



# Against Discovery

Sarah Lass

## Abstract

This essay investigates how settler subjectivity shapes modes of attention in post-Judson western contemporary dance, specifically through this dancing culture's embrace and value of "discovery" as an attentional framework and aim of dancing. Engaging Mark Rifkin's *Settler Common Sense* along with existing research into the nature and operation of attention in Western contemporary dance, the writing highlights the ways in which "discovery" is mobilized through assumptions of porousness, availability, and worldmaking in the space of encounters between a dancer moving in this lineage and their surrounds, thereby enacting and extending everyday, commonplace settler modes of feeling and perception that dynamize ongoing indigenous dispossession. The essay concludes with a summary of a "coordination" practice, initiated and refined in the context of an advanced contemporary dance technique course at Smith College in the spring of 2023. Through analysis of two constituent "coordination" scores and informed by conversations with dance students in the course, the writing explores how "coordination" as an attentional framework supports movers' awareness of both implication and distinction within their surrounds, and honors and upholds both the mover and their surrounds as always already underway and in the midst.

**Keywords:** contemporary dance, western contemporary dance, attention, perception, discovery, indigenous studies, performance studies

It is, at this point, a familiar choreography. The lights dim, the chatter subsides, the weight of each individual audience member shift-shift-shifts as the collective focus of the room washes forward toward the anticipated dance. Usually, then, a lone figure appears—perhaps the presenter, department head, or artistic director—to welcome us all to the event and to deliver the land acknowledgement, along with perhaps a few other announcements. And then we proceed. Our host exits. The lights dim again. The show begins.

I am consistently struck by the spaces between the various elements of this well-practiced sequence, in particular the space between the land acknowledgement and the dance. In that charged and expectant pause—between acknowledgment and action—I often feel all that was mobilized in the acknowledgement sliding away, slipping from present to past in a way that betrays the pernicious fact and force of ongoing colonialism and Indigenous dispossession.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I tug on the sensations and questions evoked in this space of pre-performance in-between. However, instead of examining infrastructural, programmatic, or choreographic manifestations of enduring colonialist presence and effect, as scholars like Leila Mire and Arabella Stanger have so astutely done, I take a phenomenological approach, looking to the space between mover and that which they encounter—the ever-shifting constellation of forces and entities whose presence, affect, and effect move the mover and sculpt the dance.

More specifically, I examine the operation of the mover's attention as they encounter these many elements in-the-moment of dancing. I focus my research and discussion on my experiences and practices in post-Judson Western contemporary dance—a sphere of dance where I locate the bulk of my training, dancing, choreographing, teaching, and scholarship— and on one aspect of this dance sphere's

---

1. Leila Mire summarizes this dynamic in her essay for *thINKingDANCE*, "Dancers, Let's Talk Palestine Part 1: Honor the Dancestry." She states, "Progressive contemporary dance spaces preach '-isms and -centric' bullshit under the guise of decolonization and decentering whiteness. We begin meetings with land acknowledgments without addressing how stripping indigenous people of their land is an ongoing, intersectional struggle."

worldview: the notion of discovery.<sup>2</sup> I conclude by moving towards an articulation of an embodied practice of non-discovery—a practice of “coordination”—initiated and refined over two subsequent semesters teaching a contemporary dance technique course at Smith College in the fall of 2022 and spring of 2023.

*Discover (verb): to show the presence of (something hidden or difficult to see): to make (something) known (The Britannica Dictionary, n.d., Definition 2)*

For me, “post-Judson Western contemporary dance” refers to a present-day juncture of dance practice, process, and performance—a larger culture of dancing and a perspective on its significance. I adopt the term “post-Judson” from Melanie Bales and Rebecca Netti-Fiol’s *The Body Eclectic*, an extensive survey of shifted approaches to training amongst professionals located—physically, conceptually, and aesthetically—in the downtown New York City dance milieu at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century. These are approaches that, in one way or another, trace themselves back to the Judson Church era artists and experiments of the 1960s.

Specific characteristics of the post-Judson approach to training include a rise in improvisation as both training and performance mode, as well as:

The incorporation of somatic and other physical practices into or as dance technique... and shifts in both the dancer/choreographer boundary and in company structure, with an attendant rise in the agency of the dancer to determine his or her training (2008, p. 1)

---

2. In this way, I take up Stanger’s opening provocation in her book *Dancing on Violent Ground: Utopia as Dispossession in Euro-American Theater Dance*, which she culled from Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s work. She asks, “What if dancers and dance scholars were to commit to looking beneath the movement forms we cherish, forms that have promised, even delivered, dance embodiment as an exceptional site of exhilaration and release” (2021, p. 3).

