

Master Reflection

Dis(placed) Shadows

by

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From the performance Dis(placed) Shadows. Costume and scenography: Pinelopi Spanou. Photo: Tendai Malvine Makurumbandi. Dancer: Louise Horgen Rekkedal

INTRODUCTION

The way we sense the world can no longer be ignored, though as Frantz Fanon states, “ontology ignores the lived experiences of black people” (Fanon, 2008: 90). Fanon expands on this by adding: “Ontology does not allow us to understand the being of a black man, since it ignores the lived experiences. For not only must a black man be black, but he must also be black in relation to white man. Some people will argue that the situation has a double meaning. Not at all. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of a white man. From one day to the next, the black has had to deal with two systems of reference. Their metaphysics, or less pretentiously their customs and agencies to which they refer, were abolished because they were in contradiction with a new civilization that imposed its own.” (Fanon, 2008: 90)

In the field of choreography, there is a great need and awareness to decolonize perspectives. Taking Bell Hooks essay, *Displacing Whiteness*, as a point of entry, “in theorizing black experience we seek to uncover, to restore as well as to deconstruct, so that new paths, different journeys are possible.” (Hooks, 1990: 172). Our lived experiences and realities inscribe how BIPOC¹, since the enslavement and onwards, shared special knowledge of whiteness as a survival strategy.

¹ The acronym **BIPOC** refers to black, indigenous, and other people of color and aims to emphasize the historic oppression of black and indigenous people.- Wikipedia

The dehumanization of black bodies was centered on white control over the black gaze. This meant that Black folks had to pretentiously exhibit the lack of capacity of seeing and recognizing reality in order to be safe. Though slavery is no longer a norm, the psychological terror of white supremacy still lingers in the black imagination. Bell Hook`s observations on “whiteness dominant presence in the black imagination,”² Frantz Fanon`s elaboration on the *Psychology of colonialism*,³ and Augusto Boal`s *Cops in the head*,⁴ resonates with my concept and choreography in focus, *Dis(placed) Shadows*.

In the choreography, *Dis(placed) shadows*, I explore shadows as metaphors and their deep reality that haunts us. Influenced by lived experiences and effects of colonial heritage, the choreography probes our abilities to renew and transform the ways we identify ourselves. Rather than putting emphasis on limitation, depletion and fragmentation, the performance probes what it is to philosophize and perform beyond disciplinary boundaries, accentuating potentiality.

Though *Dis(placed) Shadows* is intensely critical to colonialism, it also creates space that invites the oppressed and their allies, to meet, practice and reflect on “life as theatre and theatre as life”(Boal, 1995) to collectively quake the borders that divides us and allow our shadows to interact. In this reflection, I will unpack my choreographic process, how I worked with the concept of identity and how rhythm became a tool for dramaturgy. To conclude, I will theorize on the black experience as my own experience.

² Black folk, from slavery and on, shared with one another in conversations “special” knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people. Deemed special because it was not a way of knowing that has been recorded fully in written material, its purpose was to help black folks cope and survive in the white supremacist society. For years black domestic servants, working in the white homes, acted as informants who brought knowledge back to segregated communities – details, facts, observations, psychoanalytic readings of the white “Other”. (Hooks, 1990: 165)

³ When I meet a German or Russian speaking bad French, I try to indicate through gestures the information he is asking for, but in doing so I am careful not to forget that he has a language of his own, a country, and perhaps he is a lawyer, engineer back home. Whatever the case, he is a foreigner with different standards. There is nothing comparable when it comes to a black man. He has no culture, no civilization, and no long historical past. (Fanon, 2008) Stereotype: When Black man are tied to an image, snaring him, imprisoning him as the eternal victim of his own essence, of a visible appearance for which he is not responsible. (Fanon, 2008: 17)

⁴ In my own interpretation: *Cops in the head* by Augusto Boal is concerned with internalised oppressions. Problematising the how and why BIPOC find it appealing to uphold whiteness in order to advance as race.

BACKGROUND

○ MOTIVATION

My general interest in the start of my MA studies, was related to the immaterial essence of living beings, and how their ephemeral forms affected my state of being. I was interested in rhythm, form and balance, and how the sensing of these elements filled my soul and my body, affecting my temporality.

As a contemporary artist, I found value in the past in order to dream of the future. But the nightmares of the present times took over, and the space to imagine and to dream seized to exist. The movement and activity against racism and segregation was a strong and present force that haunted me, invoking shadows that have been present but absent within my reality, either lost or suppressed.

Overwhelmed with the temperature and levels of conversations on decolonization of black bodies, which took the virtual platform by storm, I was drawn to identity politics probing on why we are still having the same discussion in 2020 and how my blackness is actually weaponized against my corporeality. I still remember my thoughts as to; how can I be tied to an image that imprisons me as the eternal victim of my own essence? Who owns the keys to this confinement? How does that condition my desire to escape from these complexities? Must I move away from the voices of my ancestors and construct my own? Will I then be a fugitive, a man with no value, culture and no historical past?

To make it possible to discuss the complicated issues of identity, I decided to use shadows as metaphor, as a way of stretching the ambiguity and nature of our imagination, perception and understanding of one another.

I am inspired by the South African choreographer, Gregory Maqoma and the British/Zimbabwean choreographer, Bawren Tavaziva. Their works such as *Exit/Exist* (Maqoma: 2018) and *Izindava* (Tavaziva: 2017) are characterized by the complex and unique aesthetics that unite both traditional and contemporary expressions, digging deep into the concerns of identity and history. I am interested in their intricate nature of storytelling and their abilities to create space for the performers and the audience, to dream and imagine together.

I am also inspired by the Brazilian choreographer, Lia Rodrigues, especially with her ensemble work *Nororoça*. The way she explores human relationships and the group dynamics, carries images of life as lived experiences. Likewise, by the Norwegian choreographer Ingri Fiksdal who writes about her production *Spectral* (Fiksdal: 2020): “If the distinction between life and non-life collapses, can we become part of the world in a new way?” I relate to the ambiguity of her work, intrigued by her intent to unite inanimate and animate matter as a relationship that is non identical to itself, as something that exist but cannot be categorized.

In relation to the choreographers mentioned above, I draw inspiration from aesthetics that unify both traditional and contemporary expressions. I am therefore concerned with choreography as an art of storytelling that transcends beyond ethnicity and identity. The almagation and the relationship between animate and inanimate nature captivates me. It is within their rhythmic nature to transform and to be transformed, that I find new relations possible.

○ CONCEPT

With the concept, *Dis(placed) Shadows*, I focus on the ambiguous nature of shadows as something that is present but absent and its haunting use. According to the dictionary, a shadow “is an inseparable attendant or constant companion, second self”. To Dis is “to speak disrespectfully to or criticize”. To be placed “is to be put in a particular position, identified or classified as being of a specified type or as holding a specified position in a sequence or hierarchy. To displace is to deprive, or to remove.” (Dorling Kindersley Publishing Inc. & Merriam-Webster Inc., 2015)

The shadows allow us to naturally connect and reflect “on the concepts of self and others, in space and time”. Without our shadows, the notion of value and belonging are at stake. Thus, to displace the shadow is to dissociate the body from its memory, history, tradition and culture, dehumanizing its corporeal essence. A body with no shadow is a lifeless object. Its ephemeral abilities to transform and to be transformed are unsystematically infinite due to what was lost, suppressed or absent.

