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NEURODIVERGENCE AND DANCE PERFORMANCE: A THESIS

Alannah Martin

May 2024

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

Does neurodivergence have any effects on dance performance? The goals of this research project are to reflect, analyze, and understand how individual neurodivergence impacts creativity, identity, and the choreographic process. The intersection of dance and disability studies is an ever-growing area of research that is in conflict because of the societal nature of the two concepts. Within the disability studies field, neurodivergence and neurodiversity are relatively new and undeveloped ideas that primarily interact with dance studies as pedagogical areas of interest. There is little attention on the impacts of neurodivergence in dance makers and their creative products in performance. The number of artists actively engaging with neurodivergence as a topic of creative research is small, but provides inspiration and support to future creatives. Through personal narrative, phenomenological and creative research, historical development, and engagement with other art forms, I provide a comprehensive review of the impacts of neurodivergence on a year-long creative research project.

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Introduction

I have often questioned why I have remained committed to dance as my chosen career path when I do not feel connected to the motivations that are seemingly shared by my peers in the arts. When I was younger, I danced at a small local studio, and on the first day of classes every year the teacher would ask “Why do you choose to continue coming to dance class?” I remember hearing answers about dance as a form of expression, the power to put all personal stressors aside when attending class, or how my peers felt that they became the “truest” version of themselves when they were dancing. While I would echo their sentimentalities, I spent years wondering why I internally did not feel the same way. I have never loved the exhaustion I feel after a hard class, or that my choreography or performance is insight to my innermost thoughts and emotions. I struggle with the insecurities of performing, and I often have admitted that it would be easier to feel accomplished and successful in a different field altogether. As I grow close to spending 21 years involved in dance, I realize that I return to this art form because it provides stability and support that I have not found elsewhere in my life.

Learning to Feel Good and Stay Cool: Emotional Regulation Tools for Kids with AD/HD, a self-help book for children, writes that “Children with ADHD often are less self-observant and more impulsive, making it harder for them to understand their feelings and develop emotional self-control” (Glasser and Nadeau 2014, 7). This book provides easily accessible advice for children to manage ADHD and teach emotional regulation at an early age. Suggestions to stay in your “Feel Good Zone” (a metaphorical space of regulated emotion) include building tools for self-control, exercising, establishing concrete routines, and getting adequate sleep and good nutrition. Dancing, for me, involves the utilization of all of these instruments of self-regulation. Dancers are consistently analyzing and participating in choice-making that will result in the

completion of a specific task (choreography, technique, etc.) with an awareness of the self in relation to outside stimulants. In a study on dance and emotional regulation in children, Walter and Sat write that “These skills enable a child to develop emotional and self-control regulation while his body serves as a “tool” to carry out the movement” (83). Also, dancing is an intense form of exercise and the training required to develop and advance technique and artistry is regularly scheduled, creating a strict routine. Dancers must maintain healthy habits to support the energetic requirements needed to perform consistently which includes a healthy diet and adequate sleep. Dancing needs the consistent utilization of behaviors that people with ADHD often struggle with and I have used the art form as a means of regulating the instability of my emotional responses. This is why I return to dance.

ADHD is one of multiple neurological differences that is considered under the umbrella term of neurodivergence, which refers to “perceived variations seen in cognitive, affectual, and sensory functioning differing from the majority of the general population” (Bertilsson, Rosqvist, Chown, and Stenning 2020, 1). Many of the cases of innate neurodivergence are also considered disabilities by ADA standards. The Americans with Disabilities Act, enacted in 1989, prohibits discrimination against disabled individuals in employment, government, public accommodations and facilities, transportation, and telecommunications. The National Cancer Institute estimates that 15-20 percent of the world’s population exhibits some form of neurodivergence (Doyle and Colley 2022) and The National Institute of Health reports that 25 percent of adults in the United States have a diagnosed disability but only 1.3 percent of adults self-identify as disabled (Lauer 2022). With a quarter of the population having disabilities, and assuming that a large percentage of that is neurodivergence, why is there a hesitancy to identify as disabled? The biases surrounding disability have historically resulted in the abuse and

differential treatment of disabled individuals. People with temporary or invisible disabilities will refuse to associate themselves with that label because they fear receiving similar treatment, leading to a disproportionate amount of people personally identifying as being disabled.

Disabled dance is a growing area of dance research and performance that often aligns with disability justice movements. Artists like Petra Kuppers, Alice Sheppard, Jerron Herman, and companies like Sins Invalid and Kinetic Light are creating dance for and about disability without catering to an able audience. As disabled dance continues to evolve, there are few artists and researchers creating performative works focusing on neurodivergence. With the majority of research centered on dance pedagogy for neurodiverse students, the personal experiences and effects of neurodivergence on dance practice and performance is now being studied with increasing seriousness. I believe that by creating and studying dance performance about neurodivergence, artists' work will resonate with larger percentages of the population and lead to more people personally identifying with labels of disability and there will be a potential for the removal of harmful biases that continue to resist the fight for equity and disability justice.

This thesis will focus on neurodivergence in dance performance and the creation of my choreographic work, *go yonder*, that is based upon my experience with ADHD. Chapter one asks what is this all about and why am I interested in it? I answer these questions by providing my personal history that has resulted in my interest in neurodivergence as an area of study. The following chapter focuses on the intertwined history of disability and dance. Following that, I explore and explain what neurodiversity and neurodivergence are, how they differ, and my relation to the common identifiers. From there I will discuss dance artists that are researching and performing dance about neurodiversity and other primary points of inspiration for my creative research. Finally, I will discuss the planning process of my choreographic work and the

relation between neurodivergence and my choreographic structure, as well as the intentionality behind the creative choices I made during the development of the piece. Together, this should create a full picture of my graduate thesis work and the thought and intentionality behind *go yonder*.

Chapter I: The What and the Why

A seemingly obvious statement based on the topic of this thesis and the information that has been written so far is that I am a disabled artist. The labels both of disabled and artist have been conflicting in my journey with dance. Discussion of both of these terms concerning my experiences will be beneficial to understanding why neurodiversity in dance performance is of interest to me. I was diagnosed with ADHD as a small child after I impulsively ran away from dance class, which I had ironically been placed in because of my hyperactivity, and was found walking down a busy street on my own. While this was not a revelatory diagnosis, I was not made aware that I had ADHD until I was in high school. Coincidentally, I'd become involved in disabled performance with a local non-profit that created all-ability performance opportunities; casting non-disabled community members and disabled individuals that were served through the local disabled residential and support services organization. In undergraduate school, I majored in Dance and minored in Disability Studies while teaching classes at another support organization for practicum work in both areas of study. Within those three years, I received multiple diagnoses of chronic illness that affected my energy levels, caused extreme internal pain, and impacted my ability to fully participate in classes. Because of the symptoms, I often had to communicate about my illnesses with various instructors which involved sharing extremely personal information. Being open about physical and emotional health with people that I did not have strong relationships with caused me to consider how they would view my

uncontrollable health issues and whether or not that information would change how they perceived me and my participation in dance. While many interactions occurred between my dance development and the timeline of my experiences as a disabled person, I find it notable that my involvement with disabled art peaked as I was navigating my personal relationship to disability.

Before providing further context to disabled dance as a field of study, it is important to acknowledge the societally based conflict of associating disability and dance. Especially as the discord between the two has been a major area of dissonance in my development as an artist. In a primitive explanation of body aesthetics based on cultural and societal factors, anatomical body parts are divided into two categories of value: good and bad. Based on capitalistic expectations of productivity, patriarchal ideologies of beauty, racial and gender normatives, and other hierarchical social structures, bodies are often limited to the visual ideal appeal of a whole body composed of perfectly functioning parts in contrast to fragmented subunits deemed broken.¹ This marginalization of bodies based on productive value has been reinforced heavily by visual artists with the desire to capture idealized representations of humanity, thus excluding ordinary bodies and further denigrating disability.

Dance is a prime example of a visual performance art that is reliant upon the idealized notion of a productive body. Western dance forms are recognized for dancers' ability to contort the body in seemingly impossible maneuvers and display the full range of the human experience through visual kinetics. Expectations of body aesthetics in Western dance forms are widely recognized by dancers and non-dancers alike to be limiting and idolized beyond standard cultural

¹ Davis, Lennard J. *Enforcing normalcy: Disability, deafness, and the body*. Verso, 1995.

expectations.² Stemming from the standards incited by European ballets based in femininity and eroticism, standards of body aesthetics for dancers have remained diligent in dance culture even with current representation that contradicts the necessity for a “perfect” body. The stereotypes of physical appearance for dancers consist of looking thin and youthful, aligned in appearance with the gender binary, being white, and being athletic without looking overly muscular.³ Dancers’ bodies as representations of ideal function are based on the ability to combine athleticism and contortionism that requires peak physical health all while maintaining a look of ease and beauty. This directly contradicts the disabled body that seemingly cannot function without support (physical, financial, medicinal, etc.). While there is the juxtaposition of bodily function in dance and disability, there is also a shared sense of subject hood and removal of identity that relates the two, and makes dancing an important form of political expression.

The study of dance has a large focus on the transition from duality of mind and body as separate entities to the synthesized embodied experience of dancing and the consideration of subject hood in dance practices. The discussion of Cartesian Dualism in relation to dance is an intense and well-researched topic that I have come to understand as the mind and the body are not separate entities and when considered as such, removes the identity and lived experience of the dancer from the dancing.⁴ This is important to the consideration of dance because without ideas of embodiment, the dancer is merely a human-shaped blob of flesh that enacts movement based upon the firing of neurons and does not count for the consciousness of the dancer or the

² Green, Jill, “Somatic Authority and the Myth of the Ideal Body in Dance Education,” *Dance Research Journal* 31, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 80-100, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1478333>.

³ Reel, Justine J., Sonya SooHoo, Katherine M. Jamieson, and Diane L. Gill. "Femininity to the extreme: Body image concerns among college female dancers." *Women in Sport & Physical Activity Journal* 14, no. 1 (2005): 39.