For Bales and Nettle-Fiol, this assemblage positions post-Judson training as a “deconstructive process” as much as a constructive one, with dancers interrogating movement habits and embracing notions of “letting go, peeling off, [and] getting back to *something*” (p. 14).<sup>3</sup> It is what Bales goes on to describe as a “debriefing mode,” which puts “the emphasis [of training] on self-discovery through somatic techniques, improvisation, or meditation” (p. 38). Without the supports of ready-made movement vocabulary, and without assumed training-choreography or performer-choreographer relationships, a post-Judson dancer moving into the twenty-first century strips down, revealing and nurturing personal idiosyncrasies as well as disentangling themselves for habituated movement patterns.<sup>4</sup>

The present-day incarnations of the shifts Bales and Nettle-Fiol describe shape dance practices and processes within Euro-American contemporary dancing that are hybrid, interdisciplinary, and often highly collaborative, and that adopt an expanded understanding of virtuosity as it relates to both attention and to movement. They embrace listening before acting, allowing rather than doing, and a spectrum of possibilities for movement from the pedestrian to the highly athletic. As Claudia LaRocco notes in OntheBoards.tv’s *Shifting Contexts: Ways of Thinking About Contemporary Performance*, they position bodies as sites “for debates, for questioning, for argumentation, [and] exploration” (7:43). In the same video, Carla Peterson notes that, for her, “contemporary performance” foregrounds bodily intelligence, expounding “a very corporeal body” (8:55). For LaRocco, there are no answers to contemporary dancing and performing, only “variations on questions” (2:30). Like post-Judson training, then, contemporary dance process and performance operates without the guideposts of readymade forms or assumptions about what a dance is, can be, or can

---

3. For Bales and Nettle-Fiol, what the something is may vary. They question if it is “nature,” “the basics,” “the functional,” “the real,” before concluding, “The process remains as the milieu changes” (p. 14).

4. As such, the “separation between the making of the self and the making of art” is eliminated—the dancer, the dancing, and the art enter not so much a prescribed aesthetic relationship, but, I would argue, an ethical one (p. 38).

do, providing instead, “an exceptional invitation to ambiguity, to not knowing, to getting lost;” an invitation, in other words, to encounter and be present with the unexpected and unknown (1:50).

I’d like to identify two through-lines within the culture of post-Judson Western contemporary dance—that is, within the confluence of its practices, processes, and performing—as well as within the articulations offered by Bales, Nettle-Fiol, Peterson, and LaRocco. First is a valuing of sensitive bodies—bodies both engaged directly in pre-reflective experience and bodies able to access and mobilize all their available knowledge, experience, and training to respond, not just react or unconsciously enact aestheticized habit. Post-Judson Western contemporary dancing values *available* bodies. The second is an understanding of movement as itself containing intelligence and, in many cases, exerting its own kind of agency, with the same perspective applied to places, sounds, additional entities, and forces both human and more than human. The mover is moved, just as much (if not more) than they move. In other words, bodies are danced, not only dancing.

My interest in the notion of “discovery” within post-Judson Western contemporary dance extends, in part, from Anurima Banjeri and Royona Mitra’s invitation in their 2020 special issue of *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies*, “Decolonizing Dance Studies,” for dance scholars across different geographies, cultures, and genres to examine discipline-specific keywords and their operation. Taking my cue from their work, I understand a “keyword” to be not just a word, but also, potentially, an idea, notion, belief, view, whim, etc., that, through frequency and ubiquity of use, reference, or implication, becomes a powerful—and potentially powerfully imprecise—anchor within the discourses and practices it populates. Like Banjeri and Mitra, I am cognizant of the ways in which such “keywords” become obscure, opaque, or non-specific in ways that can ultimately function to legitimize certain modes of knowledge and dismiss, delegitimize, or destroy others. Also like Banjeri and Mitra, I hope that by encouraging increased attention to my keyword—“discovery”—this writing might

contribute to the vital work the special issue's co-editors instigate: "to unravel and unsettle hegemonic terminologies in dance studies" (2015, p. 22).