Taking as an example, the identity controversy that surrounded Vice President of USA, Kamala Harris, as an attempt to both dissociate her identity from being neither a White American nor an African American woman.



Bria Goeller's image of Kamala Harris walking with the shadow of Ruby Bridges, who integrated a New Orleans elementary school in 1960, went viral over the weekend, shared tens of thousands of times on social media. Image courtesy of Bria Goeller and WTF America-Good Trouble.

Opinion columnist Jamelle Bouise asserts that the attempt to stoke another *birther* controversy was flaunted by President Trump against the Vice President of USA, Kamalla Harris. Bouise observed this utterance as an opportunity to think more deeply about the forms and intensions of racial identity.

In the New York Times, Bouise writes, “black American identity within the United States emerges from the interaction between structures of oppression — slavery, the slave trade and race hierarchy — and the needs and goals of those enmeshed within them. Slavery bound African captives together into a group; the desire to assert their personhood — to build community, to find respite, to resist — was cause to adopt a common identity. In turn, that common identity gave those individuals and their descendants a foundation from which to challenge the structures that bound them together in the first place. Race hierarchy and racism set in motion a process of group formation and social action, the aim of which was to transcend and overcome racial domination, and racial categorization itself.” (Jamelle Bouise, 2020)

I, as a Zimbabwean choreographer living in Norway, my tradition and culture is only imagined and materialized as a collective speculation of all BIPOC. To deny my shadow is to dissolve my

kinesthetic memory to dust, reducing my own existence to imaginary, a reality that groups us. It is in that imagination, the characterization and expectations of my being as a POC⁵, are forged by the dominant society including my lived and inherited experiences. I am then expected to uphold whiteness, also strangely longing to possess that reality, a reality that wounds and negates, at the same time endorsing it as the only standard of progress embedded within my own psychology.

As the late artist and activist Bob Marley once said, “until the philosophy which hold one race superior, and another inferior, is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned, everywhere is war.”(Marley, 1976) My resistance is against the present structures that justifies the past in order to insure the continued dominance of the white supremacy. How then do we decategorize understandings and establish new relations among world cultures? Can we quake the borders that divide us and allow our shadows to interact?

○ METHODOLOGY

Methodologically I have been inspired by the dynamics embedded in *Sankofa*, the Akan philosophical approach, derived from Ghana, which emphasizes the importance of examining one’s heritage as integral to any self-renewal. This way of thinking made me recognize my cultural heritage as my own shadow. In my attempt to generate self-renewal, I explored what impact my own identity had to my creative work, whilst questioning how my work will find space within the artistic discourse in Norway, being of African descent.

I have been using self-observation and reflexive investigation of my own practice, bridging the gaps through explorations of anecdotal and personal stories. My biggest challenge was to make my inquiry a global concern. Coming from the context of cultural, political and social oppression, my relationship to identity and the notion of the self was very different from that of the dancers. Therefore, it was interesting to figure out how to connect and communicate with their corporeality with the language of my ancestors. I could either end up using the language to inspire their imagination, or to dissolve my intentions by facilitating stereotypes. The dichotomy of that relationship and all its friction was an interesting place for working choreographically. I appreciated the risks that came with the territory, the risks to alienate or unite, at the same time negating and fixating.

⁵ POC – Person of Color, Wikipedia

So, I had to find ways to translate these references into meaningful physical tasks and scores that the dancers could attend to, whilst placing my culture central in relation to theirs. My goal was to create a space that encouraged the dancers to take out from themselves the potentiality and the richness that they had as individuals and to bring that into the creative process as material.

I incorporated their personal stories, memories and traumas, which put them in close proximity to my problems as a global concern. It was important for the project to consider how to decategorize understandings and establish new relations, and allow productive participation among the creative team, i.e., dancers, choreographer, composer, stage and costume designer.



Photo: screenshot of the Shadow of a millipede, from a post from Great stuff Facebook page.

I strategically gave conflicting and paradoxical instructions and metaphors for the dancers to explore, purposely creating a tension that they had to work through. The idea was to help them move away from the comfort of the norm, and search for other meanings in unknown places.

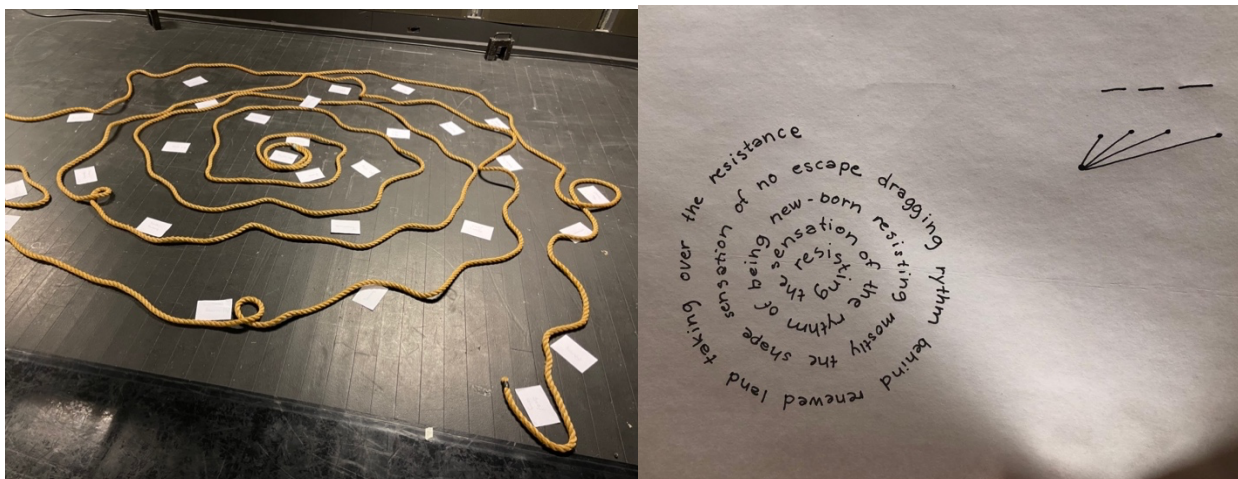
I remember when I took up the discussion around racism. They felt confronted and uncomfortable, and the walls literally went up. We then had to work collectively to find a place that permitted us to converse without needing a 1:1 relationship but allowed complex and ambiguous relationship of the body and the shadow, a relationship open to multiple translations and transformations.

PROCESS

In the process, I worked with transformation and translation of elements and their meanings through task- and score-based explorations. I was interested in how the physical material generated from different contexts interacted with each other and how their chance meetings created obscure relations and associations. We worked with transposition of elements such as images, text, stories, memories, stones, fabric and ropes into bodily and sonic material.

Each element in the process informed the other. The costume, scenography, the choreographic material and the sound composition were always in dialogue. It was important that each element stayed true to the individual process and allowed their individuality to be in the collective. This created tension between the elements, and the need to allow things to occur and find potential in all encounters.

We explored different perceptions within multiple contexts, allowing the shadows in the process to appear and interact. Below is an example of a task I initiated to allow this.