⁴ This is an extremely broad characterization of Duality in relation to dance and Descartes is rolling in his grave right now.

emotional response of the viewer derived from viewing movement.⁵ While there is a momentous amount of further explanation required to fully explain this concept, it raises questions about the objectification of dancers in opposition to their subject hood.

The marginalization of disabled people is understood in some contexts (ie. the medical model of disability) as the simplification of the individual, separated from their subject hood, to be represented solely as a disabled body that does not exist beyond that disability. In *Redefining Disability* the editors state that “Part of the trepidation and unease with which non-disabled persons approach disability is because we, the disabled, have been relegated to passive objects in art, science, and the humanities” (xv). Similarly to the Cartesian Dualism that is applied to dancers, more often than not, disabled people are condensed to nothing more than disabilities' effect on the body that is societally categorized as negative. The treatment and prejudice that disabled people have experienced throughout history is not to be compared in equal measure to the enforced visual aesthetics in dance, but can be acknowledged as the minimization of the individual based on functional physical expectations.⁶

This information contextualizes the experiences I had as a disabled dancer growing up. In dance classes and at the beginning of my higher education dance study, I was often approached with comments about my physical appearance because my success as a dancer relied on what I looked like. An example of this occurred in my first year of college. I was auditioning for a *Nutcracker* inspired ballet piece with other performing arts students who had a variety of technical training. I was not cast in the work, and when I inquired what I could do in the future to better my chances, I was told that while I had excellent technique, the costume would look better

⁵ Pakes, Anna. (2006). Dance's Mind-Body Problem. *Dance Research*. 24. 87-104. 10.1353/dar.2007.0008.

⁶ This statement does not directly reference prejudice and marginalization from race, gender, class, and other social identity structures that may intersect with disability and personal identifiers like dancers.

on another body. Further, I was told that my methods of communicating and questioning about dance were not appropriate for a successful dancer, and that it was my responsibility (not the institutions') to make the necessary adjustments to be prepared for classwork when I was experiencing flares of chronic illness. While all of these can be argued as misunderstood by me, I felt that I was being defined by characteristics of my identity that did not fully express the capabilities that I possessed as a young person. These experiences made it difficult for me to embrace the label of artist because I considered artists' to be the stereotypical idealized versions of dancers that I had been inundated with my entire life. The same difficulty made it impossible to fully embrace the label of disabled because I felt that claiming disability would remove me further from being an artist than I already felt I was. Within my experiences of navigating disabled identity and mental health challenges based on the visual aesthetics of dance and the expectations of disability, making and performing dance became a way of relishing in the wholeness of embodiment that was not supported by the larger social structures that influenced my development, all of which artists and scholars have explored throughout the history of disabled dance.

Chapter 2: The Intertwined History of Disabled Dance

Using information from *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics*, a collection of essays by dance scholars that explores the intrinsic relationship between the art of dance and politics, it is understood that dance articulates and intertwines with politics because art reflects cultural and societal landscapes, making dance inherently political.⁷ Both dance and disability are related to measures of productivity and labor in connection with a capitalistic society. The

⁷ Kowal, Rebekah J., Gerald Siegmund, and Randy Martin, eds. 2017. *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics*. N.p.: Oxford University Press.

value of a body in American culture is based on the productive contribution of labor that the actions of the body provide.

“Separation and the privileged position of productive labor are created by attributing certain attributes to productive and unproductive labor. These attributes (proactivity, power, determination, etc. for productive work, and tenderness, care work and lack of rationality and character for non-reproductive work) are sexually marked and neutralized, which means that we understand them as essential characteristics of people with certain bodies.” (Gržinić, 2023)

This passage, from activist Marina Gržinić, describes how the categorization of labor as productive and unproductive are applied to bodies to determine value in a capital driven society. Similarly to the dualist categorization of bodies as good and bad, value based on labor contribution is determined by a person’s ability to work and produce product without requiring aid or resources. For disabled people, the ability to perform labor requires acclimation to societal standards of function, such as working with little to no rest for eight consecutive hours. Without necessary support, the disabled body is useless to labor production and becomes a burden that does not replenish the resources required to survive.

Dance as a political expression is contradictory to the neo-capitalist society that it exists within. The commodity of dance as labor is unique because the labor of dance is a resilient action against consumerism.⁸ Dance is a momentary art. The fleeting nature of the form is the commodity that is most valuable. It is a luxury and privilege to witness the labor of dance because it ceases to exist after performance. This contradiction between what is required to determine productive labor and dance, which is expression of humanity and lacks tangible yield, places dancer bodies in contradiction as well. It could be argued that dancers are successfully

⁸ Lepecki, André. *Singularities: Dance in the age of performance*. Routledge, 2016.

productive while doing unproductive work. I question why dancers' bodies are productive laborers while disengaging and critiquing labor expectations but disabled bodies that do not have the opportunity to easily engage in labor practices are not. It is because of these political contradictions that I find disabled dance performance to be a powerful tool for change.

It is important to acknowledge the history of disabled dance performance that is not inherently related to dance as a movement practice but was performance not for the disabled person, but instead only about their disabilities. Between the mid-1800s and the mid-1900s, American freak shows were a cultural phenomenon that profited off of disability as a form of entertainment. "Freak shows framed and choreographed bodily differences that we now call 'race', 'ethnicity', and 'disability' in a ritual that enacted the social process of making cultural otherness from the raw materials of human physical variation" (Thomson, 60). These displays of disabilities as performance were consumed by the American public with fervor for almost a century, and are now looked back upon as a period where disabled bodies were reduced to "pure body" through representation.⁹ Historical figures from this time, such as P.T. Barnum, who were crucial to the commodification of disabled people, are still revered today as important characters in US history without acknowledgment of the role they played in the marginalization of disability in society. Charles B. Tripp, the "armless marvel" is an example of the freak show in the Victorian era. Tripp joined P.T. Barnum's Traveling Exhibition in 1872 and performed in the "Living Curiosities" section of Barnum's show.¹⁰ Tripp was a skilled carpenter and workman but chose to engage in performance. He had a long career in the circus and it was not until the mid-

⁹ Thomson, Rosemarie Garland. *Extraordinary bodies: Figuring physical disability in American culture and literature*. Columbia University Press, 2017.

¹⁰ Kirkwood, Guy Charles Murrunku. "Performing Freakery: American Freak Shows, Popular Culture and Regimes of Normalisation in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries." *The University of Western Australia* (2018).

1900s that the moral quandary surrounding the display of divergent bodies was questioned. It could be argued that Tripp was exploiting himself as a disabled person in the shows but the standard of normality at the time was the able-bodied white male. The success of the freak show was determined by the audience's desire to engage with the “exotic” and be entertained by the lack of superiority held by the entertainer.

Moving History/Dancing Cultures is an essay collection that surveys dance history throughout time using specific writings of historic dance scholars. Ann Cooper Albright and Ann Dils explain that in the late 19th century and first half of the 20th century, European dance practices were moving away from ballet and exploring more naturalistic ways of performing and creating movement leading to the development of modern dance.¹¹ Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, many dance artists, especially in New York, began to abandon the more rigid structures of modern dance and experiment with improvisation, mixed media, non-virtuosic choreography, repetition, and minimalism. Disability art emerged predominantly in the 1980s in conjunction with disability social movements that used art as a unifying cultural expression for disabled people to take pride in.¹² Koren Solvang, a disability studies scholar, writes about the history of disabled art and the evolution that has mirrored the changes within disability politics. A decade later the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) was created.¹³ The ADA is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against disabled people in all public places. There *should* have been potential for disabled dance to develop because of the evolving dance landscape and the social capital of the disability rights movements, but ableist opinion remained

¹¹ Dils, Ann, and Ann Cooper Albright, eds. *Moving history/dancing cultures: A dance history reader*. Wesleyan University Press, 2001.

¹² Solvang, Per Koren. "From identity politics to dismodernism? Changes in the social meaning of disability art." *Alter* 6, no. 3 (2012): 178-187.

¹³ Americans with Disabilities Act of 1989, Pub. L. No. 327-378, 336 Stat. 104 (1990), <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/STATUTE-104/STATUTE-104-Pg327>.

popular, perpetuated by aging dance makers who refused to recognize the effects of disability on their practices.¹⁴ Explored by “Overcoming and Denial: Disability and Modern Dance in the United States”, primary figures of modern dance development (Graham, Shawn, and Humphrey) struggled with aging and the effects of associated disabilities on their capacities as performers. Ted Shawn used dance to overcome polio as discussed in the following quote from a conversation between Agnes De Mille and June Hamilton Rhodes. “His own body, which was once ugly and weak, is the instrument he uses to portray this music of motion. By certain exercises, he has developed his muscles so that they are strong and firm. He has absolute control over these rippling flesh slaves of his superb mind.” (Bailey, 62). This quote describes how Ted Shawn overcame disability through physical transformation. Shawn’s body without dance is undesirable and must be cured of disability to represent his masculinity through dance. Albright explains that dancers are expected to maintain an idolized display of bodily action (based on femininity and aestheticized virtuosity) and the concept of movement-related disability (movement not functioning at socialized ideals of full capacity) threatens that display.¹⁵ Denial and refusal of disability associated with aging and injury meant that popular modern dance of the mid to late 1900s, which was intentionally contrastive to the virtuosic movement of ballet, remained inaccessible.

I have found that, when asked, almost every dancer that has trained at a pre-professional to professional level has experienced some form of physical injury in relation to dance. Research over multiple styles and training levels of dance show that 42%-97% of adult dancers have been

¹⁴ Anderson, Bailey. "Overcoming and denial: disability and modern dance in the United States." *Dance Research Journal* 52, no. 3 (2020): 58-75. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767720000364>.

