

## FROM PRO FORMA TO PERFORMATIVE

### Un/Commoning Pedagogies: Forging Collectivity through Difference in the Embodied Classroom and Beyond

Co-authored by Un/Commoning Pedagogies Collective: Dasha A. Chapman, J Dellecave, Adanna Kai Jones, Sharon Freda Kivenko, Mario LaMothe, Lailye Weidman, and Queen Meccasia Zabriskie

#### We Convene

Un/Commoning Pedagogies Collective are seven dancer-scholars who centre embodied anti-racist praxis in our teaching across the fields of anthropology, sociology, African American and Africana studies, gender, sexuality and women's studies, dance, and performance studies. Since 2019, Un/Commoning Pedagogies Collective has engaged in consistent, process-based collaboration around teaching, scholarship, movement practice, and collegiality. Together we have co-authored essays, facilitated workshops, and given talks and performances. We also share syllabi, strategies, stories, milestones, failures, resources, and friendship.

Our name and working framework, “Un/Commoning Pedagogies,” emerged from our initial convening in response to the Dance Studies Association’s (DSA) 2019 annual conference theme, “Dancing in Common.” We desired a space for exchange concerned with what movement pedagogies offer to the work of “commoning” in ways that would promote our unique and varied experiences rather than homogenize or universalize. By centring the body, we remain committed to destabilizing notions of “the commons” that may elide difference. Our framing is also indebted to the work of Stephano Harney and Fred Moten in *The Undercommons* (2013). Building on Harney and Moten’s call to action, we are inspired to create new ways of approaching education, *within* but not *of* the university, as the current options for education are inadequate at best and annihilating at worst.

As a cohort of educators, we assemble in commitment to activating embodiment in—and as—social justice education. In collectivity, we respond to the urgency of ongoing anti-Black racism, racist terrorism, and white supremacy. We aim to build spaces of connection without nullifying difference and positionality. This generative yet sometimes uncomfortable rub and tension of relation produce friction—like an itch that tells you, “things need to change.” This conception is in conversation with Anna Tsing’s framing of “friction,” which calls attention to the “heterogenous and unequal encounters [that] lead to new arrangements of culture and power” (Tsing 2005, 5). This is how we work inside/as the undercommons—at the level of the moving, thinking, body, both in and out of the dance studio.

We critically position movement as a method for forging anti-racist collectivities-in-difference in our classrooms and beyond. We take seriously how the body moves, thinks, breathes, exists, and experiences its environments. We further acknowledge how white supremacy is experienced and

---

**Dasha A. Chapman** is an assistant professor of dance at Keenesaw State University. **J Dellecave** is an assistant professor of the practice of theatre arts and performance studies at Brown University. **Adanna Kai Jones** is an assistant professor of dance at Bowdoin College. **Sharon Freda Kivenko** is a lecturer in Anthropology at Tufts University. **Mario LaMothe** is an assistant professor of Black studies and anthropology at the University of Illinois at Chicago. **Lailye Weidman** is a visiting assistant professor of dance at Hampshire College. **Queen Meccasia Zabriskie** is an associate professor of Sociology at New College of Florida.

patterned differently in our bodies. The technologies of racism and colonization have been disseminated, produced, re-produced, and constructed through our bodies, for the body has been the material “thing” on which white supremacist ideas have been built. We explore the potential of body knowledge and bodily practice in anti-racist praxis through movement. We are guided by the following questions:

- Why is body-based, intersectional anti-racist work so urgent for us, and for educators more broadly?
- What moments of friction have we experienced in our teaching? And what do these frictions show us about the possibilities and limitations of radical praxis in the classroom?
- What strategies do we use to remain open to and nimble in teachable moments?

Our writing, rooted in our ongoing collaborations, documents a co-generation of knowledge about the possibilities and tensions of teaching with and through our full-bodied selves. Moving beyond the syllabus, we offer you a glimpse into our concerns, commitments, experiences, and strategies as movement educators. We call you in to participate with us in a process of un/commoning pedagogy through embodied practice, dialogue, and reflection.

