having distance from that part of my dancing, my training-- I see it in a new frame. The beauty in the pure dedication. The passion. The striving. The drama. The sensation and deep feeling of it.

Maybe the distance of the pandemic, not being able to engage and connect with each other, brought into stark relief the sentimentality in the best way. Appreciation for dancers. For effort and exertion. The ritual of daily practice. Ritual of performing. The cycles of making each new piece from an unknown blank slate into something full. I don't want to fall back into taking these things for granted. Dancing. Performing. Gathering. Breathing each other's air without fear. This specific intimacy with other bodies.

I want to move forward with a lightness without forgetting the weight. We are still carrying. It is not gone. We knew and can feel it all the time. What to do with it as it finds different parts in our bodies. Our conversations. What are we telling you, showing you about it?

We are figuring it out as we go, and that is fair. Maybe even desirable.



Image Description: A white woman with long straight brown hair in a brown shirt pictured standing in profile to the camera.

Photo by Whitney Browne

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**Anna Sperber** is a Brooklyn-based choreographer and performer. Her work has been described by *The New York Times* as “immediately compelling” and “wonderfully strange” with “moments of theatrical magic.” Her performances are rooted in the poetic potency of choreography and its potential for perceptual transformation, embodying a tension between formality and chaotic wildness.

Her work has been presented and commissioned by venues including The Kitchen, The Joyce Theater’s UNLEASHED Series at New York Live Arts, Gibney, The Chocolate Factory, Baryshnikov Arts Center, Dance Theater Workshop, and the American Dance Festival. She has been an artist in residence as a Schonberg Fellow at Dance The Yard, Bogliasco Foundation, Marble House Projects, MacDowell, Yaddo, Center for Performance Research, Gibney (Dance in Process), Brooklyn Arts Exchange, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council on Governors Island, and Movement Research. Sperber has collaborated extensively with esteemed experimental composers and live musicians, as well as visual designers. These interdisciplinary collaborations are crucial to the integration of visual and sonic landscapes with the moving body in her work.

Sperber was a co-founder of classclassclass, and was a co-curator of the 2008 Movement Research Spring Festival. She has taught as a guest artist at American Dance Festival, Movement Research, Freeskewl, Pageant Space, Gibney, Hunter College, George Washington University, and Wayne State University. Sperber founded and ran BRAZIL, a studio and intimate performance space in Bushwick, Brooklyn from 2004 to 2014, and Sunset Space Studio in Sunset Park, Brooklyn 2019-2020.

I am an artist  
and a scientist

**BY GREGORY YODAN JR.**

**"I've never made a painting as a work of art, it's all research."**

– Pablo Picasso

I am often asked if I am a dancer or a scientist, as if the potential to be both does not exist. I am Dominican and American; I am gay and a cisgendered male; I am non-disabled and bilingual; I am a dancer and educator; my various identities are intersectional and exist simultaneously without negating or devaluing each other. The same is true for my identities as a dancer and a scientist, or maybe better defined as my identity as an artist-scientist. For me, there wasn't a giant defining leap from dancer to scientist, but rather science provided other tools to study the same thing – human movement.

Society often places the arts and sciences at opposite ends of a spectrum, one data-driven and one driven by emotion. However, they exhibit multiple similarities. Artists and scientists are both driven by curiosity, asking questions to seek truth. Dance and science can be viewed as methods of inquiry and discovery that are both attempting to bring and communicate understanding of the world around us.

Whether the product is a new dance work or a scientific manuscript, the acts of creation and communication are involved. While the traditions, practices, and intended audience are very different, each relies on creativity, discipline, and rigor to be successful.

Baroque and Renaissance intelligentsia made little distinction between art and science, both

concerned with the divine and with nature, co-existing naturally. Renaissance artists explored human anatomy--even through dissections of corpses, despite the Catholic Church's prohibitions--to improve their painting and sculpting techniques. This included Leonardo da Vinci who is known for the Mona Lisa and his anatomical sketches. I have the privilege of dancing with the New York Baroque Dance Company whose Artistic Director, Catherine Turocy describes the art of Baroque dance as a science in proportions, angles, and geometry.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Turocy, C. (2012). "Vitruvian man baroque dance and fractals," *Early Music America*, 26 -31.