(Image 1) exploring words starting point. (Image 2) A score by Alicia Kerrolf, from working with words exploration.

Out of this process emerged different strategies and methods that resulted and produced qualities open to multiple interpretations. The materials never reached a final state, as a way to refrain from linearity. In the following section I will elaborate on some of the methods that were used in the process.

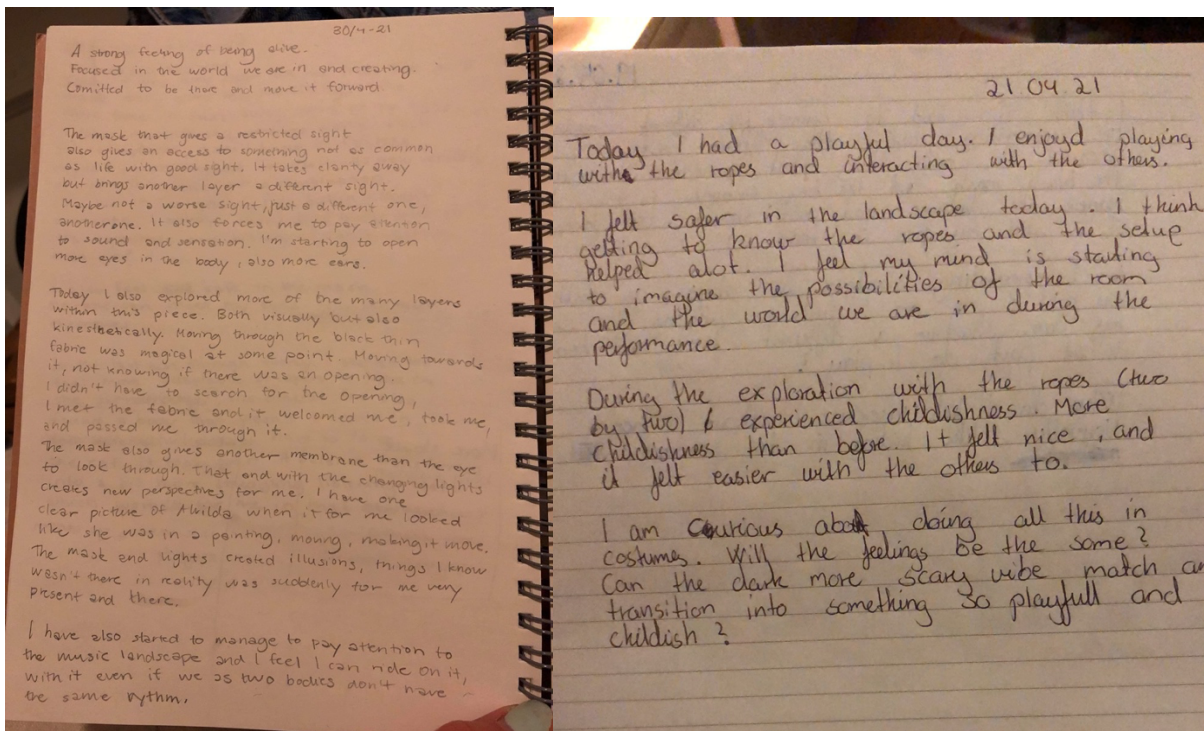
o METHODS

The methods used and or developed during the process were:

- Shadows of today: a writing practice
- Words, animal qualities
- Shadow your shadow
- Shadow of a shadow
- Making and trading scores
- Field work
- Push and pull

I will now give more details on each of these methods mentioned above.

- Shadows of today: writing practice



(Image 1): Reflection of Alicia Kerroff, 30/4/21. (Image 2) Reflection of Oda Rognø, 21/04/21

Working with the concept, *shadows as metaphors*, I realized that my truth was not the only truth. It was important for the dancers to identify their own shadows and find a language that they could use to talk about the shadows, from their own perspectives, exemplified by the text in the image above. My role was to create and open up the space that supported and challenged their perspectives, using choreography as place of becoming.

I developed a writing practice that all the dancers undertook at the end of each day. This writing practice was adapted from the workshop *Taking notes – ethnographic methods and choreography* by Jonas Kure Buer. Here, at the end of each day, the dancers were asked to reflect and write down the *shadows of the day*, which in turn, situated them more within the project. It created space and another level of participation for the dancers. It became a way for them to keep questioning their own experiences by constantly being in and out of the experience.

I noticed the moment when their thoughts and observations started shifting. They started unpacking problems and daring to be in dialogue with their own shadows and in the unknown. Each individual had their moment of realization, which also came at different points in time. It was interesting for me to observe the moments they were in doubt, lost and the moments they found themselves on a different path unknown to them. Submitting to these different states made the process very exciting but also very tempting for everyone including myself, to fall back into the familiar. Therefore, it was essential, as a choreographer to motivate them to dare take unfamiliar choices by being in that place myself.

To give an example, below is the reflection by Alicia Kerrolf, dated 13/04/21. She writes: “It’s a lot to adapt, try, feel. A lot of switching channels, training for both brain and body. Sometimes it works, sometimes not. I see it as a great practice to be able to drop expectations and instead accept what is here right now, in this moment. I slept bad this night. I woke up exhausted. I dreamt the whole night. It feels like I have been busy all night. So today my head had a lot of gaps, absences. I lost memory, I lost count. I had a bumpy journey with my animals. At first, I did not connect to them, they slipped away. Just to come back to me and interest me. When setting material, I felt as if I couldn’t do them justice. I had to just do something and trust that they would come with time. When they received an external word, they got a relation. They had something to interact with. The phrases became clearer to me.” (Alicia Kerrolf, reflection notes, 13/04/2021)

So here, to motivate her, the immediate task was for her to acknowledge her state and not ignore it, and to find a way to work from those gaps, her absences. I asked her to explore the potential in the space created by these absences, and to become that absent space which her lost memories and animals later found a way back to. To animate the relationship, I juxtaposed the *cat*, which was the animal she was exploring, in relation to an adjective *displaced*. It became a *displaced cat* which gave her more clarity yet a new relation.

Their written text gave me an insight towards their challenges and victories. I used their written reflections as material to further search for something else. For example: what were other potentials or areas of research within the challenges or how could the victories be contested?