¹⁵ Albright, Ann C. "Strategic Abilities: Negotiating the Disabled Body in Dance." In *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*, edited by Ann Dils and Ann C. Albright, 56-66. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001.

injured in direct causation by the art form.¹⁶ This is based on a definition of injury as an occurrence that results in lost time from given dance activity. While I have never experienced a debilitating injury from dance that has required more than a day to a week of recovery time, numerous peers of mine have sustained physical injuries, ranging in severity, that result in temporarily or permanently having to cease dance practice. Many of these peers that continue to dance require a variety of supports to maintain the physical demands such as braces, medication, and surgery and may dance through immense amounts of pain or shorten the necessary healing time. Do they identify as disabled? It has struck me that similarly to the founders of modern dance, current dancers seemingly believe that an acceptance of change in physical movement capabilities is the equivalent of quitting dance practices entirely. In exaggerated terms, choosing disability means giving up dance.

The slow acceptance of disabled dance into traditional dance spaces began with integrated dance. Integrated dance is the most recognizable form of disabled dance. It weaves disabled dancers and non-disabled dancers together in performance as a learning tool and form of enrichment.¹⁷ As considered by Wanda Strukus, physically integrated performances can evoke kinetic empathy from audience members who are not familiar with disabled performers by associating disability with ability simultaneously. This includes companies like Axis Dance Company, Cleveland Dancing Wheels, and Candoco. Axis Dance Company was formed by Judith Smith, who became disabled following a car accident, in 1987. The company began as an opportunity for disabled dancers to perform and work with talented choreographers, such as Bill

¹⁶ Russell, Jeffrey A. "Preventing Dance Injuries: Current Perspectives." *Open Access Journal of Sports Medicine* 4 (2013): 199–210. doi:10.2147/OAJSM.S36529.

¹⁷ Strukus, Wanda. "Mining the gap: Physically integrated performance and kinesthetic empathy." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 25, no. 2 (2011): 89-105.

T. Jones.¹⁸ Their website states that “Axis artistry redefines dance and disability” by changing optics surrounding common understandings of disability and falsifying stereotypical expectations such as movement limitations and capacity. While the choreography is created for the disabled dancers, the goal is to prove that disabled dancers are able to perform at the same capacity as the able-bodied performers.

As Emily Watlington explores, these companies are beneficial to disabled dance by raising awareness of the potential and artistry of disabled dancers, but are disadvantageous as they do not center the disabled experience and are often examples of inspiration porn; a term in disability studies where disabled people overcome their disabilities to achieve “normalcy.” Many disabled dancers are critical of integrated dance because of the lack of disability-centric voices, but recognize the importance of physically integrated dance as an entrance point into professional performance careers.¹⁹

Disabled dancers are calling for a shift from physically integrated dance to crip performance - an aesthetic that gives primary control and voice to the disabled dancers.²⁰ Alison Kopit, in her thesis, explains that crip performance recenters disabled dance to be for disabled performers, not to educate and normalize disabled people for able audiences. Crip performance can be a deeply healing space for disabled people; a sanctuary of self-care where disability can exist without the constraints of “normate” time (a term coined by Garland Thomson).²¹ Petra Kuppers, a prominent disabled dance scholar, explains a process of “Crip Time” where disabled

¹⁸ Davies, Telory. "Mobility: AXIS dancers push the boundaries of access." In *Understanding disability studies and performance studies*, pp. 43-63. Routledge, 2013.

¹⁹ Watlington, Emily. "Crippling Choreography." ARTnews.com, May 19, 2021. <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/disability-dance-1234586026/>.

²⁰ Kopit, Alison. "Toward a Queer Crip Aesthetic: Dance, Performance, and the Disabled Bodymind." PhD diss., University of Illinois at Chicago, 2017.

²¹ Kuppers, Petra. "Crip time." *Tikkun* 29, no. 4 (2014): 29-30.

people found healing and community through movement practices that required reliance on each other to be physically possible. The goal of crip performance is not to elevate disability or replicate other dance forms in pursuit of acceptance, but to undermine that acceptance and create something new.²² Kupper's chapter, in the *Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics*, explores the evolution of disabled dance that is representative of disability culture. In an interview with disabled dance performers from Kinetic Light, a disabled dance company, the topic of crip performance is discussed from a disability justice lens. It is explained that crip performance is an intersectional and interdisciplinary art form for performers to share disability culture without compromising intention for normalization.²³ Alice Sheppard, one of the co-creators of Kinetic Light, explores the intersectionality of disability, gender, and race through the evolving societal ideas of difference. She says "I am working at a new edge of the field, visibilizing intersectional, interdisciplinary disability arts as a vibrant area of cultural production while creating the contexts/documents for audiences to understand my work and the work of other disabled artists with reference to our conversations, histories, legacies, and influences" (Wong, 157). In my opinion, this is the purpose of crip performance. To create artistic spaces that invite disability as a lens of exploration that encapsulates the full self within the study, instead of disability existing as an unaltered way of being. The shift from integrated dance to crip performance is important to the development of disabled dance because the focus is no longer about proving that disabled dancers can fit into traditional ableist dance spaces, but instead are reimagining those dance spaces as places of personal and cultural expression.

²² Kupper, Petra, "Dancing Disabled: Phenomenology and Embodied Politics." In *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics*, edited by Rebekah J. Kowal, Gerald Siegmund, and Randy Martin, 267-283. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

²³ Peers, Danielle, Alice Sheppard, Lindsay Eales, and Abbie Schenk. "Inclinations: Dancing Ramps, Disability, and Multiplicities through Research-Creation." *Art/Research International* 7, no. 1 (2022): 257-266.

The evolution of disabled dance has spanned from the presentation of disability as a form of entertainment to integrated dance performance and crip performance. Within my own history, my first introductions to disabled dance were through integrated performance projects and arts outreach for disabled students. From 2015 through 2022, I performed and choreographed numerous integrated performance pieces. Ranging from fictional stories about ostracization to artistic retellings of disabled artists' stories, I was readily engaging with dance as a form of advocacy. These shows included all ages, a spectrum of disabilities, different levels of artistic training, but everyone shared a common desire to better the world through performance. My involvement in performances like these fueled my interest in disability justice in the arts, but upon reflection were also barriers in my process of personal artistic identification. Within many of these projects, the dancers that had significant levels of technical studio training were assumingly categorized as able-bodied by the audience and were there to infuse “real” artistry into performances with disabled people. I want to be clear that this criticism is not to admonish the work done by these performances for disability justice in the Midwest United States. Many of the projects were disability-centered, using original stories, narrations, and ideas created by disabled artists about being disabled. Instead, I want to note that the simplest distinguishing designations furthered the divide between dancer and disability. Because of this, it is difficult to determine exactly what is needed to define “disability” in terms of dance performance, which was a major focus of my work.

Chapter 3: Neurodivergence? Neurodiversity?

One of the main interests in pursuing neurodivergence in performance as a topic for this thesis was that I had never taken the time to consider how having ADHD affected my daily life and whether or not it had an impact on my artistic practices. Within the first year of receiving a

diagnosis of ADHD, my parents tried medication but found that it muted my personality and I would become listless and irritable. A study done in 2014 demonstrated that the largest side effects of taking stimulant ADHD medication in young children are weight loss and appetite suppression, not adverse behavioral effects or effects on learning.²⁴ While this shows that there were most likely no negative effects of stimulant medication on me as a child, the pressure of choosing to put a child on stimulant medication at a young age is a decision that many parents feel overwhelmed by. People with ADHD often exhibit addictive personalities and “negative” behavior commonly exhibited with ADHD can easily be blamed on parenting choices. A report from 2006 surveyed parents of children with ADHD on the thought process behind choosing to medicate with stimulants. This report found that parents reportedly prioritized the well-being of the child and that choosing to medicate ADHD with stimulants felt like a highly consequential decision.²⁵ This study came out within a year of my ADHD diagnosis and I believe it accurately reflects the decision-making mindset that my parents experienced when receiving similar options and medical opinions.

Following the brief attempt at steroidal medication, I was homeschooled for the majority of my childhood to provide more personally tailored academics and I was enrolled in a variety of physically based activities, including dance. This system of management worked for me through my undergraduate education and I maintained academic excellence with a variety of self-management tools. This included strict routines built into my daily schedules, minimal engagement with addictive substances, exercise regimes, therapy, and consistent involvement

²⁴ Dalsgaard, Søren, Helena Skyt Nielsen, and Marianne Simonsen. "Consequences of ADHD medication use for children's outcomes." *Journal of health economics* 37 (2014): 137-151.

²⁵ Charach, Alice, Anna Skyba, Lisa Cook, and Beverley J. Antle. "Using stimulant medication for children with ADHD: what do parents say? A brief report." *Journal of the Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 15, no. 2 (2006): 75.

with dance which required intense levels of commitment. When approaching my second year of graduate school, where I would be tasked with completing a thesis, I decided to pursue medication as a supportive tool to help with focus and manage hyper fixation more consistently. The decision to become medicated and choosing the topic of my thesis happened around the same time in the summer before my second year of graduate school. It was the first time I had strongly considered how ADHD affected my life. I became interested in how it related to my art-making.

Neurodivergence is a constantly evolving and debated term coined by Kassiane Asasumasu, a multiply neurodivergent activist and scholar.²⁶ Disability study scholars, academics, and people who identify with the term neurodivergence present numerous definitions that are criticized for being exclusionary. When beginning to research this project, I attempted the same act of definition and found myself struggling to define the term in a way that best suited my experiences while simultaneously striving for an inclusionary term developed from my disability studies knowledge. My initial proposal stated that “neurodiversity will be described to include neurological differences that have been labeled as impairments including Autism, ADHD, Tourette’s, and various learning disabilities (Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, etc.) by psychologists and activists.”²⁷ As I reflect upon this definition I am struck by the vagueness and simultaneous specificity that I present. I include specific diagnoses that are indicative of neurological functioning that is widely known to differ from “normal” cognition. Associating this specificity with the vagueness of “learning disabilities” and “neurological differences” did not further

²⁶ Multiply is the appropriate term for individuals with multiple forms of neurodivergence; Fletcher-Watson, Sue. “Neurodiverse or Neurodivergent? It’s More than Just Grammar.” DART, June 3, 2020. <https://dart.ed.ac.uk/neurodiverse-or-neurodivergent/>.