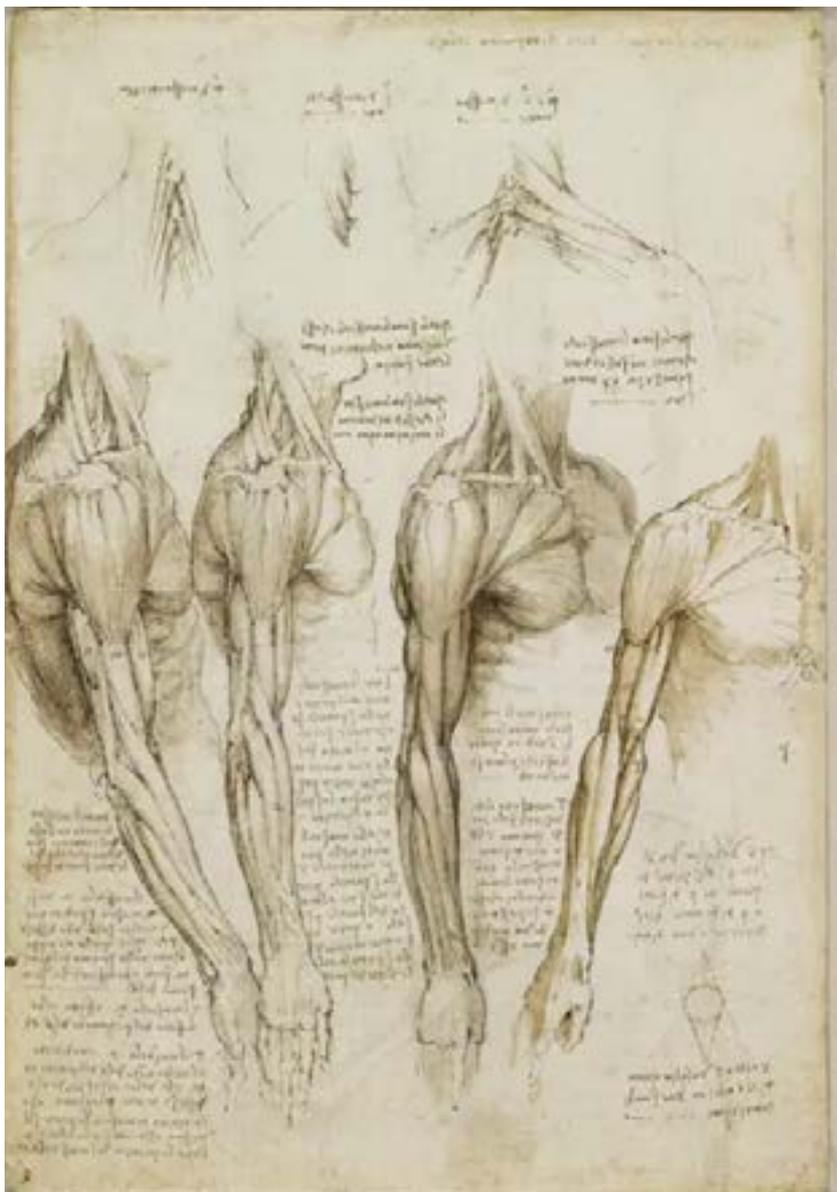


Image Description: The top row shows an anatomical sketch drawn by Leonardo Da Vinci. It shows three separate neck muscles, and the bottom row shows different views of an arm highlighting different muscles.

Caption: Da Vinci studied anatomy through dissections in pursuit of his training as an artist demonstrating his simultaneous scientific and artistic interests. In his notes it says "if it occurs to you to draw it in more ways, the purpose of each muscle will be more intelligible. And this will be good for sculptors, who have to exaggerate the muscles that are the cause of the movements of the limbs more than those that are not used in such movements."

Image credit: Royal Collection Trust/HM Queen Elizabeth II 2012

Knowledge comes in many different forms, and there are multiple ways of knowing. By multiple or "other" ways of knowing, I mean, for example, the knowledge generated through cultural and indigenous practices, lived experience, and creative practices such as dance. While I can't offer an exhaustive list of all other ways of knowing, these are some examples for context.

In dance, we gain knowledge through observation--internal monitoring of one's own body or, perhaps, a teacher or choreographer's feedback that sparks self-discovery and change. Through class, rehearsal and choreography, dancers explore their relationship with the ground, including the forces acting upon them, spatial relationships, and timing with music and more. Dancers experiment with different ways to communicate emotions through movement for new choreographic works.

In science, we use observations as data to create and test hypotheses. Hypotheses are a scientist's best guess at a proposed explanation for some event or phenomenon based on observation or data, which is then used as the starting point for investigation. Scientists repeat experiments; dancers take classes daily and undergo intense rehearsal processes. Both refine their practice based on feedback building incremental knowledge. In both laboratories and dance studios, inquiry is encouraged; failure is part of learning. Research data and evidence take many different forms, all valuable.



Image description: Gregory (left) took a selfie next to a skeleton (right)

Caption: Gregory uses skeletons to study and teach anatomical concepts to better understand human movement.