*Discover (verb): to find information, a place, or an object, especially for the first time* (Cambridge English Dictionary, n.d., Definition 1)

It is challenging to talk about discovery, in part because explicit definitions, explanations, and accounts within post-Judson Western contemporary dance are somewhat elusive. Discovery, when it is mentioned, is done so in passing, offered without further analysis or elaboration. Broad understanding and acceptance are assumed. *Discovery—of course!* Instead, it is hinted at, intimated, and summoned within descriptions of the immediate, kinesthetic experience of dancing and the particular shade of consciousness that hyper-attuned, deeply present moving can generate. It is often offered up as the final point of it all.

In this essay, I look at how discovery is roused in Western contemporary dance through the practice's embrace of the following tenet: the open, porous exchange between the dancer and space—or the dancer's surrounds—is an ongoing, mobilizing, foundational dialogue. I point to how the larger aspiration of this aim is to experience the immediacy and ecological embeddedness of dancing. And while "discovery" may not be the explicit attentional directive—*discover it!*—as a component framing of awareness, and oft-desired-end-point, discovery shapes attention.

Truthfully, I believe in discovery—I believe in dancing by way of discovering, dancing as a process of discovering. I believe in this way of being- and becoming-with the world as an antidote to the pressures and urgencies of our larger social-political-ecological moment.<sup>5</sup> I

---

5. Here I want to recognize that two concurrent operations can happen at once. As Stanger puts it in *Dancing on Violent Ground*, "My primary argument is that theater dance, understood as a nexus of corporeal, discursive, and institutional practices, can model harmonic or freeing experiences for dancers and audiences while masking and legitimizing imperial, colonial, and white supremacist practices of space" (2021, p. 4).

have felt firsthand, how a mode of discovery requires, in part, that I quiet the superimposition of what has happened in the past, what I want to happen in the future, how I want to move and feel in the present, and, critically, what I might already know or understand about myself, the movement, the space, the present moment, and more. In its suspension of past execution and knowledge, as well as present or future ambition, this mode of attention creates a horizon-like space where I know enough to keep moving, but not enough to fully predict or predetermine what I will find. The result is often poignant surprises, unexpected connections, a deeply felt sense of *now*, and an impression of implication and inextricability of myself and my moving from my surrounds. Necessitating a simultaneously honed and dilated awareness of only that which is presently happening, I move within a space where something as of yet unknown can happen.

My question, and my central provocation for this writing, is: With the perceptual funnel of “discovery” at work in this space of possibility, what do I take as “given,” and, is it, actually?

*Discover (verb): to make known or visible: expose* (Merriam Webster, n.d., Definition 1)

In the following pages, I move towards a deeper understanding of the presence and operation of discovery as a mode of attention in post-Judson Western contemporary dance practice. Before addressing a few examples of the way in which discovery is mobilized in existing contemporary dance discourse, I look to a scholarly companion that provides the theoretical undercurrents for my thinking: Mark Rifkin’s *Settler Common Sense*. I conclude by proposing another mode of attention—a mode of “coordination”—that I began to investigate over the course of two subsequent semesters teaching a contemporary dance technique course of my own devising entitled “Delighting” at Smith College from 2022–23. As a series of scores and practices, “coordination” endeavors to destabilize nonnative orientations around continued Indigenous dispossession as a means to, as Rifkin

so beautifully puts it, “shift the momentum of nonnative feeling, imagination, and knowledge away from a field of possibility bounded by and oriented around settlement, instead taking Indigenous survival and self-determination as the ethical horizon toward which we all may move” (2014, p. 38).<sup>6</sup>

*Discover* (archaic): c. 1300, *discoveren*, *divulge*, *reveal*, *disclose*, *expose*, *lay open to view*, *betray* (someone’s secrets) ([Online Etymology Dictionary](#), n.d., Entry 1)

Through examination of nineteenth century canonical fiction, *Settler Common Sense* considers how institutionalized frameworks of settlement give rise to everyday modes of feeling that, in turn, shape nonnative experience and normalize settler presence and governance. Rifkin theorizes that:

Institutionalized relations of settlement, such as law and policy, help generate forms of affect through which they become imbued with a sensation of everyday certainty. In this sense, quotidian affective formations among nonnatives can be understood as normalizing settler presence, privilege, and power, taking up the terms and technologies of settler governance as something like a phenomenological surround that serves as the animating context for nonnatives’ engagement with the social environment (p. xv)