²⁷ This initial proposal definition was based on my knowledge of the various models of disability and how I considered neurodiversity in the medical and social models.

clarify any specificity. I defined neurodiversity as any different cognitive functioning but did not inquire about my own biases related to what normative cognition is. In other words, I was splitting cognition into a dualist comparison “good” cognition and “bad” cognition.²⁸ I now understand that this division is not beneficial to my research, because I was comparing my cognitive experience to an unattainable and idealized form of functioning. Through my definition, I had deemed my cognition as different in comparison to the majority of thinkers and no amount of study would make my cognition normal. I was setting myself up for failure before I had even started.

It is important at this point, to clarify the specificity of language that will be used throughout this thesis. Neurodiversity and Neurodivergence are not the same thing. Neurodivergence relates to an individual whose brain functions diverge from the societally dominant standards of “normal”. Neurodiversity relates to a group with various neurocognitive functioning. Diversity applies to groups of people, not an individual, and thus neurodivergence and neurodiverse are often confused.²⁹ For example, I am neurodivergent but the cast of my thesis creative work is neurodiverse. The confusion of these terms will result in an unclear understanding of the points being made. More importantly, neurodiversity is a biological fact. It cannot be argued that humanity does not have multiple ways of thinking and to say that people, as a collective, are not neurodiverse is ableist.

In the consideration of a definition of neurodivergence, I have been reliant upon the research done in *Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm*; a collection of essays

²⁸ As discussed previously in this research, the division of any classification into good and bad leads to the objectification of experience for the ease of understanding.

²⁹ Glenn, Daniel. "Neuroqueer Heresies: Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Autistic Empowerment, and Postnormal Possibilities: Walker, N. Neuroqueer Heresies: Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Autistic Empowerment, and Postnormal Possibilities. Fort Worth, TX: Autonomous Press, 2021." (2022): 339-341.

combined by Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Nick Chown, and Anna Stenning. This book provides insight into research that is devoted to furthering understanding of neurodiversity by neurodivergent and neurotypical scholars alike. Especially relevant to my current writing, the editors introduce the book with their objective thoughts on the term neurodiversity. They regard the ontological assumption of neurodiversity as the “perceived variations of difference in cognitive, affectual, and sensory functioning that differs from the... neurotypical population” (1). This definition (similar to the one I wrote) is based upon an idolized version of normal cognition that psychologists defined following a rise in eugenic research.³⁰ The problem with defining neurodiversity in this way is that it acts as a means of othering neurodivergent individuals on a fictitious baseline. Using assumed ideas of rationality (conceived in terms of medical, social, and cultural behaviors) these definitions produce deviants that experience internal and external exclusion by subjecting them to comparison with an unrealistic and unethical ideal. This standard does not reflect the multitude of alternative conceptualizations. Strictly defining neurodiversity results in comparing cognitive functioning to an ideal that does not exist.

Further in *Neurodiverse Studies*, Robert Chapman writes an essay on defining neurodiversity for research and practice. He notes that the term neurodiversity has different effects of meaning depending on the context of the desired use of the term. Neurodiversity can be used as a scientific concept, a new way of considering cognition to include genetic diversity, a redefining of dysfunction, as well as an act of politicizing and depathologizing neurodiversity. A problem with all of these definitions, though useful in their individual contexts, is that they all rely upon a specific species-based assessment of impairment that neurodiversity as a concept does not support. Neurodiversity is an endless multitude of ways of cognitive processing.

³⁰ Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Hanna, Nick Chown, and Anna Stenning. "Neurodiversity studies: A new critical paradigm." (2020).

Furthermore, while the act of defining neurodiversity is important in clarifying intention and general understanding of neurodivergence, personal opinion, and experience may contradict a definition when used between two separate people. For example, when beginning this project I considered neurodivergence to be (as discussed previously) a specific categorization of medically diagnosed differences in cognition. Throughout my creation process, I have been collaborating with my sibling on my creative thesis work; she is composing the soundscape that accompanies my choreography. When I initially proposed the work, she told me that she was comfortable including that she is also neurodivergent. My sister has various mental illnesses and was referencing those diagnoses as neurodivergence. This contradicted my previously established definition and made me consider how I was defining the term. Was it my right as a person with ADHD to tell her that neurodivergence was not applicable to her experiences with mental illness? Especially as she found liberation from the term? While I think skepticism and critical analysis of neurodivergence is important to various aspects when considering final definitions, there are also harmful exclusions that come from rigidly defining such a term. I now believe that an ambivalent definition of neurodivergence reflects the complexity of the interactions of culture, behavior, neurodivergent people, and the institutions that look for specific definitions to solidify humanity under study. Chapman also presents the complexity of neurodivergence as a reflection of the epistemological nature of the concept. Neurodivergence is reflective of the evolution of knowledge. In searching for definitions and explanations, humankind is considering the differences between how the world is and how it could be. I finish this thought on defining neurodiversity with the idea that neurodivergence and neurodiversity are

language tools that facilitate deeper understanding of the self and it is not my job, nor any of my business, to limit how other people connect with their understanding.³¹

Another important approach to the concept of neurodivergence is the relation to the neurodiversity paradigm and the Neurodiversity Movement. The neurodiversity paradigm is a perspective of neurodiversity that is based on a few guiding principles:

- 1) Neurodiversity is valuable diversity and is natural to humankind.
- 2) There is not one “normal” or “healthy” way of mind and to believe that there is, is invalid
- 3) Neurodiversity has social dynamics that manifest similarly to other diverse groups.

These principles are helpful in philosophically guiding understanding of neurodiversity and creating a base of understanding for The Neurodiversity Movement to develop upon. The Neurodiversity Movement is a political justice movement that seeks total societal inclusion of neurodiversity for neurodivergent people. Neurodivergence is not an inherently positive or negative term and must consider the type of neurodivergence being discussed. Innate forms of neurodivergence, such as Autism, dyslexia, ADHD, are intrinsic and ubiquitous to the selfhood of the person. It is crucial to the neurodivergent paradigm that these forms of neurodivergence are not pathologized and the Neurodiversity Movement fundamentally opposes attempts to eradicate them. Other forms of neurodivergence are not innate and may be experiential or do not erase fundamental aspects of personhood if removed. Examples of this include epilepsy, psychotic mushroom therapies, or traumatic brain injuries. The pathologization of these is not

³¹ Chapman, Robert “Neurodiversity, Disability, and Wellbeing.” In *Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm*, edited by Bertilsson Rosqvist, Hanna, Nick Chown, and Anna Stenning. Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020.

objected to by the neurodiversity paradigm and consensual cures are not objected to by the Neurodiversity Movement.³² This history, along with modern examples of neurodivergence in art from contemporary artists, served to inspire my choreography and thesis work.

Chapter 4: Points of Inspiration

My research as a dance scholar up to this point has been mainly focused on dance advocacy issues that I have been exposed to or personally experienced. In these papers, I have noted the impact of these conflicts on dancers as a general population, but have not delved into the various interactions that these have held in my personal life. I was adamant when considering topics for my thesis, that I would break former patterns in my research, and write and choreograph about something personal and experiential. I considered my interests in dance research and choreographic creation and noted the intersections between topics and how they related subconsciously to myself. The connections between dance, advocacy, disability studies, body image, and aesthetic exclusions connected with my movement explorations of oddity, dancer autonomy, spatial navigation, public appeal, and sensory experience, seemed to unite in my belief that dance should be accessible to all, dancer and viewer alike. But, this messaging did not resonate with the choreographic structures I was interested in making. My works involve bright colors, strange soundscapes, and unique movements that do not transcribe to traditional post-modern standards but still are supported by the visual appearance of the work in relation to choreographic structures. How could I care about dance being a sensory stimulating experience without contriving to visual aesthetics that I feel limit Western dance performance and are inaccessible (ie. virtuosity, energetic expression, etc.)

³² Cures can still be used as objects of discrimination against people with acquired neurodivergence.

In the spring of 2023, a TikTok trend emerged where sensory videos made for babies of fruit dancing were set to popular pop songs.³³ The videos, created by *Hey Bear*, feature brightly colored fruits and vegetables dancing to copyright-free music.³⁴ A friend of mine, who at the time was in a piece I was choreographing, commented that the dancing fruit videos felt like being in one of my pieces. This was the first time I had connected my dance-making to sensory stimulation. The purpose of these videos, and all videos considered to be for baby sensory, is to “enhance visual stimulation, as these specially-made videos feature a variety of different shapes, patterns and engaging colors, which move around the screen and help to improve eye coordination... can also benefit your little one’s auditory stimulation, as these often include a number of different songs and rhythms to choose from” (Brodie, 2022). Studies have shown that infant stimulation can accelerate infant motor development, concentration, memory, curiosity, and attentiveness as well as boosting IQ.³⁵ While research has been conducted on the importance of sensory stimulation in children, there is no research proving the effectiveness of Hey Bear videos on infant stimulation. A recent study on adults with ADHD found that 43% of adult females with ADHD reported sensory hypo and/or hypersensitivity in comparison to 22% of men with ADHD in comparison to a control group of adults without ADHD or Autism.³⁶ This study demonstrates that adults with ADHD (me) have increased responses to sensory stimulation (baby sensory stimulation) than adults without ADHD. For me, sensory stimulation (such as dancing

³³justdancingfruit. “Make Your Day.” TikTok, February 2, 2024.

³⁴“Hey Bear Sensory - Sensory Videos.” Hey Bear Productions. Accessed March 14, 2024. <https://www.heybearsensory.com/>.

³⁵ Ludington-Hoe, Susan, and Susan Golant. *How to have a smarter baby: The infant stimulation program for enhancing your baby's natural development*. Bantam, 1987.

³⁶ Bijlenga, D., J. Y. M. Tjon-Ka-Jie, F. Schuijers, and J. J. S. Kooij. "Atypical sensory profiles as core features of adult ADHD, irrespective of autistic symptoms." *European Psychiatry* 43 (2017): 51-57. Bones, Paul DC, Jessica Smartt Gullion, and Danielle Barber, eds. *Redefining Disability*. Brill, 2022.

fruit) results in longer periods of focus and feels like my brain is being “itched” in a pleasurable way.