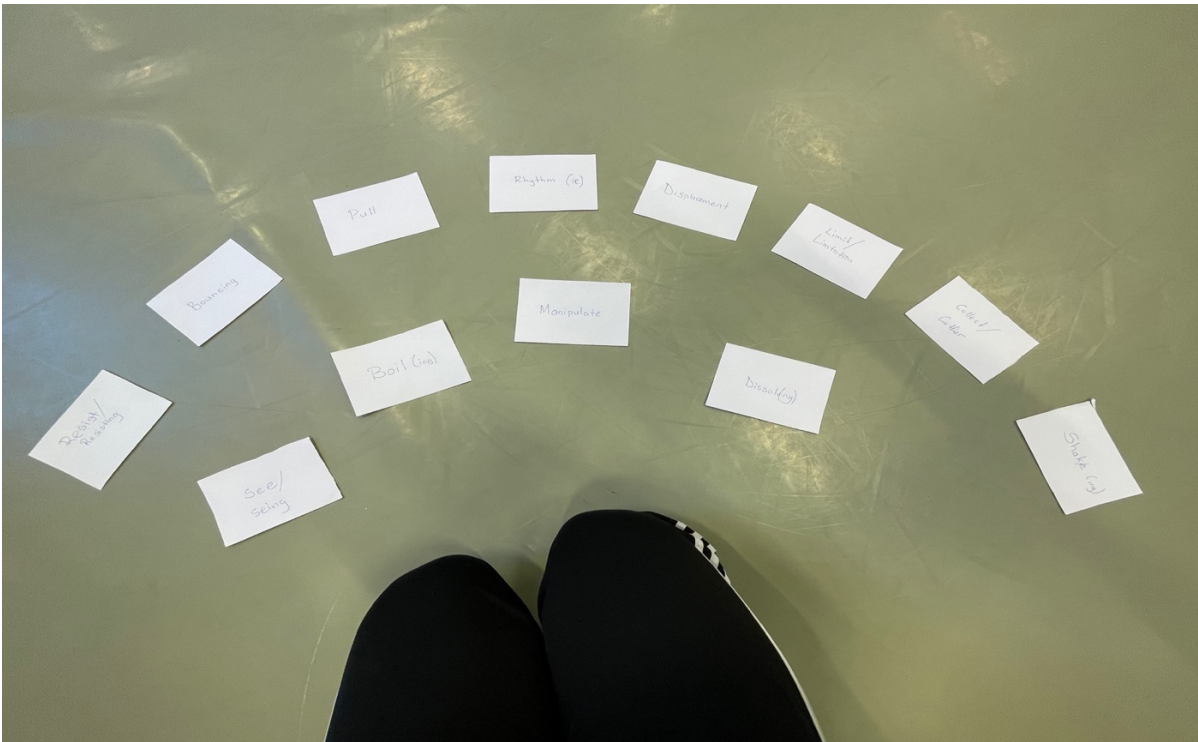
As time passed by, I noticed how their writing transformed into more of a poetic voice, an observant and alert eye that spoke with clarity, daring to be different, both as an individual and as a collective. The accumulation of different shadows and narratives from the written material, brought a strong sense of dynamic that I later used to expand choreography as research. I used their words and terms, to personalize their explorations. By adopting their written language into the creative tasks, it opened up channels and ways that none of us expected. I was now in direct contact with their subconscious which greatly developed our level of communication at the same time making it more complicated.

- Words, animal qualities

Working with words to start a creative process was something new for me. I got inspired from the workshops; *Mapping choreographic interests* by Prof. Anne Grete Eriksen, and *Calibrating: Specifying Choreographic Concerns and Focus* by Prof. Amanda Steggell.

I picked 28 words from my project description and lay them down on the floor. The dancers constructed five sentences each using those words. Those sentences became a score that they explored towards set material. They then explored their solo material generated from those sentences in different constellations. I mostly played with the solo material in duets and trio settings, using chance methods to allow moments of relationships to arrive. I filmed these improvised constellations to be sure that we captured moments when interesting meetings occurred, for then later to use this video material as we worked further.

The next day I selected only 12 words out of the 28 words, the words that were in close relation to the project, namely: resisting, bouncing, seeing, pulling, boiling, manipulating, rhythmic, displaced, dissolving, limiting, collecting and shaking, as shown in the photo below.



A photo of 12 images selected in close proximity to the project, working with animal qualities. Photo: Tendai Makurumbandi

I then asked the dancers to choose 3 animals and write down the qualities they associated with those animals. They would then explore each set of animal qualities into a set phrase. The next stage was to give each animal an adjective from the selection. i.e., we ended up having a Displaced Cat, a Resisting Monkey, a Boiling Flamingo, a Dissolving Donkey etc.

In continuation, the dancers revisited and re-worked the same set material in relation to the given words (the adjectives). The task was to allow the adjective to affect the qualities and dynamics of the movements to arrive at a set material. We then explored those different phrases in different constellations. I played with chance method, interested in the dynamic or rhythm created when these phrases met. In those different encounters, I questioned; how do we find freedom within the set material? How to give space to the material to interact without us imposing our will on to it?

I experimented with placement or starting point in space. I observed that it was easier for the dancers to work with animal qualities. They had something concrete to relate to, which freed their imagination and brought them closer to their physicality. It was thought-provoking when we started exploring the same material in masks. It totally transformed the expression of the body and my experience as an observer. I became more attentive to the bodily expression and found myself focusing on different body parts other than the face.

I allocated 45 minutes for each dancer to work on their solo material just with me. It was productive to have the time and space just to work and focus on the same material for some time, trying to understand it. I then started modifying each solo, playing with choreographic tools like minimization, repetition, inversion, rhythmical modifications, deconstruction and amplification. This fundamental aesthetic experience brought much needed attentiveness to movement origin, departure and arrival in relation to space and time. Every element of the movement was given value and nourishment which made the dancers even more versatile in their executions of the material.

- Shadow your shadow

With the help of a light source hanging from the ceiling, I let the dancers explore their own shadows while questioning: How do we relate to our own shadows from the first encounter? How can we play with our own shadow? Catching the shadow? Running away from the shadow? Imitating the shadow? Imagine being a shadow of your own shadow, how would you move? How can we understand space and time from the perspective of our shadow? If our shadows could communicate with each other, how would their conversation sound like or look like?

Everyone's gaze was facing downwards, occupied with observing their shadows. From my experience, the bodies became the shadows of the shadow, almost to the point when we could not tell who was leading who. It activated the space the moment we started playing with the shadow from different perspectives, even imagining your shadow standing up while the body is laying on the floor, trading places with your shadow.

- Shadow of a shadow

To work with images was a very interesting process that I enjoyed developing along the way. I selected 12 contrasting images and asked each dancer to choose three of them within 30 seconds. After choosing the images from the given selection, they had to write down the qualities embodied by the image. They would then explore the qualities of each image into a movement phrase.

Below are three examples of the images which were in the selection:



Image 1: Memorial to the Lost Children of Lidice, Czech Republic is a photograph by Barbara Ebeling which was uploaded on September 3rd, 2019.