Here, Rifkin points to the ways in which macrological structures and dynamics infuse everyday life and experience, becoming operational on the level of consciousness in ways that are often so commonplace that they go entirely unnoticed, coming “to be lived as given, as simply the unmarked, generic conditions of possibility for occupancy,

---

6. There are dancers, artists, and teachers who are already engaged in this work. However, an exhaustive account of other artists and their respective approaches is beyond the scope of this paper. That said, I invite articulations of embodied practices that similarly trouble notions of availability and openness for immediate experience in dancing.



association, history, and personhood" (p. xvi).<sup>7</sup> In other words, operations as everyday and as foundational as a "sense"—a feeling—are not beyond the reach of the legal and institutional apparatuses that convene to enact and enforce continued colonialist power, even while they become masked and consequently unnoticed in their "everydayness"—a hidden background against which all experience is contextualized, understood, and advanced.

Rifkin goes on to summarize a few of the typical ways settler certainties "come to be lived as given" through reference to Bruno Latour's concept of "plug-ins," which refers to the "everyday enactments of place, personhood, and belonging that rely on the reiteration of settler sovereignty and the redeployment of its legal and normative templates" (p. 15). "Plug-ins," in other words, function as the mundane, "ready-made" anchors of settler subjectivity, which upon activation incorporate new "information, sensation, and experience" within already normalized framings of inevitable Indigenous dispossession and disappearance alongside affirmations of settler privilege and presence, dynamizing settler experience in the direction of ongoing colonialist power (p. 16). While Rifkin mentions several "plug-ins," I draw our attention to just a few, including, "narrations of national history as progress or as expansion into politically empty space," "articulations of the extralegal character of individual agency," and "calls to increase intimacy with one's place of inhabitation" (p. 15–16). For Rifkin, these templates all contribute to nonnatives' "nonconscious processes of orientation, (re)producing a phenomenological sense of givenness and projecting it as the horizon of future possibility" (p. 16).

---

7. Co-editors Claudia Rankine, Beth Lofreda, and Max King Cap also address this dynamic as it relates to racism, imagination, and writing in their book *The Racial Imaginary*. Rankine and Lofreda explain, "We are all, no matter how little we like it, the bearers of unwanted and often shunned memory, of a history whose infiltrations are at times so stealthy we can pretend otherwise, and at times so loud we can't hear much of anything else" (2015, p. 13). They go on to point out that "to argue that the imagination is or can be somehow free of race...acts as if the imagination is not part of me, is not created by the same web of history and culture that made 'me'" (p. 15).

While Rifkin focuses his research on canonical literature of the 1800s, his insights and theoretical underpinnings offer up questions that might be embraced in many different disciplines, and this is what I gesture towards next. How do “settler common sense” and the “plug-ins” Rifkin discusses show up and operate within post-Judson Western contemporary dance practice? And importantly, how is “discovery” implicated within this process?

*Discover (verb): as in to reveal: to make known (as information previously kept secret) (Merriam Webster Dictionary, n.d., Definition 3)*

In her paper, “A Kinesthetic Mode of Attention in Contemporary Dance Practice” dance scholar Shantel Ehrenberg positions attention as a formative feature of contemporary dance. She identifies kinesthetic awareness as a central feature of the movement, the mover’s work, and the larger culture within this sphere of dancing. She goes on to summarize what exactly kinesthetic awareness is based on her interviews and research, writing:

[A] kinesthetic mode of attention is generally conceived as a directing of intentionality toward one’s own bodily sensations, and perceptions and maintaining a particular awareness of the ways the body moves and responds to movement—a sort of listening and openness to the body and its movements in a mode of discovery (2015, p. 46)

In her writing, Ehrenberg situates “discovery” at the heart of the mode of attention that she proposes underlies and moves contemporary dance practice. It is a particular “sensitivity, and curiosity” directed predominantly towards “internal and pre-reflective bodily experiences” as well as “the environment (e.g., the studio space, another dancer’s touch, the choreography, the music)” (p. 46). According to Ehrenberg, to be listening and open, sensitive and curious, moving and responding “in a mode of discovery” is the constituent perspective

of contemporary dance practice, the perceptual funnel through which encountered materials slide on their way to danced consciousness.