The brief connection made between my dance-making practices and sensory stimulation for babies made me consider if I was making work that would similarly engage my brain. Reflecting on past work that I have created, almost all have included similar inclusions of sensory-focused details. A piece created when I was a junior in high school included dancers performing to a strong percussive piece of music while wearing white gloves with eyes on them that covered the face.³⁷ My final composition in undergraduate study was titled *Petrichor* and was set to the sounds of rainfall with the dancers in long skirts with wet hair.³⁸ In the first half of graduate school, I continued to invest in creating works that featured sensory stimulation; the first piece being a duet set to the sounds of falling ping pong balls, and the second was a quartet with Cunningham style color-blocked unitards, goggles, and was set to a 3 minute guided meditation from YouTube and traditional Swiss yodeling.³⁹

³⁷ See Figure 1; Zoller, Joleen. Photograph. Performing Arts Center of Rapid City, April 28, 2017.

³⁸ See Figures 2 and 3; Edwards, Sydney. Photograph. University of Wyoming, May 8, 2022. University of Wyoming.

³⁹ See Figure 4; Baranova, Maria. Photograph. Sarah Lawrence College, April 27, 2023.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

The reflection on my entire collection of work made me realize that all choreographic creations stemming from my interests (this does not include works created for teaching purposes or that were based on specific prompt requirements) are rooted deeply in the pursuit of sensory stimulation. This realization accompanied by the coincidental timing of my pursuit of ADHD medication led me to the consideration of my neurodivergence as a source of inspiration for my choreographic and creative work.

In the beginning stages of research, I looked for other artists who were creating based on their experiences with neurodivergence. Neurodiversity and performance in other art-related fields has been a prevalent area of inspiration for artistic creation. My first interaction with another dance scholar pursuing neurodivergence as a topic of creative research was Aby Watson. The first video I saw of Watson's choreographic work involved her kneeling on the stage and rocking back and forth while pulling and pushing a silver space blanket onto her rocking form. The interaction between the texture and movement of the blanket captures the silhouette and changes in the shape of her rocking. Following my viewing, I could see the blanket as an extension of her. I could imagine the cooling feeling of the aluminum foil-like material on the skin and the sound of the blanket changing shape with each rock. Without being immersed in the props myself, I could imagine the sensory inflections that came from the choreography. This created a sensory immersion into the piece that felt guided by the choices Watson made with the materials and choreography.

Watson, a UK-based dance scholar, has a website that is the collection of observations and current research studying neurodiversity through dance performance for her dissertation.⁴⁰ Other examples of her choreographic experiments include dancing with her head submerged in a

⁴⁰ Watson, Aby. "Disordering Dance." *Disordering Dance*. First posted on March 14, 2016. <https://disorderingdance.com>.

bunch of balloons, decorating herself with tree tinsel, and using pom poms, exercise balls, video, and nontraditional musical instruments. Through this website and Watson's social media pages, I felt a sense of familiarity and similarity with the work that she was making and my own choreographic creations. While the composition of our work was vastly different, both utilized sensory stimulation to engage audiences. I utilized color, sound, and unique movement vocabulary that is indicative of specific imagery and manipulation of common gestures, while Watson engages with props, various textures, and a specific centering of neurodivergent behavior. The centering of neurodivergence in Watson's work did not diminish the artistic mastery that was abundant within the choreography but instead added a layer of vulnerability and personality that grabbed my attention further. To see another artist share similar interests and successfully engage with the topics that I was considering researching made it easier to fully commit to the process of making dance about myself.

The other creative inspiration that I have clung to throughout this entire process is Autistic non-speaking poet, Adam Wolfond. I first connected with Wolfond in the early stages of research for this project. My literature review included a section about neurodiversity and art-making that featured creative practitioners who centered their art on experiences with neurodivergence. Wolfond's mother had written a dissertation for her PhD from York University with her son as an exploration of languaging neurodiversity through artistic writing.⁴¹ The beginning of the dissertation includes notes on language; specifically "neurodiverse", "neurodivergent", and "autistic."

"We wriggle from fixed positions. This is not how Adam Wolfond, my collaborator, orientates or situates. Rather, he's interested in movement" (xiii).

⁴¹ Klar-Wolfond, Esté, "Neurodiversity in Relation: An Artistic Intraethnography" PhD diss., York University, 2020.

This description of Wolfond to the process of defining neurodivergence created an immediate camaraderie between him and me. The word “wriggle” invokes specific imagery of what escaping definition looks like to Wolfond. I associate this action with frivolity, lighthearted sneakiness, and humor. There is joy in a wriggle. From this statement, I deduced that to Wolfond, positioning him to a singular definition of neurodiversity was uninteresting and binding. There is no room for movement, his real interest, and without movement, his exploration of the self with neurodivergence cannot happen. Excluding the obvious projection that I have infused into the writing, this is how I view my dance-making. An opportunity to wriggle from the binding standards of composition and technique and experiment in a freer space that is waiting for me to explore. This began an exciting one-sided relationship between me and Adam Wolfond’s poetry. In an attempt to avoid confusion, I want to be clear that Wolfond’s poetry acted primarily as inspiration and my choreography is not a replication of his writing into movement. I imagine our creative processes running parallel to one another, they are about completely different experiences and individuals, but they share connections of theme and topic.

I dove further into Adam Wolfond’s work as a source of inspiration by referring to a collection of his poetry throughout the creative process. *The Wanting Way* is the product of a project by neurodivergent poet, Chris Martin (no relation). Martin has produced many projects that feature neurodiverse writers and poets, including *Multiverse*, which is a literary series that aims to publish neurodivergent authors, including Adam Wolfond.⁴² In an NPR interview with Adam Wolfond, he describes the embodied nature of his poetry, as a nonspeaker, as a “dance with language” (Verma). The very direct relationship that Wolfond establishes between his poetry and dance, not just movement, connected me to this collection of his poetry over others

⁴² Martin, Chris, ed. “Milkweed’s Story.” *Multiverse* | Milkweed Editions, 2020. <https://milkweed.org/multiverse>.

that he has published. After purchasing *The Wanting Way*, I became enthralled with Wolfond's writing style and how it felt evocative of my own process of choreography. I have attached a section of Wolfond's poem titled "Tall Ideas". I have maintained all formatting as it appears in publication.

"Having the lust dancing in giving life to feel

the names of categories dancing

out of bounds

is amazing to play

and I get a thrill guessing

the way people will respond

to me and my open

linguaging

language is the pavement answering

the way and I am the water

bathing and living

lustfully"⁴³

I saw myself in Wolfond's writing. The different ways I communicated were seemingly mirrored by the layout of the poetry. Small ideas were presented quickly and then almost run

⁴³ Wolfond, Adam. *The Wanting Way: Poems*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2022

over by the following lines, which felt like how I spoke and choreographed. The specificity of language that was not unusual when separated but in combination presented an odd and specific idiosyncratic rhythm. The spacing and presentation of each line makes every word unique but important to the overall structure of the poem. I could see a dance that held the same interests that I infused in my own work in the poetry Wolfond wrote and this acted as a major motivator in my choreographic process. Armed with the exciting work of artists in the same act of self-discovery that I was embarking on, I felt prepared and supported in the vulnerable journey of studying myself in writing and dancing.

A conflict within my thought processes was that exploring ADHD in relation to dance would be nearly impossible because ADHD resides primarily in cognition while dancing is a physical embodied form of expression. Once again, I found myself unintentionally subscribing to the Cartesian separation of mind and body. While I firmly believed that a connection exists between my creative movement practices and my ADHD, the recurring problem I feared was that I would be the only person considering neurodivergence through movement and there would be no written research to support my claims. Fortunately, I found research by Kasper Levin that focused on the specific relationship between ADHD and movement practices through a phenomenological lens. Levin describes that “the theoretical assessment of ADHD immediately lends itself to a reproduction of the classical Cartesian dualism separating the acting body from the regulating or executing mind...” (1). This raised questions for me about the connection between body, movement, cognition, art, and expression. If ADHD is considered via a separation of mind and body and symptoms of ADHD include bodily movements such as hyperactivity and inattention (i.e. the wiring of the brain producing physical outcomes), then Cartesian duality should make those physical outcomes impossible, as the mind does not express through the body.

The movement behaviors that are symptoms of neurodivergence are spontaneous and unconscious. Because they are not consciously controlled and thus do not serve a specific purpose, the movement associated with ADHD, like fidgeting, could be considered “overflow” or unnecessary for task completion. Based on Merleau-Ponty's argument that gestures are expressive and cannot be reduced to movement without meaning, in a comparative sense to language, it could be determined that movements as a product of cognition are an actualization of expressive materiality.⁴⁴ Continuing with this argument, if all movement has expressive intent, then “overflow” movement, though unintentional, holds the same intentionality and expressive content as a dance. The point of this explanation is not to determine a singular way of exploring neurodivergence and movement, or even deem Levin's reasoning true, but instead has provided my research a base of understanding when analyzing my own creative reasoning and production. Because my ADHD manifests as movement without creative intention, then it makes sense to me that it would also unconsciously influence my choreographic creations.

To expand this perspective even further for fun, when considering phenomenological approaches to perception, the body is not only a functioning system but a phenomenon that is required to build knowledge.⁴⁵ In other words, cognition and the perceptions of the body are equally required and interconnected to achieve embodiment. Thus, the embodied movement with behavior influences of ADHD cannot just exist as a cognitive expression but require the lived body experience to be enacted. Levin argues that when considering sensation through the lens of art and aesthetics, no expression can exist without the influence of the world (culture, society,

⁴⁴ Levin, Kasper. “ADHD, Expression, and the Incorporeal Materialism of Movement.” *Theory and Psychology* 00 no. 0 (2017): Sage Publications.

⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, and Colin Smith. *Phenomenology of perception*. Vol. 26. London: Routledge, 1962.

etc.).⁴⁶ When considering movement derived from ADHD behavior from the influence of sensation and perception, it is not a question of movement as an expression of inattention but instead of how embodied attention is expressed. This perspective on movement that is a result of ADHD made me consider that my pieces are not random sensory experiences but instead are an embodied reflection of my attentions. This realization was powerful to my decision to pursue neurodivergence in dance performance because it confirmed that while I was seeking to express myself and my vulnerability in my works, I always have been. From this realization and development of my intentions, I was finally able to begin my choreographic work.