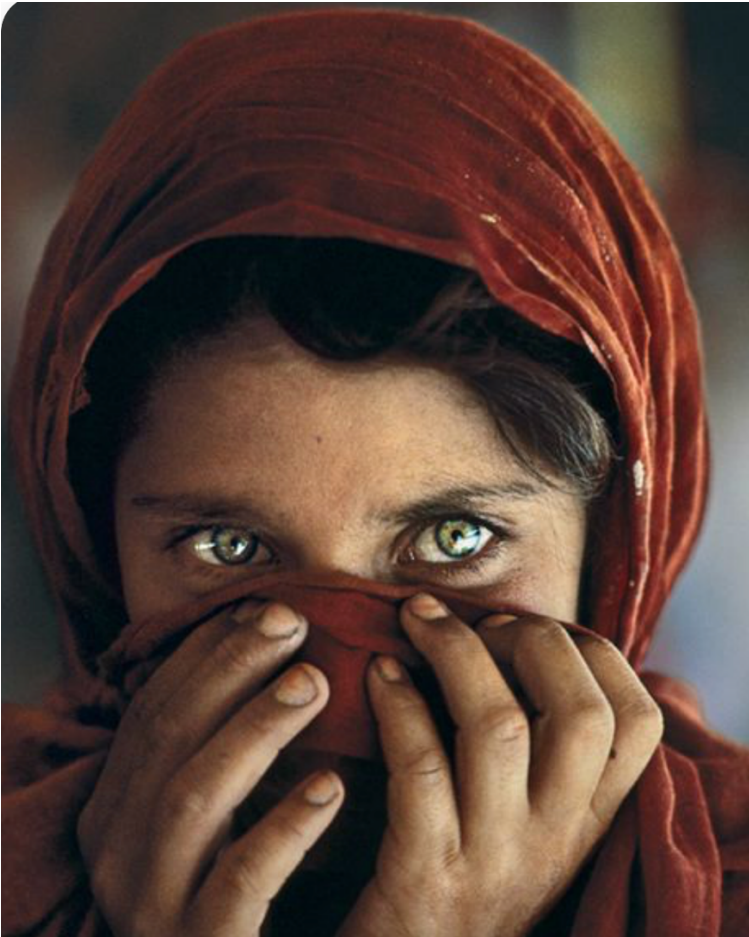


Image 2: Afghan Girl is a 1984 photographic portrait of Sharbat Gula, also known as Sharbat Bibi, taken by photojournalist Steve McCurry. It appeared on the June 1985 cover of National Geographic. The image is of an adolescent girl with green eyes in a red headscarf looking intensely at the camera.



Photo 3: Navajo Fire Dance by William Robinson Leigh. Courtesy of the Woolaroc Museum

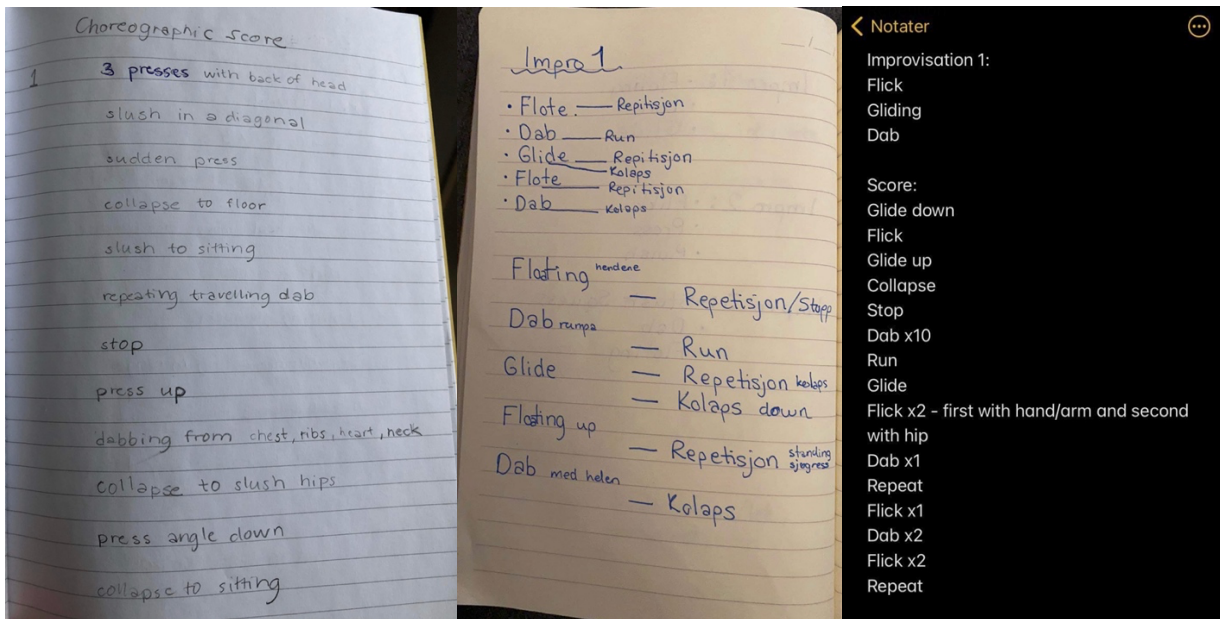
After different interpretations of the images, I created a space that allowed these different expressions to meet and interact. Here it differed according to how one perceived the images and from what position. In this task we played with the concept *Shadow of a shadow*.

To give an example: Whilst Emma Jansen, one of the dancers, explored her solo material based on the three images, the rest of the group took the role of the shadow. They supported her solo by being in constant relation to the way she moved in space, in their own way. This connected the dancers through a multitude of relations, weaved from the different interpretations of their relation. This situation created an interesting composition in the space that brought the dancers much closer to their own bodies. It reached to a point where I could not tell them apart. Through the sensing, they were all united, as a collective and still with their individuality vividly present.

- Making and trading scores

Making and trading scores was inspired from the workshop on *Scores* by Associate Professor Janne-Camilla Lyster. In this method, we explored eight Laban movement action and created choreographic scores that the dancers swapped and explored. The actions and qualities we explored were:

“**Punch** – direct, quick, heavy, bound (punch with any part of the body), **Dub** – direct, quick, light, bound, **Press** – direct, sustained, heavy, bound, **Glide** – direct, sustained, heavy, bound, **Slush** – indirect, quick, heavy, free, **Flick** – indirect, quick, light, free, **Wring** – indirect, sustained, heavy, bound, **Float** – indirect, sustained, light, free” (Connors, 2000)



Examples of the scores (1) Alicia Kerrolf (2) Louise Horgen Rekkedal (3) Jørgen Fenstad Kottum.

From the movement actions above, the dancers were asked to make three combinations using three movement actions in each combination. They then physically explored the combination of the actions in space, incorporating run, stop, shake, collapse and repetition. After 10 minutes improvisation with the actions in the combinations, they had 10 minutes to reflect and write down a score that captures the expressions of their physical exploration. The score had to be concrete with clear instructions that would guide others in the exploration of the same score.

After writing down the score, they each explored their own scores. The next stage was to trade scores with three people and explore the scores to set phrases. After they all had explored the scores, we now had different interpretations of the same score available. I used that as material that I then manipulated and juxtaposed it with the others. This process demanded more time to really explore. Different solos and duets emerged from this exploration.

I enjoyed the differences in expression and similarities in intentions. There was a lot of direct execution of the movement that moved with immense energy and clarity. Repetition was visibly a tool that we used to generate movement dynamic that created room for interaction with space and other dancers.

- Field work – Torshov park in Oslo

For this exploration I chose Torshov park because right beside the park was also a construction site. The task was to observe the qualities and characteristics of the place and become that place. I asked them to listen and observe to what was already there and allow themselves to move from that place. This exercise freed them from inventing but allowed them to sense.



From exploring the landscape in Torshov park in Oslo. Dancers: (left) Louise Horgen Rekkedal, (right) Alvilda Faber Strim. Photo: Tendai Makurumbandi

The second task was to pick a direction and just walk for 20 minutes. The task was to relax your gaze, see and observe. After 20 minutes of walking, they had to find somewhere to sit and write about the shadows from that walk. They then brought their reflections back to the studio and read them to one another in pairs. Whilst one was reading, the other one would note down key words that stayed with them. They then used those words as a place to move and improvise from. The exercise was inspired from the workshop *Suspension in disbelief* by research fellow Lisa Lie, and the goal was to explore how it is to imagine other people's journeys and experiences. How do we listen and what is important in each story? Can we embody, materialize or capture the essence of the story? What is conveyed and what is lost? How does that give life to the story or characters within that story?