Ehrenberg mentions discovery as a foundational approach to moving within this dance lineage directly in her writing, but this is not always the case in discussions of perceptual operation in contemporary dance. Other allusions to discovery and its vital function are opaquer, arriving by way of the other avenues. Among these is the contemporary dance tenet I mentioned earlier: a particular approach to space—both the inner space of a body and the outer space in which a body moves—and an understanding of these spaces as uncontested, available for both incursion (moving into the outer) and incorporation (bringing into the inner), and, in many cases, as inseparable from one another.

In her chapter on “Space” in *Poetics of Contemporary Dance*, Laurence Louppe describes Merce Cunningham’s “radical solution” to the dilemmas posed by the dynamizing vectors of theatrical architecture and artifice—he makes the theatre “a non-place.” Louppe explains that he does so by activating what he calls the “quiet center,” which refers to “a centre discharged of energy, where there are no privileged points of intensity” (2010, p. 131). Louppe leaps from this “discharged centre” in choreographic space to the space between artist and their manifestations (i.e., dancer and their dancing), acknowledging that it is “[a] prevalent feeling among many painters that lets them make a space in which anything can happen” and that this “is a feeling many dancers may have too” (p. 131). This critical space of encounter between mover and their surrounds is immediately available—a terrain to “discharge” into, in which possibilities are open, “in which anything can happen.”

With its “quiet center,” Louppe contends that Cunningham’s work is “an essentially liberatory experience,” allowing for the audience’s free roaming through multiple, equally valued happenings onstage. She further contends that this space is even more liberatory because “the agent of this liberation, as always in contemporary dance, is the

dancer her/himself.”<sup>8</sup> She goes on, reinforcing a “dancer as space-maker” perspective, explaining, “The contemporary body is the agent of its own space.” For Louppe, “It is the dancer who ‘spatialises’ by opening up the plane of a perceptual field” (p. 131). Louppe takes this concept a step further, alluding to the “worldmaking” aspect of contemporary dancing saying, “There is no space but the one my eyes open upon and which at each moment reinvents both the world, and the circulation of the real” (p. 131).

In Louppe’s description, space does not exist before the dancer opens it—indeed, “the world” is invented and reinvented by the dancer and their attention. As Stanger points out in *Dancing on Violent Ground*, the space-making and “worldmaking” of dancing is not without its complications, especially when the dance-made world claims utopia or utopic qualities (i.e., “liberation”). She writes, “When [‘utopia’ is] taken as a spatial operation for which hopeful dance cultures provide cover, [‘dispossession’] both complicates—and describes the deleterious underneath that can make possible—dance’s promise to release bodies into space” (2021, p. 4–5). In this way, “worldmaking is understood to be at one and the same time the unmaking of worlds” (p. 5).

The simultaneous making and unmaking of space and worlds also brings us back to Rifkin, in whose work the making of settler subjectivity and ongoing, everyday common-sensical colonialism requires the simultaneous unmaking of Indigenous presence and inherent sovereignty. In Louppe’s analysis, there is a shadow of Rifkin’s plug-ins at work: an understanding of dancer as an exceptional, liberatory (“extralegal”) agent, an understanding of progress (Cunningham’s “radical solution”) as the formulation and adoption of empty space

---

8. Interestingly, in equating questions of freedom with the dancer-agent’s spatial orientation (both physical and metaphysical), Louppe charges this orientation with political and ethical questions. Free for whom? It feels necessary to again point to Stanger, who recognizes, “practices of dance—as joyful, healing, and politically transgressive as they may be for the individuals who experience them, and as valorized as they are for these reasons in works of dance scholarship—can contribute processes of violence” (5).

(the making of “non-place”), and an understanding of space as itself empty until the dancer reveals and thereby (re)invents it. And here, in the dynamic of the non-place revealed by the dancer-agent, is a shadow of discovery.

*Discover: as in to find; to come upon after searching, study, or effort* (Merriam Webster Dictionary, n.d., Definition 2)

It is not only the dancer who makes space in Louppe’s book—space also makes the dancer. “[M]ovement does not have its origin within the subject (even if the notion of ‘inner’ is validated in the ‘inner impulse to move’) but, on the contrary, comes from an essential otherness” (p. 126). This means that, for Louppe, the impetus for movement is not from inside, but from outside a body, or rather from the incorporation of the outside into the inside, which then moves back to the outside. “The dancer lives from space and from what space constructs within her/himself,” she explains. In this way, Louppe proposes we can come to understand the importance of Irmgard Baretneiff’s “vision of the body as a ‘*geography of relations*’” and “why we need continually to explore, maintain, or open relational pathways or sometimes repair them.” Here, Louppe points the neuro-physical-spatial aspects of dancing, and of knowing oneself in and through dancing. There is a slightly paradoxical operation at work in Louppe’s summoning, one that both recognizes space as charged in terms of a mover’s history and nervous-system based relationship to space, and that simultaneously positions excursion and incursion of this territory as necessary for making that space uncharged and available—for making it a “non-place,” as Cunningham did choreographically, thereby freeing the mover.