Chapter 5: Planning *go yonder*

This section of my thesis will be focused on the creative research and decision-making that went into my choreographic work, titled *go yonder*. This title is derived from the poem "Tall Ideas" by Adam Wolfond. The piece consisted of 8-10 neurodiverse dancers, over the course of two semesters, and was accompanied by soundscapes composed by my neurodivergent sister who is a playwright, author, and musician. The work was performed four times over the course of the creation, twice in the fall and twice in the spring with biweekly showings of the progress throughout the year. The dancers wore brightly colored variations of monochromatic costumes in the fall and in the spring. The piece was approximately half an hour long and was performed at the beginning of April in 2024.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Levin, Kasper. "ADHD, Expression, and the Incorporeal Materialism of Movement." *Theory and Psychology* 00 no. 0 (2017): Sage Publications.

⁴⁷ See Image 5; Baranova, Maria. Photograph. Sarah Lawrence College, December 8, 2023.



Figure 5

Initially in making this piece, I set goals for myself to uphold throughout the full year of the process. These goals were set to keep me focused on the intention of connecting the piece to my neurodivergence as well as upholding the advocacy space that other disabled performance artists have opened up, known as *crip performance*. The goals are as follows:

1. I will fully invest in my impulses and intuition that I believe are associated with my neurodivergence in the creative process.
2. I will keep myself centered as the primary source of inspiration in the work.
3. I will use feedback as clarifiers and will not implement notes just to appease others.

4. I will not use the piece to try and create understanding from viewers, but remain dedicated to the motivator that the piece is for me.
5. I will be receptive to my own vulnerability
6. I will be open and honest about my creative process with the performers.
7. I will remain committed to the intention of the work above the requirements of the project for my degree.

These goals all share a similar theme of rooting myself in the work. As a dance artist, I have a tendency to loosen choreographic control and make adjustments based on the opinions of others. Whether that is peers, instructors, performers, or general viewers, I will bend my intention to fill their needs. I want to clarify that this does not mean that I will not be receptive to feedback or that I will not utilize viewer uncertainty as informative knowledge of how to strengthen the work. I want the end result to feel fulfilling and evocative of the years of learning that had brought me to the current point in my training.

It was also important for me to strive for audience accessibility within the piece. My mother used to tell me to make work for the grandpas at the dance recital, because if I could hold their attention, I could hold anyone's. I carried this sentiment into the thesis process because I felt that in creating and researching an advocacy based thesis that it was important to consider that people viewing the work may not have the amount of background knowledge of dance making that my fellow artists do. While I did not want to make work that was made to facilitate audience understanding, it was important that the piece was a welcoming invitation to explore my neurodivergence. While this was an important goal in my process, there were aspects of the creation process that I did not have control over. Accessibility of the physical performance space,

for example, was not a factor that I had complete control over.⁴⁸ To combat this, I looked for a variety of spatial layouts that would position performers throughout the space so that every seat would have a vantage point that would include at least one dancer. I also strove to place key moments of choreography in locations that had similar vantage points from anywhere in the audience so that the information would be shared equally.

My goal was to create choreography that does not require background knowledge of dance to understand but that dancers would also appreciate the complexity upon viewing. I attempted this through the construction of the movement vocabulary. I tried to create a unique tone in all the movements that was evocative of recognizable gestures. A study conducted in 2010 found that students with ADHD improved in focus, response, and completion when teachers utilized gesture based pedagogy.⁴⁹ I decided that I would modify and place recognizable gestures into the choreography as a tool for reconnecting viewers like the aggressive self-hug into wing-like arm gestures that competitive swimmers use to warm up. This would create a sensorial relationship to the danced material as a viewer because not only is the choreography visually recognizable, but I guessed that because of the commonality of the gestures, the audience would also have kinesthetic empathy, or the feeling of how to replicate a specific movement in their own bodies, in response to the choreography.⁵⁰ This would help orient the viewer to the feeling of doing the choreography. The placement of the gestures in relation to sections of the piece were utilized to evoke specific relational feelings to the ideas I was creating. For example, I modified the gesture of a lasso in a section that was primarily about spatial

⁴⁸ The performance space is not easily accessible for disabled people that require mobility support.

⁴⁹ Wang*, Xiao-lei, Ronan Bernas, and Philippe Eberhard. "Engaging ADHD students in tasks with hand gestures: A pedagogical possibility for teachers." *Educational studies* 30, no. 3 (2004): 217-229.

⁵⁰ Reason, Matthew, and Dee Reynolds. "Kinesthesia, Empathy, and Related Pleasures: An Inquiry into Audience Experiences of Watching Dance." *Dance Research Journal* 42, no. 2 (2010): 49-75. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767700001030>.

exploration because I associated lassos with the vastness of space in the Midwest. Another example is that some of the dancers view the others in a modified sphinx position during the baby sensory section of the piece. My association with that position was with babies who can hold their heads up but cannot yet crawl. By accompanying the choreography inspired by the baby sensory videos with a position recognizably held by adolescents while viewing the world, I wanted to engage the audience in a specific type of focus that was evocative of that relationship.

Planning for the piece started in the summer between my first and second year of graduate school. Once I had selected the idea of neurodivergence in dance performance, I began to research how my choreographic work could embody the relationship between artistry and neurodivergence that I was experiencing. I began by identifying very broad ideas that I would like to represent in the creative process of the work. These included impulsivity, time blindness, overwhelming self, motivation initiation, and inattention. When researching ADHD behaviors that are common in adult women, these were the behavioral patterns that I most strongly identified with and saw impacting how I choreographed.⁵¹ I wanted to invest in these behaviors while making *go yonder* instead of attempting to correct them as a measure of productivity. I was curious as to how my process would change based on these ideas and whether or not the piece would vary greatly from how I created other works. I informed the dancers that I was making this choice because I knew it would have a strong impact on how rehearsals would be run and would most likely contradict their ideas of productivity. Ways in which this manifested included not forcing myself to prepare material for every rehearsal if I did not feel inspired, making decisions based on intuition alone, not working with set objectives related to time management

⁵¹ Young S, Adamo N, Ásgeirsdóttir BB, et al. Females with ADHD: An expert consensus statement taking a lifespan approach providing guidance for the identification and treatment of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder in girls and women. *BMC Psychiatry*. 2020;20(1):404. Published 2020 Aug 12. doi:10.1186/s12888-020-02707-9

in rehearsals and in preparation for showings or a performance. I also strived to let ideas emerge naturally and let them overlap or end when I was done with them instead of forcing development that I did not want or no longer held my attention.

The process of creating this work was shared with my peers in a class titled “Time-Based Art.” Every student in this class would create a piece, participate in showings, provide feedback to peers, and receive feedback from each other and the instructors of the class on a regular basis. In the past, my relationship with receiving feedback has been complicated. I have often felt pressured to make creative decisions that I do not fully understand or agree with and will change large aspects of a piece to appease what other people want to see. This is a personal issue and has not been forced upon me by classmates or instructors. With the focus of viewing feedback as clarifying information about the work instead of a subjective determination of value, I am hoping to change the cognitive habits that I have developed, rather than make quick fixes that may change how a piece is performed, but do not fundamentally alter my choreographic process.⁵² While this may seem like an obvious point of intention in an educational process, I have found that in my own, and others’ processes, when working within a strict time frame it is much easier to make changes that demonstrate understanding than engaging with feedback in a way that promotes understanding because of the required effort to successfully make that change. This was a huge challenge for me because I had to continuously reinvest in the work I was doing and give the time and energy required to that investment even when I would lose interest in what I was making and would have preferred to move forward with new ideas than continued development on content that I was content with.

⁵² Motley, Phillip, Nancy L. Chick, and Emily Hipchen. "A conversation about critique as a signature pedagogy in the arts and Humanities." *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 16, no. 3 (2017): 223-228.

While considering other people's reaction to my project, I had to consider how much information I needed to provide to accurately gauge the experience they had in viewing the piece as that would affect how feedback would be presented and expectations of how feedback is implemented into the work. Studies show that historically in the decision-making process, non-disabled opinions are often used to substitute or support decisions made by disabled individuals and that the opinions of abled-bodies are valued higher than disabled opinions.⁵³ This created an internal conflict for me because while I valued the opinions of my peers and educators, I wanted to avoid unintentional imposition of opinion on a work centered on my experiences as a disabled artist. I was concerned that by providing detailed information about my process, I would be offered suggestions on choreography that would be based on experiences of viewing that did not directly relate to my intentions. I also questioned whether or not the implementation of neurotypical feedback into the work would make the piece about audience understanding of my neurodivergence, rather than my own. In consideration of this question I determined that I would not share the intentionality of my process with anyone outside of my cast. This guaranteed that I was not catering to the viewer, but instead using the work as an invitation to explore what it feels like to experience the world through my brain. To accomplish this, I utilized feedback as a method of understanding audience perception compared to my own viewing experience rather than directly influencing my decision making.

An example of this occurred late in the process, in the spring of 2024, close to the end of the year of research. A peer told me that they had been holding back on feedback and had been softening how they communicated their experience of viewing the work. I asked them to directly

⁵³ Wiesel, Ilan, Elizabeth Smith, Christine Bigby, Shih-Ning Then, Jacinta Douglas, and Terry Carney. "The temporalities of supported decision-making by people with cognitive disability." *Social & Cultural Geography* 23, no. 7 (2022): 934-952.

share what they were experiencing and was told that they were overwhelmed by the quick changing of ideas and the amount of action that was occurring in the choreography. This was interesting to me because what was visually overwhelming to them was the minimum amount of visual stimulation required to engage with my own work. Studies done on sensory seeking behaviors found that children with ADHD would compensate for their sensory hyposensitivity by increasing stimulus input, either through elevated seeking of novel sensory stimulation or enhanced activity in comparison to children without ADHD.⁵⁴ Rationally, it is understandable that as a person with ADHD my attention span when watching dance is much shorter and requires quicker introduction into new ideas to maintain my focus. After making this connection between my attention-span in comparison to my peers, I utilized the information by exploring different ways of pacing that would maintain the timing that I connected strongly with while adjusting the amount of information being presented so as to not overwhelm the audience. This balance between honoring and representing my experiences while maintaining the engagement of the audience became a major challenge throughout the process. I do not believe that I will ever be able to confidently determine whether I succeeded in this challenge or not, but by considering the cognitive needs of all viewing participants of *go yonder* I was building a creative practice that was supportive of neurodiversity as a concept, something that I further extrapolated on in structuring the dance.