Photo by Gregory Youdan

The study of kinesiology and anatomy can not only help improve technique but also help to reduce the risk of injury possibly lengthening a dance career. Initially, intent on improving my own technique, I became deeply curious about the musculoskeletal system and biomechanics of human movement. This led me to take several medical courses in anatomy, physiology, and biomechanics during my undergraduate studies. To support my dancing and to deepen my

experience with human movement, I became a certified Pilates teacher. And I learned even more while performing with Heidi Latsky Dance, a company of both disabled and non-disabled dancers. Dancing with the incredible Jerron Herman—a disabled dancer with cerebral palsy—became more curious about the neuroscience of human movement. This duet led to my pursuit of graduate studies in motor learning and control.



Image description: Gregory Youdan Jr (left) a Latinx non-disabled dancer and Jerron Herman, a Black disabled dancer are dressed in white in a lunge facing forward. Brynt Beitman, white and non-disabled, is in the background. Also dressed in white, Beitman is facing backward with his arms to one side. The floor alternates with black and white Marley.

Caption: (L to R): Gregory Youdan Jr., Brynt Beitman, and Jerron Herman in *Somewhere* with Heidi Latsky Dance.

Image credit: Marina Levitskaya

Yet it was during these academic pursuits that I came to the realization that the textbooks and scientific manuscripts I was studying ignored the applied practice so integral to my experience as a dancer—knowledge that does not come solely from studying skeletons and books. It comes from lived experience and applied practice--having the kinesthetic space to embody movement!

Dancers have a vast body of knowledge to share. This principle is one of the founding philosophies of the Mark Morris Dance Group Dance for PD®

(Parkinson's Disease) program, where I am a Stanley J. Wertheimer Fellow and teaching artist. The program is grounded in the idea that a dancer's body of knowledge—techniques, methods, and insights which with dancers guide their own bodies—could benefit people with Parkinson's.

While studying at Teachers College, Columbia University I had the opportunity to work on a research study collaborating with the Dance for PD® program aimed at determining the effectiveness of a targeted dance intervention to improve walking speed for people with PD. This was the first time my dance experience was being valued in a scientific research study. My knowledge was being used to contribute to the scientific evidence around dancing for people with Parkinson's which documented benefits ranging from improvements of symptomatology, improved cognition and quality of life, and the joy associated with dancing.

When I began my graduate studies, I'll admit I had imposter's syndrome as I lacked formal scientific training. I wanted to be perceived as a "real scientist." I still don't even know what that means. Initially, my research looked at various measurements and outcomes of human movement including the use of wearable sensors to examine walking and balance. However, this first study examining improved walking speed as a result of a dance program allowed me to intersect this new skillset with my dance background thus growing my confidence in my identity as an artist-scientist. Since then I

have been able to apply that knowledge more directly to study the health benefits of dance programming for various populations including older adults and those with neurological disorders. Although, I can use fancy equipment to observe movement details that may not be observable to the human eye. My scientific pursuits are deeply tied to my experience and identity as a dancer.



This experience taught me that scientists have much to gain from the involvement of artists. Artists are great collaborators, whose body of knowledge and contributions deserve to be equally valued. Complementary thinking within interdisciplinary teams can result in unexpected outcomes, often of greater value than siloed approaches. Artists can often see different perspectives to assist in the reconceptualizing of theories or research designs. On the flip side, scientists can share their own body of knowledge to assist with the creation of dance works that may communicate concepts to a broader audience than a scientific manuscript. For example, in 2019 I was a part of performance titled "A Lot on the Mind: Huntington's Disease" (created by Stephanie Rogers) in which I was able pair a scientific lecture on the potential benefits of dance for people with Huntington's disease (a rare genetic neurodegenerative disorder) with a live dance performance where I performed with a dancer with Huntington's disease.

Image description: Gregory is standing in a movement science laboratory wearing joint markers which reflect light. It looks as though the markers are glowing in the image.

Caption: Gregory in a movement science laboratory using a motion capture system to study human movement.

Photo by Alexis Sidiropoulos

In the US, we have a strong bias that values analytical data over the lived experience and practical expertise of artists. This was highlighted in Dance/NYC's research report "Defining Small-Budget Dance Makers in a Changing Dance Ecology,"<sup>2</sup> which highlighted that many dance makers are being required to produce numerical data to "prove" their value. Dance/NYC stated, "Fundamentally, survey input and discussions at convenings reveal that 'small-budget' dance is compelled to move away from value, success or 'worth' defined solely by numerical figures, and instead toward definitions based on 'process over product,' individuals over structures, depth of engagement over breadth of audience, community accountability over funder accountability, and social impact over economic impact."