In Louppe’s writing, a body’s very knowledge of itself is contingent upon the geography it occupies and extends into, and among the dancer’s objectives, it seems, is the continual expansion and consolidation of this geography, this body-as-geography, this body. The movement of outer to inner back to outer that makes this expansion and consolidation possible requires an understanding of

one's own body as porous, and that whatever is outer is available for subsummation into one's own body. And again, there are hints of Rifkin's plug-ins, not only in the story this proposition tells—of growth through expansion—but also in the assumption of this expansion as rightful and uncontested, positioning mover as an extralegal entity within it. There is, too, a shadow of the last plug-in—to “increase intimacy with one's place of inhabitation”—in the upholding of increased understanding of and access to the space-to-be-subsumed as a necessary, foundational component of dancing. The more a space around a body is known, the more a body understands itself, and the more movement out into space is possible. The possibility of self-discovery and of movement discovery, then, is contingent upon a boundaryless dialogue between outer and inner, with all that is outer available for incorporation, and all that is inner empowered to move outward.

*Discovery: “A-ha! Or, Whoa! Yes!”* (Gay, 2019, p. 172)

I, too, have been moved by discovery.

In the fall of 2022, I offered an intermediate contemporary dance technique course at Smith College, which I called “Delighting.” Newly designed, it was structured around a sustained, direct cross-disciplinary pairing with Ross Gay's *The Book of Delights*. Every two weeks, we read an “essayette” from Gay's book, culling insights, images, questions, and prompts from the text, and mobilizing them in our dancing. I was curious to see how the tracking and noticing of delight in the context of dancing might encourage students to observe, as Gay does through his writing practice, the dynamized tangle of identity, history, politics, and culture within their own experiences and to discern how it shapes their attention in dancing.

I offered the class two subsequent semesters at Smith—at the intermediate level in the fall and at an advanced level in the spring. While I shifted many of the essayettes we examined when I returned to the course material for the advanced class in the spring, there were a few essayettes I included in both courses. One of these was, “Found Things,” which appeared in both syllabi as the final essayette of the semester.

In "Found Things," Gay suggests that one of the consistent qualities of delight "is the feeling of discovery," defining that feeling as, "[t]he sense that one has found something, been shown something, perhaps materially, perhaps spiritually or psychically, that was previously unknown" (p. 172). Upon first reading, my initial response was, *that sounds like dancing*. Or, at the very least, that sounds akin to the horizon-like space I hope to cultivate and move within when I'm dancing—a space where my encounter with choreographic material, room, sound, another body, ensemble, myself, is characterized by a sense of newness, of feeling-it-for-the-first-time, of (hopefully) revelation; a space where my knowledge of and history with myself and my surrounds rubs up against this-moment-right-now-that-is-distinct-from-all-others. It is, to sum up in Gay's words, an experience of "A-ha! Or, Whoa! Yes!"

And so, when I first offered "Delighting" in the fall of 2022, the final invitation for our technical training was to experiment with "discovering, not doing." We wove together a long sequence of exercises and phrases from past classes, feeling the rub of past knowledge and current circumstances, approaching the deeply known (or relatively familiar) with curiosity and openness, receptivity, and wonder. It was refreshing. It was moving. It was a lovely culmination of our semester-long work together. And it was a moment when I started to question both the adequacy of discovery as a descriptor of the complex, unruly sensing and sensemaking of dancing, to reckon with its entanglement with colonialism, and to entertain, in turn, the possibility of its subtle exertion of ongoing colonialist power in the context of my dancing.

When I prepared the same final unit for the advanced contemporary technique class in the spring of 2023, I returned to "Found Things" and homed in on the aspect of Gay's "discovery" definition that I had acknowledged during my fall semester preparations, but upon which I had not focused. "Perhaps delight is like a great cosmic finger pointing at something," Gay muses, before immediately negating himself. "That's not it. Perhaps delight is like after the great cosmic finger has pointed at something, and that something (which in all likelihood was already there, which is why I've enlisted a cosmic finger

rather than a human one) appears" (p. 172). Discovery, in other words, is not absolute. Existence of "something" is not contingent upon my knowledge of it. The "something" I encounter is already and always underway. What shifts, then, is my awareness. I discover nothing. Rather, abetted by shifted awareness, I drop into relationship with what already is. I sense myself relative to it. I coordinate with it.