- Push and Pull

These are two different actions, yet their common intent is move material from one position to the other. I investigated the action of push and pull, gravitated by the spirals of the upper body. Here the dancers played with the dynamics of each action in different levels and directions, making use of the openings presented from the spiral of the body. From this exploration we developed a writing practice, where the

dancers reflected on their own practice, identifying their experiences with key words. The words that emerged were *limited, overlapping, free, playful, complex, visual, going through, letting go, release, 9 points*. I then asked the dancers to attempt to retain the same qualities and expressions from the exploration, using the key words to trigger the memory of their bodily experiences.

Spirals became integrated in the *Push and pull*. I observed the dancers moving to understand, accumulating expressions which were processed back as actions. Each action displaced another through constant moving of energy back and forth. It was interesting to see which qualities were retained and which qualities were lost in the process. The conclusion was that, if we do not reflect on oneself, we will keep making the same choices, to push and pull, and miss out on other possibilities. So, how can choreography create space to reflect? Can choreography as a body create an environment in which meaningful change is likely to happen?

STAGING: Transformation towards continuity



Photo: Tendai Makurumbandi, from tech rehearsal, 5. May 2021, Dancer: Louise Horgen Rekkedal, Emma Jansen.

The shift from studio work to staging was fascinating. At some point it felt as if I was actually working on two different productions. The project had a different face in the studio than on stage. It made me reflect on BIPOC way of being, that we behave in a certain way when in the presence of white gaze than when we are among ourselves, which, a British art historian, Tanya Barson refers to as “*double consciousness* – a term used to describe the incorporation of codes which place the artistic practice both within and outside of the dominant culture” (Barson 2010, p.10).

In the essay, *Africanist choreography as cultural citizenship*, Funmi Adewole states that: “in many choreographic works, *double consciousness* is contextualized within what I describe as discourses or philosophies of continuity. Artistic vision assembles multiple sources in pursuit of cultural continuity, across historical time and geographical borders, between performance contexts and indeed discursive formations.” (Adewole, 2020: 5)

In *Theater of the oppressed*, Augusto Boal asserts that “every oppressed body has a cop in the head that is submissive subversive. Thus, the goal is to render the subversive more dynamic while making the submission disappear.”(Boal, 1979)

Within and outside of the dominant culture, I observed my real images from my real oppressions transform aesthetically. I then “belonged to both the real and aesthetic world in an active rather than vicarious way”(Boal, 1979). That is to say, when I was in the studio, my daily life outside became fiction and vice-versa. Through this friction I was freed from restrictions that existed in both realities. By bringing the material from my daily life to the studio and taking the concerns from the studio back into my daily life, transformation of both realities was attempted.

To contextualize this transformation, I will link it to Funmi Adewole’s thoughts on *cultural continuity* where she states that an “artistic vision assembles multiple sources in pursuit of cultural continuity, across historical time and geographical borders. (Adewole, 2020: 6) I accumulated material from both realities, my world and the dancers, and in their vast form they overshadowed me. I did not know where to start and which direction to take. Per Roar and Hooman Sharifi played a crucial role, by offering me tools, methods and advice that grounded me and gave me the space and motivation needed to continue exploring, researching and unpacking the elements, finding a direction.

It was during the staging process that everything revealed itself, including the choices I had to make. I had to take away some material in order to give more time and space to other materials. For example, I had worked with blue tube costumes as a part of the beginning scene for a long period. Six dancers in blue tube costumes were to be placed along the corridor, intended to interact with the audience as

they entered the space. After that encounter, the audience would meet one dancer standing still in the center, in a constellation and a costume which was as the shadow of the scenography, as demonstrated by both images below.



Image from rehearsals, showing the dancers in the blue tube costumes. Photo: Tendai Makurumbandi



From the performance, 8. May 2021. Dancer: Louise Horgen Rekkedal. Photo: Tendai Makurumbandi

However, all this visual input became too much information and activity within the first five minutes of the performance, which made me, as an outside eye, work extra hard to get into the piece. So, I decided to take away the blue tube costumes, and gave more time and space to the audience to take in the setting of the performance. I was content with that change which also influenced the continuation and the unfolding of the performance. The way the six dancers were introduced, emerging from the dark void of space became mysterious. It gave the audience a chance to discover the dancers, and the dancers to discover the space and one another.

Another big transformation was taking place with regards to the sound landscape. I wanted to take into consideration the natural soundscape, the ropes and the fabric. This made me take away some of the composed sound sections, to give space to the sounds that already existed in the space; for example, the sound of the tape being ripped off the floor, the ropes falling, and the fabric moving and being moved.

The presence of these sounds invited moments of silence, that became very significant for the piece. The silent moments were the spaces for the audience to come into the work, as a society, echoing the past, present or future, in a sense of “cultural continuity across historical time and geographical borders.” (Adewole, 2020: 6) The way the audience were seated revitalized the moments of silence. Each row was mirroring the backdrop made of organza fabric, which filled the room with something dark, shiny, confronting and haunting, at the same time present but also as if absent breath.

Overall, the toughest thing for me in the staging process was to do nothing, and just give space to the dancers to work without me intervening. This is something that, my mentor Hooman Sharifi had me working on for a while. When I managed to trust and be in the process, a lot happened in a short amount of time. I realized how well the dancers were prepared to take ownership of the work. All the small choices they made, together with the ideas and energy I brought, contributed greatly to the growth of the performance. It was evident that we had a common understanding of the concept and our shadows, and that we felt safe and confident enough to be exploring them with one another. Our willingness and openness to multiple interpretations, moved us beyond the human and non-human limitations “in pursuit of cultural continuity”. (Adewole, 2020: 6)

- o Working with costumes:

The Costumes were designed by my colleague, the MA Design student, Pinelopi Spanou, as part of her MA project. The costumes embodied strong aesthetics and presence. In the process I investigated

the premises that were created by the costumes and the ephemeral forms they embodied. The exploration focused mainly on how the costumes extended the borders of identity. The costumes had an agency when discussing history as our shadows. They allowed us to access memories and re-imagine the present future.

I was also interested in exploring the blurry borders between costume, set design, installation and performance, extending their meaning to create an interactive and multisensory experience. The costumes had different levels of restriction embedded in them, which affected movement choices and created real issues.

I worked with dancers in black body suits and black masks. I was interested in seeing the body as a form that is always becoming. In order to achieve such an effect, I concealed the dancers faces with black masks, which dehumanized their bodies. I was after something known but unidentifiable, a presence that was open to multiple interpretations. It definitely shifted the way I viewed the bodies. I found myself not thinking about bodies at all but occupied with associations. The absence of facial recognition created ambiguous identities. It made me aware of how we can use costumes as a tool to extend the borders of identification in a society full of associations.



Photo: Tendai Makurumbandi, from the performance, 8. May 2021. Dancers from the left to right; Oda Rognø, Alvilda Alvheim Åse, Alicia Kerrolf, Emma Jansen.