The nonprofit Dance/NYC, serving the greater New York City area, advocates for an equitable, just, and inclusive dance sector. I served as Dance/NYC's Research and Advocacy Coordinator at the time of this report's publication. This report both focuses on quantitative numbers and qualitative data collected from dance workers' lived experience. It also includes commissioned personal essays from some of these workers.

I'm highlighting this report as an example of how evidence and data can come in many different forms and may be documented in a variety of ways. Just because data hasn't been



Image description: Gregory is standing (left) in front of a screen with a slide that reads, "Dance Dance Revolution as a potential exercise therapy in people with Huntington's Disease: A controlled clinical trial" and a image of two non-disabled white men playing dance dance revolution.

Caption: Gregory is speaking at A Lot on the Mind: Huntington's Disease, a scientific lecture using dance for people with Huntington's. This study used a dance video game, dance dance revolution.

Photo by Dalina Delfing

documented yet does not mean that evidence or research doesn't exist!

Dance and science needn't be on opposite ends of a spectrum. Both benefit from the multifaceted identities that artists and scientists bring. My path to becoming an artist-scientist was circuitous and resulted in amalgamating skills in both areas that benefited the other. Dance is research and an intrinsic embodied way of knowing.

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2. Dance/NYC. (2020). "Defining Small-Budget Dance Makers in a Changing Dance Ecology." <https://www.dance.nyc/programs/research/2020/10/Defining-Small-Budget-Dance-Makers-in-a-Changing-Dance-Ecology/>



Image Description: Greg, a white-latino man with dark hair and a beard is sitting smiling at the camera. The background is blurred and out of focus. You can vaguely tell he is on a NYC rooftop during the day. He is wearing a red checkered shirt and jeans. Photo by Dave Sarrafian

**Gregory Youdan Jr.** (he/him/el) is a dancer and a human movement scientist. As a dancer, Greg performed with the NY Baroque Dance Company, Sokolow Theatre/Dance and Heidi Latsky dance, where he now serves as a board member. Other company credits have included David Parker and the Bang Group, HT Chen and Dancers, Catherine Gallant/DANCE, Gloria Mclean and Dancers among others. Currently, Greg is a visiting research scholar at Brown University, adjunct lecturer at CUNY Lehman College and visiting lecturer Hollins University. He is the 2022-23 Dance Anatomy Teaching Fellow at Juilliard assisting Irene Dowd. He is a Westheimer Fellow through Mark Morris Dance Group's Dance for PD program and is a teaching artist in their Dance for PD en Español program. He was a 2021 National Association for Latino Arts and Cultures Advocacy Fellow and 2021 Latin Impact Honoree. Currently, he serves on the development committee for the International Association for Dance Medicine and Science (IADMS), the research committee for the National Organization for Arts in Health (NOAH), review board for the Journal of Dance Education and the advisory council for Dance Data Project. He is a member of the Latinx Dance Educators Alliance. Formerly, he served as the Research and Advocacy Coordinator for Dance/NYC.s.

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**REMEMBER  
THE MAGIC OF  
BLUE**

**BY LESLIE PARKER**

**When the door opens,  
don't forget fat mean greasy.  
When the door closes,  
REMEMBER the Magic of Blue,  
hot grease, and comb to guide us home**  
– Leslie Parker

Words are often tricky when used to provide anyone a glimpse into who I think I am and what it is that I do. So, I divert attention away from all projections in search for a unique kind of form. What does this mean? Searching for a new perspective? A redirection or a reconfiguration of overused words but without clinging to old forms? I write poetry to find ways, new or old, to open my mind, root myself soulfully, and then to uproot again. Where does this cyclical pattern happen? In my imagination, where reflections on earth's generosity make way for the unseen and the unheard never to be discarded. In this present moment, a sense of well-being along with a desire to be an individual, a thinker, dancer and an artist takes precedence.

When remembering past and present impulses to move away from familiarity in search of difference physically and mentally, I am defiant. Because of resisting all urges to what I think is belonging in an attempt to confront the unknown, my future. Why choose to go against the grain in the present? Perhaps, gaining more flow tomorrow is the underlying goal. For what purpose? Balance. Can belonging nowhere result in providing a sense of community anywhere? When does building community

become value creation by manifesting choices for individuals to adventure beyond (although not without) community? I imagine that fulfilling individual desires is a priceless cost to pay. Especially when the need for self-determination is greater than the demand to perform identity at any stage in life. Instinctively, in this sensible but unknowable state called desire is where I tend to find myself over and over again; hinting to purpose, re-membering, and to direct gaze inward.

The aesthetic of leading a life with heart-centered practice shifts as society changes culturally. I remember experimentation as my ancestors did and make a determination to continue learning in tandem with embracing my vulnerabilities in real time. As a result, I hope to make dances with a deeper capacity for holding/acquiring knowledge internally and externally with more spaciousness. Paying attention to nuance in my creative work intensifies as it is captured, revealed, interwoven into consciousness or released. Hopefully, then the aesthetics of the work emerge from doing the work?