As we began our final "Found Things" unit in the advanced class, I shifted the invitation, encouraging students to play with the idea of "coordinating, not discovering." I began the unit with a transparent discussion of my transition from "discovery" to "coordination," but we started moving without a clear definition of what, precisely, coordination was, trusting that we might find its nuances through embodied trial and consideration. While we experimented with several different structures and prompts, here I will highlight just two: an open, start-of-class, improvisational tuning, and the adoption of coordination as an attentional frame in precisely set phrase work. Through reference to subsequent conversations with three then-MFA candidates enrolled in the course—Chloe London, Alex Davis, and Maddy Sher—and in conversation with my own experiences in the material, I muse upon the affordances and effects of "coordination" as a mode of attention.

*Coordinate (verb): to attach so as to form a coordination complex* (Merriam Webster Dictionary, n.d., Definition 3)

Over the course of our two-week "Found Things" and "coordination" unit, we began classes with an extended, open "coordination" score. We began walking through the studio together, tuning to our weight, allowing our legs and arms to swing, letting our heads turn, encouraging our breath to sink into our bellies and then permeate through our limbs. We softened, we played with changing directions, with walking forwards, backwards, and askew. From there, I invited students to start "coordinating with the space," first with the room's architectural landscape, then with the twilight weave of light/dark, then with the other dancers in this landscape, then with the sound, and finally with this dynamic, unruly assemblage as a whole.



What I found was a unique charge to the awareness, movement, and relationships that arose. While I remember, as Sher does, that there was a sense of “widening” along with a “dissolving of boundaries of the self,” this was joined with a distinct awareness of all that was met as already dynamized, exerting vectors of influence that were not immediately available for exploration or adoption, but rather with which I had to contend (M. Sher, personal communication, October 31, 2023). As I shifted my awareness amongst the various elements of the room, the directive to “coordinate” positioned the encountered elements as agents of their own, on their own journey, with their own unique sensibilities. My capacity to act and the specifics of this action were contingent upon my surrounds. As Sher remembers it, it was a “tracking rather than a doing.” The world was already there—I was not finding it or making it. Instead, I felt a continual locating and re-locating of myself relative to a myriad of spatial beings and phenomenon. As Sher put it, it felt like “a shift away from ego” and an “attunement to where things already [were].”

Interestingly, the result was not a blurring of boundaries between entities—even with the “widening” and “dissolving”—but rather a maintenance and sharpening of distinction, now, however, in a field of mutual implication. For Davis, coordination highlighted the “confines or limitations” of the space, especially once we transitioned into a floor-based warm-up (A. Davis, personal communication, October 24, 2023). This, in turn, brought up the spectrum of doing anything versus doing something—“anything” was not possible, but “something” was. The resultant sense was one of embeddedness, but not indistinguishability from that which was encountered. As a collective, then, we did not find ecological harmony, but instead a kind of sensitive, roiling, constantly reattuning discord.

*Coordinate (noun): any one of a set of variables used in specifying the state of a substance or the motion of a particle or momentum* (Merriam Webster Dictionary, n.d., Definition 1b)

During our two weeks, I also proposed “coordination” as a frame for approaching set choreography. At the end of class, I led students through a short chunk of phrase work, encouraging them to move through and

with the material by coordinating with the following possible partners: themselves, today; their breath; their weight; and the movement material (i.e., the phrase) itself. Sher notes that “coordination” in this context reminded her “of the cue of sending two parts away” which opens onto a “more relational awareness of my body to itself... a more tangible web.” For London, Angie Hauser’s notion of “poly-attention” came up—an experience of one’s attention as many-limbed and on multiple co-existing journeys at once in the moment of dancing (C. London, personal communication, October 24, 2023).