However, there were challenges imposed by these costumes. With the tight body suits, it became imperatively important to work on the movement clarity, the dynamics and the way of being present in space, as space. The masks limited the dancer's vision. I was worried that they could not manage to perform at all under these conditions. We practiced with masks at every chance we got, but that

did not improve their vision. Instead, it heightened their sense of the body, space and their relationship to others. This sense of listening with the body, gave the dancers a rich presence that could not be easily defined, but took the performance to a realm of imaginations. This presence embodied a human-nonhuman essence, which haunted, confirmed, questioned and existed as something beyond geographical borders of time.

In addition to the tight black body suit costumes; we also worked with a set of big shadow costumes shown in the image below. The shadow costumes added another set of great challenges both for the dancers and me as a choreographer. Whereas I only had an external experience of the costume, the dancers experienced them inside-out. The costumes revealed the difference that separate our internal and external reality. This level of disconnection brought many questions. Who tells which story and from whose perspective?



Photo by Tendai Makurumbandi, from the performance, 8. May 2021. Dancers from left to right: Alicia Kerrolf, Kamilla Moen, Oda Rognø, Jørgen Fenstad Kottum, Emma Jansen, Alvilda Alvheim Åse.

We worked closely together to find out how to handle these costumes, their weight, special features, tempo and expressions. After loads of explorations, we came down to finding the main essence of the costume for us, as framework for our bodily explorations. The dancers explored and worked with the weight, spirals, volume, transformation and the presence of the costume. It was important to take note of how each shadow costume worked, both individually and as a collective. One's problem became everyone's problem. If one costume embodied qualities that did not appear natural for that costume, it disturbed the whole picture, affecting the whole group.

- *Working with Stones*



Researching echoes of time. Dancers: 2nd and 3rd year students from Oslo National Academy of Arts and Kristiania University College, 2020. The photo is a screenshot of my MA project video presentation.

My exploration of stones started early in my process. The stones were significantly present in their physical form in the research. We explored their shapes, texture and weight and allowed their qualities to inform the dancers. We made rhythms and sounds that came from hitting stones against each other or from dropping them onto the ground.

When I started exploring stones as space and time, they became less and less visible in my project. They came back in different forms as amplified sound and as movement material. Their materiality transcended their normal physical form into something tangible without actually grasping it.

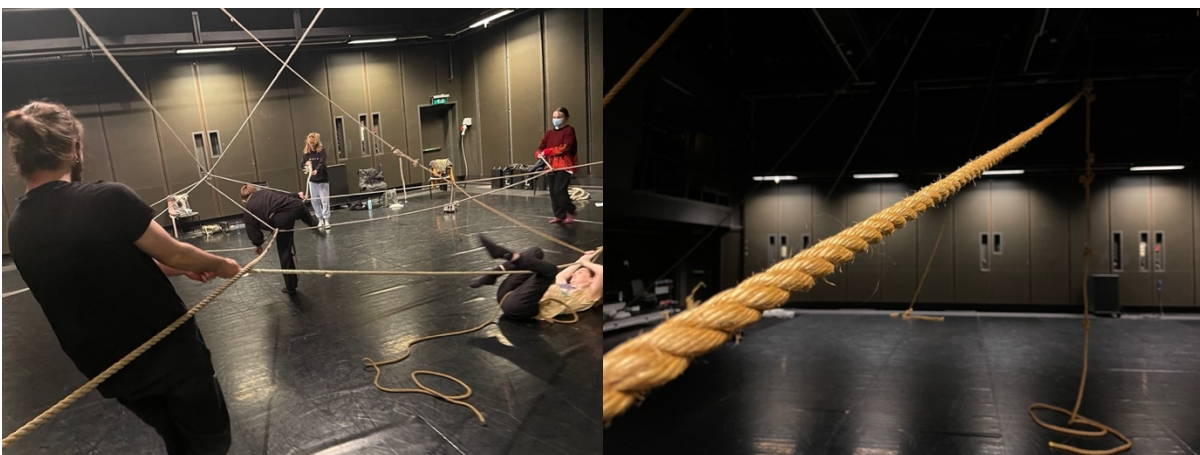
There was a surprising meeting between the stones and costume that gave a purpose to one another through tension built from the different qualities. The costume was very light and stretchy, the stones were heavy and rigid. Together they created a constellation of the costume that extended and embodied the space. Below is an image that shows when we were exploring the relation of the costume and stones.



Photo by Pinelopi Spanou, exploring stones as an extension of the body, Oslo National Academy of Arts, studio 12.

- Working with Ropes

In order to get to know the ropes; we played a lot with them. The explorations raised questions about how to handle them, and in what way they could become alive? The work with ropes invited thoughts like listening through touch, touching and being touched. As scenography, they divided the space with symmetrical lines, both diagonally and vertically. I was interested in how these ropes transformed the space in the room, in the body and in our imagination. How their tactual sensation could be read and translated into audible and physical forms?



Exploring ropes, Oslo National Academy of Arts, stage 5. Photo: Tendai Makurumbandi

We explored hanging, swinging, entangling, unentangling, gathering and stretching etc. We just had to play with them, which was a tough choice to make for me as a choreographer to allow the dancers just to play in our limited and precious rehearsal time. Giving up the control during a production period that was already time restricted, was very stressful. I was strongly advised to be patient and take a step back. After some time of being playful something shifted. The physicality that was produced by the dancers interacting with the ropes and vice-versa, generated some thoughts that invited my gaze and my imagination.

I became more curious as to find out what else these ropes could do. The challenge was space, to have space to explore. For practical reasons, we could only work with ropes in Stage 5, which was not always available to us. So that was a limiting factor for our continued exploration. But on the other hand, that worked to our advantage. It kept the relationship between the dancers and the ropes anew and always becoming. Each time they revealed new qualities and challenges, which in my opinion kept the ropes alive and the dancers present.

- Working with the Fabric

The fabric had a complex textuality that needed special handling. It was white and created waves, visually, audibly, and tactilely, as waves of air. It practically challenged the horizontal space of the black box. It created a beautiful contrast that made the black shadow costumes more visible and vibrant in space.



Exploring the fabric as an alternative landscape, Oslo National Academy of Arts, stage 5. Photo: Tendai Makurumbandi

This is one element I feel I didn't manage to really explore and give new life in the production. However, I am also aware how this fabric has been exhausted in the contemporary dance scene, which is also a reason for revitalizing it, as an exhausted body. I kept it because, I feel there is still something more to this fabric other than being a landscape. Its sense of spirit, transformation, liveliness were areas of interest. I hope that next time I work with this fabric, I will have more time to explore, listen and understand its textual sensation and potentials.

- Working with Sound:

I collaborated with Mikkel Alvheim Åse, a 3rd year BA student in composition from the Norwegian Music Academy in Oslo. We worked with a tonal cinematic approach, capturing tension and release, animate-inanimate. I was interested in approaching sound as an ephemeral scenography. The way the speakers were set up was very important to the sound design. They were rigged in an oval set up that allowed Mikkel to move and perform sound, whilst exploring its ephemerality and the way it shaped the space. We explored shadow as a connection between inanimate matter and living beings, with the intent to transform something recognizable into something unrecognizable and vice-versa.