In the midst of so much change, I offer a snapshot into what stability looks like and what suffices as an anchor; remembering my mom braiding my hair... for hours! The process that went into gathering the tools, how to and where to position our bodies to perform our braiding ritual, the uniqueness of each braid, teaching me about beauty, order, and chaos all of which encompasses an extravagant experience in my

mind that cannot be duplicated and yet subtle and simplistic at the same time. I reflect on the embodiment of my mother braiding my hair as it conjures a feeling of love that transmutes grief even as I write this piece. The braiding ritual happened often enough to be a regular occurrence while not daily enough to take for granted, and happened long enough ago to become part of my most treasured memories that bonded us so intrinsically and inextricably over and over again.

“Neo Traditional dances are those dances that are created in the spirit or likeness of traditional dances but do not necessarily come from that particular society and, as a result, are not bound to all the aesthetic and cultural rules of that society...”<sup>1</sup>

Mama Kariamu was a key figure who reminded me to ground myself in each and every class and rehearsal I had with her at Temple University. As a dance mentor, she challenged me to remain grounded in ways that only another fighter of the Black and African Diaspora could do. Because she taught me how to channel my anger and tune in to a force greater than myself when there seemed to be no one within proximity who understood “my dance” in predominantly white spaces. Where at Temple University, my qualities of dancing were usually judged only as hard, angry, too much, at war with space, and masculine. When I practiced technique and rehearsed dance work with Mama

Kariamu for Kariamu & Company: Traditions, the space she provided allowed me to feel liberated and seen much more expansively than what was depicted of me. I explored my unique qualities and dynamics openly. Although the space she cultivated felt safe to hone in on my skill set while embracing my uniqueness and cultural heritage, it was not always a peaceful space for me to be in. This was also reflected in processes for academic advancement/achievement within the institution. When studying Umfundalai technique, I made a conscious choice to channel my desire to thrive more productively as an artist by working to expand my capacity for learning. Overtime, my creative processes outside of class sparked an interest. I continue to research new models of an individual working/living within a communal environment because that spark ignited a determination that has not yet disappeared. Although the feeling of being outcast did not dissipate completely in class or rehearsal, I appreciate and often think of how Mama Kariamu made space to validate Black bodies possessing qualities like mine to perform dance in academia more authentically. Similar to how a machete weapon cuts away obstacles to see the path forward more clearly. I honor her and her legacy, now a part of me, as an embodiment of how I return to the source.

My thinking-body is a source for genetic information and somatic learning. An individual body dancing is not void of recalling memories that may also include but not limited to collective and personal history, ethnicity/lineage, intersecting identities and cultural heritage.

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1. Welsh, Kariamu Dr. World of Dance. African Dance, Second Edition. New York, NY. Chelsea House. 2020.

Although I may experiment with form or formlessness to explore Black subjectivity, regurgitating form or formlessness is not an objective. Curiosity as well as recognizing conscious responsibility is what I strive to attain when experimenting with wild abandonment of thought and ideas using the thinking-body, the deconstruction and then reconstruction of projections vs. realities as a grounding of passion for justice; to forefront continuum care, compassion, and self-determination connecting all forms of humanity purposefully. Holistically.

“What does it mean to be called to do something? A calling signals engagement in a particular kind of life’s work. The kind that supersedes notions of occupation and employment, that requires sculpting and making a way where there may not have been one before. Although this research isn’t necessarily the calling itself, but, like the call, it is part of something much larger than myself; it is an amalgam of personal experience based on the portrayal of multiple realities that I have encountered beyond my own personal realities. The entanglement of spiritual practice, creative processes, and artistic vision that goes beyond a solely individual physical existence is how the calling unfolds.”

## A Poem for Bone Womyn

Be present and remember where we live, He said  
Being led not from time to time,  
No father, no mother, no black, or white gaze  
through all times, they said.  
Relevance defeats allies against my side.  
Crystal clear like water,  
Here I lie,  
not abiding, unbridled,  
and defiant, revealing truths I heard.  
Being alive in our wake,  
She fled.  
Now is my home, so move.  
But not too quickly,  
Bow to the grave, she said.  
Listen deeply,  
Eyes look to see her wiser,  
This time knowing transcendence,  
Treads bellies wading in dark rivers.  
I wait for her.  
Let the bones tell it, she said.  
I hear her repossessing spirits swallowed up in  
flesh,  
Becoming again and again and again.