Chapter 6: Structure of *go yonder*

The structure of my creative piece differed immensely between the fall showing and the spring performance. I feel that these structural changes not only supported the ways in which I

⁵⁴ Piccardi, Elena Serena, and Teodora Gliga. "Understanding sensory regulation in typical and atypical development: The case of sensory seeking." *Developmental Review* 65 (2022): 101037.

was engaging with the concept of neurodiversity but also how I saw my neurodivergence interacting in my daily experiences.

In the fall, the piece consisted of “the metronome section,” “impulsion,” “amoeba town,” “amoeba death,” “baby sensory,” and “exertion.” Each of these sections were representational of aspects of my neurodivergence that I felt interacted most significantly with the creative process. The naming of each of these sections, which I will later expand upon, is related to my commonly used choreographic method of utilizing metaphor in language as a way to root my collaborators, and myself, to the different intentions of each section. Most of my dance composition training has been in Western contemporary dance styles and is heavily influenced by concepts from Laban and Bartenieff Movement Analysis. In this style of training, the basic elements of choreographic composition are identified as shape, energy, space, and time (not to be confused with the more specific, capitalized versions from LMA).⁵⁵ I have found that by using metaphor descriptors for more abstract ideas, I can establish a general idea of how these choreographic elements will function in a given section. For example, “amoeba town” included choreography that was more rounded in shape; the energy was calm, the space was busy, and the timing was slower. While the specifics of the choreography sometimes differed from the given metaphor, this process of naming sections created a baseline concept from which the dancers were able to work.

The metronome section consisted of dancers lying supine and rocking with their heels to a steady beat. Over the course of three minutes, this evolved into repetitive gesture phrases that traveled throughout the space with each dancer having a unique and varied rhythmic pattern. At the time, this section was representative of the ease at which I would often find myself drifting

⁵⁵ Blom, Lynne Anne, and L. Tarin Chaplin. *The intimate act of choreography*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982.

away from structured expectations and into more unique circumstances. The choreography builds upon itself in the section and additional variables (such as traveling and expanding size) make it more difficult to remain exact with the given beat. By the end of the section, each performer is operating in a unique pattern that remains loosely connected to the beat through the individual rhythm of each choreographic pattern.

I connected this to the experiences that I have had about the adaptations that I have to make to complete simple tasks. A study from 2013 notes that “Adaptation and structure in the environment can... contribute to the creation of reasonable requirements for the person with ADHD and in turn strategies to become more independent in their performance of everyday activities” (Ek and Issakson, 288). While staying on beat with a metronome is not an everyday task, staying on beat is a task that is expected of most dancers. I found that adjusting the dancers’ structural approach to remaining on task created interesting choreographic intricacies that uniquely developed each dancer’s interaction with the material, space, and each other.

The most identifiable ADHD behavior that is present in myself is impulsivity. Since I was a child, I have struggled with being an extremely impulsive person and how that affects my daily experiences. Impulsivity is one of three of the major identifiers of ADHD along with hyperactivity and inattention.⁵⁶ My experience with impulsivity and ADHD has been negative in relation to financial decisions, substance abuse, diet, etc. This also greatly impacts how I consider decision making in general, whether major or minor, and forces me to question my autonomy in decision-making processes. Because of the major implications that impulsivity has in my life, I knew that it would be a major factor in the creative process of this work. I wanted to work with impulsivity as a choreographic tool (as previously mentioned in my creative goals),

⁵⁶ Banaschewski, Tobias. *ADHD and hyperkinetic disorder*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

but I also had a desire to use impulsivity as a means of reflection on the question of autonomy in a low stakes creative scenario.

A study done by Jonathan Pugh in 2014 explores questions surrounding autonomy and impulsivity in relation to ADHD through a philosophical lens. He writes “it seems plausible to claim that impulsivity is inimical to autonomy when one is impulsive simply because one cannot resist or control one’s impulses to act in ways that one does not reflectively endorse” (374). Before I engaged with this research, I had always considered my impulsivity as a true expression of my autonomy. I, without influence, was making decisions without restriction and thus, those decisions reflected my desires without inhibition, expressing pure choice making. After reading Pugh’s research I began to question the validity of my previous thoughts. If I, because of ADHD, am unable to resist my impulsivity, am I actually engaging with my autonomy in choice making even though my ADHD is integral to my being?⁵⁷ This is a question that I am still grappling with but one that I used as choreographic inspiration.

The impulsion section of *go yonder* consisted of a thirty second long phrase and a starting and ending position for each dancer. Within my choreographic experiment, I allowed myself to give corrections on the specifics of the phrase material, make adjustments to the spatial starting and ending points as needed, and set a general timeframe for the choreography to occur. The experiment was that beyond these parameters I would give up all choice making control to the impulse of the dancers. The means at which they manipulated the phrase to move between starting and ending was completely up to them; there was no expectation to set material, creating an opportunity to make a variety of new choices every time they performed the piece.

⁵⁷ This is an extremely basic reduction of this type of query as it does not reflect the numerous socio-economic influences and privileges that affect autonomy in choice making.

I created this experiment because I wanted to question how my autonomy changed when I was in control of making a decision but had no control over how the decision developed and changed, as well as the ethical question of whether or not I should claim ownership over a creative decision that had just as much if not more influence from the dancers' decision making processes. As I near the end of the creative process, I do not think that I have developed a satisfactory answer to these questions but instead feel that this line of thought leads to a cycle of unanswered questions that grow in complexity with each new addition. This experiment is reflective of my own conflict when contemplating the role of impulsivity in my life. While seemingly lower stakes than more life-altering decisions, the implementation of this experiment in my work has not only forced me to acknowledge the infinite possibilities that come with uncontrollable choice but also the beauty in the teetering balance between control and spontaneity.

The following three sections of the piece (“amoeba town,” “amoeba death,” and “baby sensory”) all relate to variations of sensory stimuli in choreography. “amoeba town” was indicative of increased amounts of stimuli to satisfy sensory seeking behavior. “amoeba death” reflected seeking sensory stimuli as a result of changing orientation, and “baby sensory” was an attempt at choreographing movement that felt similar to the baby sensory videos that initially inspired me. Each of these sections were an opportunity to deeply investigate my desire to create work as a form of sensory stimulation by adjusting the different effectual methods of stimulating the brain in a pleasurable way. This section was entirely based on my intuitive experience with the material. To achieve the goal of rooting myself in the work, I focused on making each variable section pleasurable to my viewing experience over anyone else's.

The final section of my fall work was based on the present attitude and fears that I have towards ADHD and the self-analysis that I was participating in throughout graduate school. Engaging with this material in my thesis required me to be in constant analysis about how I was doing and if ADHD had any impact on the behaviors that I was exhibiting at any given time. It is easy to write and choreograph about past experiences or feelings, but to write about a current state of being, especially when negative, is an act of vulnerability and honesty that, to me, felt degrading to my role as a graduate student. When approaching the year long process of my thesis, I had two major fears:

- 1) I was going to lose interest in the topic of the work and it would be very difficult to self-motivate creatively and analytically.
- 2) I was going to become burnt out because I have been in school every year since I began kindergarten and have a pattern of overtaxing myself towards the end of each year, especially in the final years of a program.

Because of these fears and the pressures (that I admittedly put on myself) that a thesis should be a summation of all the years of work I had invested in academics and dance, I set forward to create a plan that would guarantee success through the end of the year.

A dissertation study that was done in 2022 found that female graduate students with ADHD struggled to uphold the motivation and energy required to support them in graduate school, an educational structure that they believe is not supportive of students with ADHD.⁵⁸

This study was incredibly validating to the feelings that I was having about my experiences as a graduate student and the behaviors that I was exhibiting. It was also relieving that there were methods of support that these students engaged with as means of success.

⁵⁸ Devol, Tiffany Michelle. "Paying Attention: The Lived Experiences of Female ADHD Graduate Students in Higher Education." (2022).

One of the primary concerns that interviewees of the study noted was that work-life balance was almost non-existent during years of graduate study because all free time was dedicated to scholastic exertion. Almost every participant noted that they required rigorous scheduling to successfully complete all expectations of their degree and maintain fulfillment of their basic needs. Research shows that work-life balance is incredibly important to an individual's health and that successful work-life balance "will vary over time, often on a daily basis."⁵⁹ In hindsight of my thesis year, it was extremely difficult for me to maintain a work-life balance and I often sacrificed social and personal experiences to complete the work required for my degree. I fell into a repetitive cycle of study, work, and rest every week and the passage of time bled together from the similarity.

I wanted to choreograph this cycle of exertion in my choreographic piece to be symbolic of the personal requirements that I established to achieve the end of my academic journey. To convey this, the dancers performed a high energy repetitive phrase in a triangular clump. Each time the phrase was repeated a change was made that would adjust the spatial relationship of the phrase but would not disrupt the specific rhythm. This was an adjustment to the tone of the piece because the majority of material consisted of low tension and settled energy with overlapping ideas that would flow on top of each other. The phrase returned to the task like metronomic quality of the first section but included a retained rhythm instead of beat conformation. It also required a fatigue exertion from the dancers that shifted the tension of the space. They all had to regroup their energy and give final efforts following a long period of dancing. My goal with this section was to create a feeling of exhaustion coupled with determination and focus that would demonstrate the feeling of near avoidance of burnout. After the completion of six of these

⁵⁹ Meenakshi, S. Pattu, Venkata Subrahmanyam, and K. Ravichandran. "The importance of work-life-balance." *IOSR Journal of Business and Management* 14, no. 3 (2013): 31-35.

repetitions the dancers unexpectedly stopped and the piece ended without a resolution to the extreme effort, mirroring how I predicted the end of graduate school would feel.