Mikkel Alveim Åse, exploring sound composition, Oslo National Academy of Arts. Photo: Tendai Makurumbandi

A question of interest was, how does sound affect our perception of a present moment and our connection to memories? Mikkel followed closely the creative process and recorded the sounds from my activity with the dancers in the studio. He then used those sounds as material for sound composition. Therefore, the sound development was really embedded in the process. It captured time, memory, place, and gave something unknown a possible future.

Another question was, can sound be a model that helps us perceive the environment that we interact with? Mikkel's suggestion to use «time and timelessness» as a musical tool to dilate or compress how we experienced time, or to heighten the sense of presence in the listener was very interesting to explore as space. The sound then contributed to the ambiguity of the shadow's interaction in the space. We also explored the sound's textures and its levels of abstraction. Sound and room negotiations shaped the perception of each other and our experience of both spaces.

- [Working with Lights](#)

Lighting was very important element in this production. I worked on the lights together with the light designer Tobias Leira. Through working with the light, I became aware of how challenging lighting a black box can be. A slight leakage of light through the backdoors of the changing rooms or from the speakers, could easily destroy the intensity of darkness we were after.

The concept was to hide and reveal, with focus on creating spaces rather than lighting the bodies. It was important to work with a clean light that captured or suspended time. It was essential to not see the light transform but to feel it after it has already transformed as an echo or memory of the space. We worked a lot with shadow and light, playing with perceptions of space.

The lights created conditions that were needed for this production. The dancers had less vision because they were wearing masks. That problem became more real once we started working with the concept of light. The dancers had to find a way to adapt because they had a real problem in their hands. This created a sense of insecurity, so I had to workshop with the dancers in a different way. I gave them tools they could use to navigate in the space and still be present and interesting to watch.

For an example: How to keep the presence on stage a mystery, without giving away your limitations? I asked them to take in the space and interact with the scenography until the sense of direction was clear for them to continue exploring. This heightened their sensing of space and sound and their

relation to one another. The more we worked with lights, the dancers adapted to manage less light in the space. In that process we also encountered challenges where it was totally impossible to see. We only used light from the roof, to avoid blinding the dancers. Together we sought to find a balance, like how much was too much, and how little was too little?

It was so nice to see how the elements started to come together but only to observe a new problem arises, the rhythm of the performance needed work.

RETAINING RHYTHM: as Dramaturgy

In the process I had originally planned to work with rhythms from Zimbabwe. After teaching the rhythms and steps to the dancers, it did not translate as well as I had imagined. There was something missing even though they did the rhythmic steps quite well enough. All the rhythmic unison material started feeling out of place. I started question: was it because it originated from a different time, deriving from my ancestors or because there was something that the dancers in Oslo miss and could not convey in comparison to the dancers in Zimbabwe? I came to realize that I had to find another sensible way of working with rhythm in the production.

Through the dynamics embedded in personal stories from the dancers and my own, I managed to retain rhythm as a tool for dramaturgy to the piece. Rhythm became a choreographic tool that I used to work on dynamics, relations, transposition and transformation between the dancers, space, sound and light in the piece. I paid attention to the relationship between the dancers. I was interested in their unexpected shift in space, playing with call and response and their proximity to and from the scenography and to one another. Sound and light contributed to the moments they appeared and disappeared, which brought the energy of the place into the space. Through listening and sensing of the total rhythm in the room, I crafted the space that kept the flames of the production becoming. The rhythm accentuated the transformation of time and space in the production. It added attention to dynamic, timing and the crafting of different spatial densities. The sensory output of the performance, in both bodies and materials became something that I had not imagined.

Rhythm translated well through the *philosophy of Ubuntu*: which is best described as an «African philosophy that places emphasis on 'being self through others'. It is a form of humanism which can be expressed in the phrases 'I am because of who we all are' and ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu in Zulu language. This means that in African philosophy, an individual is human if he or

she says I participate, therefore I am. In Western aphorism, Hailey (2008) argued that the individual is expected to say I think, therefore I am» (Exploring Africa Philosophy, Jacob Mugumbate, 2013).

Therefore, the concept of *Ubuntu* is a rhythmic cross-cultural bond that shares structures and connects the physical to the spiritual world, awakening our ability to touch and to be touched by the space “where the unborn, the living and the dead co-exist” (Akinyela 2005: 241). In the composition, I played with rhythmic movement interactions, a call and response between dancers, space, light and sound. Through the embodiment of percussive and rhythmic body movements, the dance and the sound captured the idea of communicating beyond borders for me and confirmed my being through the presence of others.

- The pandemic as Rhythm

The shadow of the pandemic contributed to the rhythm development and interaction in a broader sense. It had an effect on what kind of choices we could make, and to recognize which choices were made for us. The concern of living with something invisible but present was very interesting as a rhythmic sensation, the way it conditioned the way we moved and related to one another.

The shadow of the pandemic tested our individual borders and redefined the rhythm of our private spaces. It created space to listen to other people`s stories and connect with the local environment and community. At the same time, it connected us to the global society and allowed us to inhabit virtual collective spaces.

A question of interest was: in which sense are we the same and different? We were all restricted by the same shadow, being in the unknown became a potential to reinvent oneself. This has been special time to work with choreography, without much physical contact. The circumstances opened up other possibilities of working alone together, a collective rhythm of *Ubuntu*, the shadow of being.

*But how does corona affect choreography?*⁶ In my ensemble work, we dealt with this problem collectively. It translated very well as a choreographic problem because it affected space, and everyone was experiencing it. It had a huge impact on movement and form. The dancers were sensing through action, moving to understand. The notion of being present but absent and its haunting effect gave the dancers a presence that the audience could feel even though the dancers` faces were in masks.

⁶ My own italics

The shadow of the pandemic made the production much more alive and rhythmically unpredictable. Anything could happen and we were ready for it, evidenced by all the choices we made.

CONCLUSION:

Working with *Dis(placed) Shadows* was a spiritual awakening that unearthed the wisdom contained within essence. To explore my lived and inherited experiences in relation to the dancers with Norwegian background shifted the way I perceive and value myself, even though whiteness still lingers in the black imagination.

Growing up in Harare, success was defined by my proximity to whiteness. As Boal states: “a propagation of ideas is presented through a seductive repressive manner and the marginalized eventually loses their sense of identity out of admiration” (Boal, 1995). Even today there are POC who are constantly trying to rid themselves of the black curse by whitening their skin. Through their new creation they also erase their being, for the need to be visible.

Imagine, when I meet a POC in streets of Oslo, we naturally nod and make a quick scan and assumption of one another. During colonialism, it was a way of informing and of acknowledging our existence. But in the contemporary world, this action translates contrarily. It references to the systems of domination that forces us to reside in the colonial anthropology, upholding white supremacy in order to advance as race.

This made me realized that there is no black problem, but a human problem. Black on black racism exists on the basis of the skin tone, hair type and facial features. Even though Mannoni insinuates that 'colonial exploitation is not the same as other forms of exploitation', Fanon argues that “all forms of exploitation are alike. They all seek to justify their existence by citing some biblical decree.” (Fanon, 2008: 69).

Therefore, the weaponization of blackness is an idiocy that must be eradicated. I believe and I think that we can invite change by questioning our own experiences, and practice life as in theater and theater as in life and unroot our inferiority and superiority complex from these fertile grounds, which womb us all both in life and death.

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