– Leslie Parker

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1. Parker, Leslie. *Bone Womyn Traces in Black*. Roanoke, VA. Hollins University, graduate thesis. 2017



Image Description: A figure, mostly obscured, wearing boxing gloves surrounded by pale strands of raffia

Photo by Leslie Parker and Joshua B. Alafia

Desire may lead to an adherence to the call but where does the call come from? Does it come from within my being? Because it locates my existence. Am I called to dance? Yes, all the time. Why? Where does the call come from that continues to inspire a need to dance all the time and what happens when I forget it? Just like a series of arrivals and departures, dancing has become a ritual of forgetting and remembering. The desire to dance fulfills the need to feel more fully the present and to acknowledge all that the moment holds. (In my mocked Frankenstein doctor's voice, "She's alive!")



Image Description: Brown skinned person, with long, dark dreadlocks pulled up and arms crossed leans on a fence next to trees.

Photo courtesy of artist

**Leslie Parker** is a St. Paul, MN native with art home bases in Brooklyn, NY and in Twin Cities, MN, is a dance artist/maker, improviser, performer, director, collaborator, and educator. She is currently awarded by NEFA/NDP, NPN Creation Fund and McKnight Fellowship for Choreographers. She received an Outstanding Performance Bessie award and was a Jerome Foundation Artist Fellow. Holding a BFA in Choreography and Modern Technique from Temple University and an MFA in Dance from Hollins University in partnership with the Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, The Frankfurt University of Music and Performing Arts and The Dresden Frankfurt Company in Frankfurt, Germany, her additional credits include Judson at Movement Research, NYLA Fresh Tracks (NY), Danspace Project (NY), Center for Performance Research (NY), University of Minnesota Dance (MN), Pillsbury House Theatre (MN), Pangea World Theater (MN), Painted Bride, (PA) and Centre Culturel Blaise Senghor in Dakar, Senegal.

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# punk, pleasure, poetics, and politics:

antidisciplinary aesthetics and punk  
performance practices

BY OLAIYA OLAYEMI

## **prelude**

the future is antidisiplinary  
the future is pleasurable  
the future is punk

## **movement 1: pleasure, primitivism, and performance practices**

i have always been a womxxxn on the edge of things and antithetical by nature. i thought the art world would be a refuge for me. a place to truly find community, and most importantly, liberation. however, my interactions with the art world have been less than pleasurable. since i have been on the east coast, i have encountered condescension and ego. i would be lying if i said the art world is liberatory, rebellious, and radical. art is supposed to be pleasurable for all involved, not stiff and stagnant or pompous and pretentious. the time has come to build a new art world; one not rooted in capitalism and rigid tradition. one that is free.

art-making shouldn't be some elitist exclusive activity for a minority group of people; it should be accessible and democratic. how do we get back in touch with our pleasurable primitive selves who were unconcerned about whether or not something was "polished" (whatever that means). moving forward means going back; we have our ancestors inside of us; we know what the beginning of the world smelled, felt, and looked like because it is in our bone and blood memory; it is in our spirit and flesh. how can we embody an aesthetics of the flesh? instead of being obsessed with "mastering" disciplines, how can we be antidisiplinary?

the world of live performance, in particular, is a static space where innovation is defined by white western patriarchal notions of virtuosity and success is defined by one's proximity to institutional support. but what about artists who choose to operate outside of major organizations? what about artists who choose not to "master" a specific discipline or form? maybe we should all be post-genre and post-form. maybe we should dare to be brave and blossom past what we think we know and move towards more expansive possibilities of what can be. will you go on this journey with me?

## **movement 2: antidisiplinary aesthetics, anarchism, and the avante-garde**

far too many artists and organizations invoke radical politics and replicate dominator culture. If we want to experience real revolution, artists must be on the vanguard of social change; their forms should be emergent and their politics should be reflected in their work in subtle and/or overt ways. there is a lack of radicality and formal experimentation in contemporary art-making. artists can remedy this by remixing forms that can creatively annihilate the system of capitalism that we live in.

there is no style guide to being an antidisiplinary artist. i am not the inventor or owner of what constitutes as an antidisiplinary artist. i have merely chosen to define myself for myself à la audre lorde. i have chosen to rename myself so that others can't define me. there is not a singular definition of antidisiplinary

aesthetics, but there are certain principles that can guide one's artistic practice:

1. an antidisiplinary artist is first and foremost an anarchist and has a healthy distrust of systems and institutions. an antidisiplinary artist has zero respect for authority and artistic authoritarians who seem to think they are gatekeepers.
2. an antidisiplinary artist opposes "grind culture" and "hustle culture." he/she/they privileges rest and living a balanced life, not a life of burnout as a badge of honor.
3. an antidisiplinary artist is not beholden to any particular artistic tradition or lineage. he/she/they may be inspired by many different forms and genres as well as non-art influences like sacred sex practices and the natural world.
4. an antidisiplinary artist makes work that is spiritual, intellectual, political, and personal.
5. an antidisiplinary artist mediates the distance between fine art and popular culture and makes no differentiation between the two.
6. an antidisiplinary artist doesn't make art that is purely for entertainment. he/she/they strives to make artistic experiences that create an erotic state of being, a utopic and blissful feeling, for both the artist and the viewer/listener/reader/witness.
7. an antidisiplinary artist creates a critical framework/discourse/pedagogy around his/her/their own work.
8. an antidisiplinary artist believes that all art is essentially body-based and emanates

from our physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental bodies.

9. there is no such thing as being trained as an antidisiplinary artist. an antidisiplinary's training comes from living life and following their own curiosity and pleasure. everything an antidisiplinary artist does can inform their art; there is no separation between art and life; one's whole life is an artistic project; creativity is everything we do; there is no streamlined rubric that exists that could be vast, expansive and comprehensive enuf to "train" someone to be an antidisiplinary artist; we are literally making up ourselves as we go; and that making is pleasurable, joyful, and deeply erotic.

### **movement 3: the poetic possibilities of a punk performance practice**

anything that doesn't bend will break. if the art world doesn't revise itself, it will cease to exist. new life has to be breathed into the medium of live performance. broadway cannot be the standard for what bodies and voices do in space and time. we need to make performance punk again. a punk performance practice is a practice of freedom; it is a practice of being and becoming; a practice of not being stilted. it is participatory, democratic and immersive. it is ritualized. it evokes self-awareness and introspection. it is always in progress and radically imperfect. it is bathed in the present moment and assumes the intelligence of its audience as opposed to catering to low vibrational base level sensibilities. the protagonist(s) of a punk performance art piece is an anti-hero/anti-heroine who

is unapologetically interrogating their own interiority. they are an outlaw and renegade navigating an unjust society with clear eyes and a willful spirit.

a punk performance art piece embodies the lo-fi-ness, d.i.y.-ness, repetitiveness and stripped down and minimalist quality of punk music. no gloss. no polish. no superficiality. no pretentiousness. no earnestness. no bullshit. just pure anarchism. pure hedonism. pure heathenism.

early punk was predicated upon simplicity: the idea that so much could be said with simple chords and unscrupulous voices; it was also predicated upon democratizing the arts: the idea that anybody could pick up an instrument or a mic and plug in an amp and make sound/ noise happen. punk has evolved over the years, but the ethos of rebellion and accessibility remains. the emphasis on community and anti-commercialism are still integral to a punk aesthetic; a punk performance is about creatively annihilating dominant culture and having fun while doing it.

a punk performance aesthetic embraces the idea that any text can be a performance text and that a text can consist of multiple textualities and oralities (or even visualities); the lines demarcating a play, prose, poetry, and performative writing all blur. words and images can collide with each other. a punk performance text can simultaneously be a piece of literature, movement score, sound score, and artist's book.

movement in a punk performance art piece is not dance and therefore does not have to resemble dance; it can be as improvisational, somatic, sensual, ecstatic, anarchic, rebellious and wild as punk rock music is.

a punk performance piece is not theater and should therefore not resemble theater. any space can be a performance space. the visual environment in a punk performance piece are installed images that are results of performative and improvisational processes (i.e. action paintings, automatic drawings, conceptual photographs, video installations as well as altars consisting of ritualized objects).

it's very punk to be slow in a world that tells us we should move fast. it's very punk to be soft in a world that wants us to be hard. it's very punk to be quiet in a world that can't shut the fuck up. i am interested expanding what it means to be punk beyond a hard and fast musical form. punk is more than sonic transgression. it is a literary, sonic, visual/cinematic/sartorial, choreographic/ kinesthetic, and socio-political subculture (much like jazz and hip-hop which are renegade forms in and of themselves). it is an artistic intervention. it is spiritual, intelligent, and body-based. it is antidisiplinary.

### **coda**

the future is antidisiplinary  
the future is pleasurable  
the future is punk



Image Description: A dark-skinned black woman with pink faux locs, pink eyeliner, and fuchsia lipstick wearing red glasses and a black shirt with a pink purse strap going across her shoulder. She is outside standing in front of a window.

Photo by olaiya olayemi

olaiya olayemi is an anti-disciplinary artist, educator, and pleasure organizer who makes literary, performative, cinematic, and sonic works of art. she has performed at Brooklyn Arts Exchange, AAA3A, and JACK. she was a 2019-2020 Queer Art Performance Fellow and a 2020-2021 Dramatic Question Theatre American Woman Fellow. she holds a b.a. in english/creative writing from depaul university and a m.f.a. in creative writing from emerson college. she lives in philadelphia.