For me, this approach highlighted attention as itself a gesture of dancing and helped me to sense how my surrounds remained always distinct and in motion, not necessarily dependent upon my awareness. Instead, I could notice them and track them, decide to move with them, separate from them, support them, etc. Coordinating also required allowing the partners we embraced—today’s body, breath, weight, the phrase, etc.—to exert themselves, upon me in the act of dancing; my moving was, in other words, the scaffolding for *them* to express themselves, not through subsummation into my body, but through my responses to them as distinct entities unto themselves. I made room for them. The choreography was not a structure for me to discover and express myself, but rather a constant re-attunement to and re-calibration of a web of relationships that always shifted and expanded beyond my attempts to totalize it.

Taken together, what I felt as we coordinated during these two final weeks of dancing was an understanding of self and movement as implicated, always—embroiled, embedded—in a field of beings and forces that were not there for my experience, but were there, always, in their own fullness.

*Coordinate (synonyms): to meet, dovetail, adapt, associate, groove; nouns: a counterpart, correspondent, companion* (Merriam Webster Thesaurus, n.d., selected from Entries 2 and 3)

Attention acts. In her acclaimed remarks-turned-essay, “Taken by Surprise: Improvisation in Life and Mind,” Susan Leigh Foster gestures

toward attention and its dynamizing force in dancing. While Foster writes in specific reference to improvisation, for me, the mobile, mutable dialogue she summons constitutes dancing, regardless of where it falls on the spectrum of fixity. She writes:

This body, instigatory as well as responsive, grounds the development of consciousness as a hyperawareness of relationalities... During this playful labor, consciousness shifts from self in relation to group, to body in relation to body, to movement in relation to space and time, to past in relation to present, and to fragment in relation to developing whole (8).

For Foster the “consciousness” of dancing is many-faceted and on-the-move, evident not as an isolated *Thing* unto itself, but rather in the seams between entities and forces, and in a particular quality of awareness of these seams. This positions the knowledge of dancing not so much in individual bodies or in movement in and of itself, but rather within dancing’s spaces of encounter.

This essay agitates within these spaces, questioning how common modes of attention in post-Judson Western contemporary dance—and in particular a sensibility and prioritization of discovery—may be both liberating and revelatory for the mover, and simultaneously spring from, enact, and reinforce a settler subjectivity—a “settler common sense.” In the spirit of gentle provocation, then, I conclude with a series of questions: What might happen, on the level of consciousness, when encounters are not assumed to be open for either exploration or subsummation? What might happen when the entities and forces we meet in dancing are upheld as inherently separate and sovereign? What happens when this fact of their sovereignty is contiguous with my own embeddedness and implication in our shared circumstance?

## References

Bales, M., & Netti-Fiol, R. (2008). *The body eclectic: Evolving practices in dance training*. University of Illinois Press.

- Banjeri, A., & Mitra, R. (2015). Introductory remarks. *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies*, XL, 22–24.
- Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). Discover. In *dictionary.cambridge.com*. Retrieved November 14, 2023, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/discover>
- Ehrenberg, S. (2015). A Kinesthetic Mode of Attention in Contemporary Dance Practice. *Dance Research Journal*, 47(2), 43–61.
- Foster, S. L. (2003). Taken by surprise: Improvisation in dance and mind. In Albright, A. C., & Gere, D. (Eds.), *Taken by surprise: A dance improvisation reader*. Wesleyan University Press.
- Gay, R. (2019). *The book of delights: Essays*. Algonquin Books.
- LaRocco, C. (n.d.). *Shifting Contexts: Ways of Thinking About Contemporary Performance* [Video]. OntheBoards.tv. <https://www.ontheboards.tv/node/724>
- Loupe, L. (2010). *Poetics of contemporary dance*. Dance Books Limited.
- Mire, L. (2021, June 20). "Dancers, Let's Talk Palestine Part 1: Honor the Dancestry." thINKingDANCE.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Coordinate. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved November 14, 2023, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/coordinate>
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Discover. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved November 14, 2023, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discover>
- Online Etymology Dictionary. (n.d.). Discover. In *eymonline.com*. Retrieved November 8, 2023 from <https://www.etymonline.com/word/discover>
- Rankine, C., Loffreda, B., & Cap, M. K. (2015). *The racial imaginary: Writers on race in the life of the mind*.
- Rifkin, M. (2014). *Settler commonsense: Queerness and everyday colonialism in the American Renaissance*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Stanger, A. (2021). *Dancing on violent ground: Utopia as dispossession in Euro-American theater dance*. Northwestern University Press.
- The Britannica Dictionary. (n.d.). Discover. In *britannica.com*. Retrieved December 2, 2023 from <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/discover>