Between the fall and spring, I expanded upon the ideas that I had choreographically developed. I let the ideas become more abstract and I let new material evolve based upon the intuitive needs of the work as a whole. I also allowed myself to become less tethered to the research aspect of the work and delved more pointedly into my artistic expression. This idea evolved from a conversation held between myself, the peers in my cohort, and our instructor. We were asked “how can you write like you choreograph?” and I realized that I had been doing the inverse during the fall semester where I was choreographing the same way I had been writing; the extreme connection between my written work and choreography had made the dance feel stifled to me. It was time for me to be a choreographer as much as I had been working to be a scholar. I am not endorsing the idea that choreographer and scholar cannot exist simultaneously; I just had realized that my fear of not succeeding in graduate school due to my perception of my neurodivergence caused me to place extreme importance on the academic over the artistic.

Following this shift in mindset, my choreographic work became more playful. I took risks and experimented freely without internal pressures of expectation and failure looming over my process. My feedback sessions became easier to navigate because I was less focused on how my work was being judged and more on what my explorations revealed about my desires and how I could continue to make the work reflective of my curiosities.

In the process of creating a work about myself, I became aware that I was dropping viewers immediately into my metaphoric cognitive dance and I did not provide any context that would make that transition clearer. I also decided that I was interested in using the choreography to not only represent my mindscape, but to force viewers into a cognitive process that felt similar

to mine. I created an introductory section that played with distraction and focus. A dancer performed a solo at the well-lit rear of the stage away from the audience. The dancer focused intently towards the audience as if dancing to maintain attention towards them. This section was entitled “fidgets.”

There are currently two schools of thought on the purpose of fidgeting; fidgeting as a result of inattention or fidgeting as a method of fighting inattention.⁶⁰ While neither of these arguments have been proven to be correct, most studies acknowledge that fidgeting is a result of inattention. Individuals with ADHD, especially children, express fidgeting, jitteriness, and an inability to sit still as a result of hyperactive behavior.⁶¹ Initially, I had experimented with my common fidgeting as choreography but upon further reflection and research about crip performance, felt that I was trying to make my behavior more digestible for the audience. This led me to the idea of making dance into a form of fidgeting. I instructed my solo performer, a fellow neurodivergent dancer, to attempt to give their full attention to the audience. When they noticed the desire to become attentive elsewhere, that was the moment the choreography would begin. While this was occurring at the back, the remaining performers would travel through the rest of the dimly lit stage with varied choreography and timing. This was intended to distract the audience from the performer that was set up to be the sole focal point of their attention, inciting behavior that was reminiscent of my neurodivergent experience.

The final major choreographic idea that I experimented with in my piece was a reframing of both the subject hood and objectification that I have experienced as a neurodivergent dancer.

⁶⁰ Frankenthal, Patrick. "Can Fidgeting Help Students Maintain Attention? How Restricting Movement and Varying Cognitive Load Relate to Attention on Reading Comprehension Task." PhD diss., Indiana State University, 2019.

⁶¹ Kumperscak, Hojka Gregoric. "ADHD through different developmental stages." *Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children and adolescents* (2013): 3-19.

One of the results of research for this project is the question of personhood in relation to identifiers such as neurodivergent or dancer. Alexandra Vrhel explores the dilemma between personhood and ADHD subjectivity through somatic analysis. She theorizes that current society bases personhood on “brainhood”.⁶² By deciding that personhood is based on expectations of successful cognitive functioning, neurodivergent individuals are subjected to liminal definitions based on social perspectives of diagnoses. These reductions result in a conflicting expression of self that remains tethered to limiting opinion. These reductions result in a conflicting expression of self that remains tethered to limiting opinion.

Dancers are in a philosophical dilemma of existing as both the subject and object simultaneously; a representation of the design and a living expression of the design. From an audience perspective, it is much easier to categorize the dancer as a body that performs movement and is not expressive of the person, just as it is easier to identify someone as having ADHD instead of considering the complex sociocultural structures that influence personhood beyond cognitive functioning. While I do assign blame to a viewer for naturally responding in this way, I also wanted to construct a choreographic experiment that would expose the viewer to similar levels of subjectivity. For the final section of my piece, following the exertion section, the dancers move extremely close to the audience and visually focus on the viewers. I tasked the dancers with the instruction to do what they saw and abstract any movement derived from the audience. This could include small movements such as an itch or the turn of the head. I hypothesized that under the attentive pressure of the performer, the audience would feel some form of social anxiety from being watched and would respond with kinesthetic response due to

⁶² Vrhel, Alexandra. "Somatic personhood and the dilemma of authenticity in ADHD subjectivity." *Subjectivity* 30, no. 3 (2023): 251-266.

the expectation to remain silent in a dance performance.⁶³ Dancers would respond to these movement cues and begin to abstract and perform the movements as they are seen from audience members and amongst themselves. This experiment created an interesting form of improvisation because the dancers were summarizing the audience based on unconscious responses and roles that were unknowingly assigned to them.

In its final form, *go yonder* is the choreographic metaphor of my neurodivergence that I have wanted it to be since the initial conception. I see myself and my experiences reflected not only in the performed material but the process and community that was built throughout the year. I went into the creative process nervous about expressing myself to others and the vulnerability that would be required. While I cannot say that engaging consciously with myself and others in a vulnerable way will be the approach I always take in my future work, I do feel that through my investment with this piece I am a much better choreographer and dance artist. I have a more clear understanding of why I make work and how dance making serves me, which I can now use to help serve others.

Conclusion

As I reflect on the work that I have done over the past year that has related to neurodivergence in dance performance, I am struck by the interconnection that has developed between my interests before I had even thought of going to graduate school. As a child, having dance class as a means of energy expulsion, to developing passions for disabled dance as I was navigating personal conflict between dance and identity, up to as recently as a year ago when I was picking a topic for my thesis and discovering that my creative work has always had sensory

⁶³ Thompson, Trevor, Nejra Van Zalk, Christopher Marshall, Melanie Sargeant, and Brendon Stubbs. "Social anxiety increases visible anxiety signs during social encounters but does not impair performance." *BMC psychology* 7 (2019): 1-9.

seeking themes, I have been connected to dance through my neurodivergence. Whether I was aware of it or not, having ADHD has been influential on the development of my artistic practice and the choices I've made to pursue dance as a career. Not only has dancing successfully provided me with tools that foster behavioral training that supports my ADHD, but the ever evolving field has held my interest for two decades. I have developed a greater understanding of myself and others through the process of researching neurodivergence through multiple lenses in connection. I've learned that the ambiguity of neurodivergence as a concept can be a tool to help support, validate, and uplift individuals that are searching to make sense of their identity while developing as a person. This revelation has been one of the most exciting discoveries within this process. Not only do I now feel more awareness of myself as a multifaceted individual, but I also understand with more clarity that while investing in societal development in relation to advocacy and integration, it is important to be self-aware of the limitations that are being imposed upon the self and others by misguided understandings. But how does this knowledge benefit the collective?

I believe that there are multiple effects of research, like this, on the evolution of performance dance study. Disabled dance is evolving from integrated dance performance to crip performance, and within that transition there is a shift of focus on the intent of work. Pieces about disability are no longer primarily focused on convincing audiences that disabled dancers can overcome disability, but instead are opportunities to make dance personal and explore movement through and with disability. The more work that artists make about disability, the less oppositional dance and disability become as concepts. Instead of idolized versions of physical performance, the dancer instead is representational of themselves first, and character second. Performance dance, characterized by Western dance practices, has historically objectified

dancers to fill a role instead of utilizing their lived experiences. By making work about those experiences, dancers are reclaiming their labor and redefining their subject hood.

Finally, my goal in completing research of this type is to redefine the requirements of being a successful dancer. I think about my past experiences and my resistance to label myself as a dancer or disabled because I did not want to limit myself. I want to be an example for dancers that the dance community is actively working to remove expectations surrounding dancing bodies and that the only requirement to be a dancer is to dance.

Neurodiversity as a concept supports the moral beliefs that I have held onto for years that there are a multitude of differences that exist and it is important to be equitable and kind in practice as a way of inviting further development and inclusion. Dancer artists, such as Aby Watson and Alice Sheppherd, are actively creating dance practices that support this initiative by centering themselves and other marginalized artists as the primary audience in their works. To create art that digresses from the societally held opinions about dance invites opportunities for exploratory works to be made and seen by a variety of viewpoints. As the dance field continues to evolve and become more tolerant, I look forward to the other research that is developed that may contradict or build upon the research that I have done in this thesis.

I return to Adam Wolfond's poetry as I finish my year of research and recollect the excitement I felt upon discovering his invigorating use of language as a form of expression. Just as I was searching for the means of choreographing my jumbled and confusing thoughts of self-expression, I was reassured by the knowledge that someone else was making art from the same scintillating desire to be known to oneself and to share that knowledge with the remainder of the world.

The making of *go yonder* has been the most satisfying and exciting artistic endeavor that I have been a part of up to this point of my choreographic career. I feel that I have developed immensely as an artist through the connections I have made between written research and artistic exploration, as well as the development of directorial skills that have been required to execute my vision in the desired direction I chose. Most importantly, I feel that I have achieved all of the goals that I set for myself at the beginning of the process. I can confidently say that my choreographic work for this project is about me and every decision has been reflective of the intentions that I set for myself as choreographer. I have developed a close relationship with all the dancers that I worked with and feel that an important community has been built throughout the process. I allowed myself to be open and vulnerable as challenges emerged and because of that was able to clarify my understanding of myself in relation to my artistic practices. It is exciting to be proud of my own work and to feel that I dedicated the resources that were required to create a work that is reflective of the years that I have spent as a dancer and learner. I think back to my peers in my dance classes who were growing up and I am in awe of how accomplished they were for realizing something that has taken me until now to discover: dancing to me is in fact about sharing the truest version of yourself with the world.

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