### **Website**

[pillowtalkwithaplaygurrrl.com](http://pillowtalkwithaplaygurrrl.com)

### **Instagram**

[capricorn1089](https://www.instagram.com/capricorn1089)

### **Support**

[Venmo: Olaiya-Olayemi](https://venmo.com/Olaiya-Olayemi)

[Paypal: olaiya1089@gmail.com](mailto:olaiya1089@gmail.com)

[Cashapp: \\$olaiya1089](https://cashapp.com/$olaiya1089)

# EDITORIAL TEAM



Image description: In this selfie, taken in her home office, Eva Yaa Asantewaa is wearing a black turtleneck sweater and looking forward with a cheerful grin. She is a Black woman with luminous, medium-dark skin and short gray hair. She's positioned in front of a room divider with an off-white basket-weave pattern.

**Eva Yaa Asantewaa** (she/her) is Editorial Director for *Imagining: A Gibney Journal* and, from 2018 through 2021, served as Gibney's Senior Director of Curation. She won the 2017 Bessie Award for Outstanding Service to the Field of Dance as a veteran writer, curator and community educator. Since 1976, she has contributed writing on dance to *Dance Magazine*, *The Village Voice*, *SoHo Weekly News*, *Gay City News*, *The Dance Enthusiast*, *Time Out New York* and other publications and interviewed dance artists and advocates as host of two podcasts, *Body and Soul* and *Serious Moonlight*. She has blogged on the arts, with dance as a specialty, for *InfiniteBody*, and blogs on Tarot and other metaphysical subjects on [hummingwitch](#).

Ms. Yaa Asantewaa joined the curatorial team for Danspace Project's Platform 2016: *Lost and Found* and created *the skeleton architecture, or the future of our worlds*, an evening of group improvisation featuring 21 Black women and gender-nonconforming performers. Her cast was awarded a 2017 Bessie for Outstanding Performer. In 2018, Queer|Art established the Eva Yaa Asantewaa Grant for Queer Women(+) Dance Artists in her honor. In 2019, Yaa Asantewaa was a recipient of a BAX Arts & Artists in Progress Award. She is a member of the Dance/NYC Symposium Committee, Founding Director of Black Diaspora, and Founder of Black Curators in Dance and Performance.

A native New Yorker of Black Caribbean heritage, Eva makes her home in the East Village with her wife, Deborah. Sadly, their best-cat-ever Crystal traveled over the Rainbow Bridge on February 18, 2021.



Image Description: Monica Nyenkan is the daughter of African immigrants. She has dark brown eyes and hair. In this photo, her hair has two-strand twists. Photo of Monica Nyenkan by Jakob Tillman.

**Monica Nyenkan** (flexible pronouns) is a Black queer artist, administrator, and emerging curator from Charlotte, NC. Graduating from Marymount Manhattan College, Monica received her Bachelor's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies, concentrating on administration for the visual & performing arts.

Currently based in Brooklyn, Monica has interned and worked with Rachel Uffner Gallery, Gallim Dance, Ballet Tech Foundation, Movement Research, and 651 ARTS. She's produced community-based engagements and art events throughout NYC for the last five years. She acted as a consultant and advisor to an award-winning project, LINKt: a dance film. Most notably, Monica co-curated WANGARI, a pop-up art exhibition focusing on climate change, with the Brooklyn-based collective Womanist Action Network.

Monica currently works as the Gibney Center Special Projects Manager, managing programs such as *Black Diaspora* and *Imagining Digital*. In her free time, Monica loves to watch horror films and spend time with friends and family.



In this photo, Anastasia is wearing a black top with a checkered blazer draped over her shoulders. She is a white woman with dark brown hair, wearing gold jewelry and light makeup. She is sitting down, leaning over a table with her arms crossed, and smiling into the camera. There're string lights in the background of the photo. Photo by Ksenia Ugolnikova.

**Anastasia Gudkova** (she/her), born in Moscow, Russia, is currently pursuing a B.A. in philosophy at New York University. While not a dancer herself, Anastasia has a deep passion and appreciation for contemporary dance and cultural programming and is fully dedicated to a future career in this sector.

Since 2019, Anastasia has worked as a Programming Assistant at MART Foundation, a non-profit, non-governmental foundation that supports contemporary culture on the international stage. Through this position, she has been exposed to a number of aspects of the performing arts world. Having worked on multiple projects both in the U.S. and internationally, Anastasia has been providing executive administrative assistance, events producing support, and logistics management.

Currently based in Brooklyn, Anastasia worked as a Gibney Center Presenting Intern from May 2022 to February 2023.

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