*Movement Prompt #1: Movement starts with breath. This work is heavy. It can weigh on the body and immobilize. Let's first find some lightness and breath inside ourselves as a reminder of our ability to activate and engage from a place of ease. Get comfortable. Gently nod your head. Softly elongate the distance between your shoulders and your ears. With your eyes, easefully take note of where you are, physically and mentally. Take a deep breath in. Exhale.*

Here in our performative writing, as we do in our classrooms, we invite you to think through your own moving, feeling, dancing body. We provide prompts for moving and sensing that make space for your body to show up. We encourage you to read, with attention, noting the ways our text lands in and on your body, in all its unpredictable messiness and layered experience.

## **Digging In**

**Why is body-based, intersectional anti-racist work urgent?**

*Movement Prompt #2: Find your ground. Whether you are standing or sitting, feel the soles of your feet on the floor, spread your toes wide. Drop your weight into the floor (and/ or the chair), breathe in. . . . Hold it. . . . Exhale, making whatever sound comes up. Notice any emotions that are percolating within your body. From this emotive space, start to tremble from your torso. Like growing roots, let the vibrations travel throughout your entire body from your lungs to the muscles in your fingers and toes. This trembling is meant to release energy and release emotions. Shake as vigorously as you can. Stop. Notice what sensations linger.*

**ALL.** Given the ongoing anti-Black state terrorism and global health crisis, the body is an important site for making sense of these larger forces and healing (Menakem 2017). Our classes teach about the ways white supremacy impacts bodies and embodiment. We do this in both content and method—through our bodies—which means we swirl in the depths of these impacts—in the eye of the storm, in the belly of the beast. Due to the psycho-somatic effects of affective labour, caretaking of all kinds, illnesses, career pressures and institutional DEI demands, we dwell in the valences of exhaustion and capacity that each of us feels. Showing up must take on different shapes depending on our social identities and the contexts in which we find ourselves. Thus, breathing, pausing, and reflecting are more important than ever (Gumbs 2020). The pause with breath offers a moment for

tuning in and for reflective recalibration. In our teaching/learning spaces, we witness white supremacy working its way in and through our felt physicalities and processes. In particular, white supremacy shows up in our students' default to Euro-American hierarchies of "proper" dance technique (Monroe 2011), their goal-oriented versus process-oriented approaches to class, their striving toward perfection, and their discomfort with the inherent messiness of process. We also notice how white students and students of colour take up space differently, as their assumptions diverge regarding how much physical, intellectual, emotional space one is free to take up—e.g., where and how students sit or move through the space (periphery or centre), whose voice is most audible, who speaks readily, who holds back their contributions. All of these examples inscribe how our students show up in their bodies in the classroom.

We practise strategies of "Digging In," as per Brenda Dixon-Gottschild (1996), to excavate layers of physical, social, and historical invisibilizations of Black presence and contributions integral to cultural formations in the United States, which requires we also examine the biases inherent in our positions. As Dixon-Gottschild instructs, white supremacy and coloniality function through binary logics (Dixon-Gottschild 1997). We aim to instruct the complexity and ambiguity of the learning process. Things do not always have one right answer or make sense in singular ways, nor should they. Part of the research we encourage for our students and ourselves is a practice of sitting inside the contradictions, centring how and why the contradictions can and do coexist. This practice of sitting with and reflecting on contradictions requires effort. An improvisation score or class activity that appears to be chaotic or disorganized is in fact ordered in ways students have not yet been trained to understand—much like the ways white spectators colonially perceived Black performance as unwieldy and untrained movement rather than virtuosic practices within a different set of aesthetic-philosophical principles that value contrariety, invention, improvisation, and collectivity (Dixon-Gottschild 1996). Fostering adeptness at improvisation and patience with process is urgent to un/commoning pedagogies.

**DAC.** These approaches that value emergence through process and improvisation mean that we often deviate from "the syllabus"—as the specific contractual document we give students at the start of a semester and the more generalized notion of a traditional educational agenda within neoliberal academic contexts. Navigating the unpredictability of teaching in un/commoning ways is not something for which we often have support. I put out the initial call for our first convening for DSA 2019 from a desire to generate some form of community around critical movement-based pedagogies and their potential in/as anti-racist praxis.<sup>1</sup> In dance and performance studies, our integration of theory and practice alongside integration of body-based, process-oriented knowledge production potentially poised us to centre movement in alignment with social justice and critical theory; however, our fields have historically not always fulfilled such a promise (see George-Graves 2020). At the same time, I was noticing that many anti-racist educational spaces were neglecting to acknowledge embodiment or incorporate movement, although this has been shifting in recent years (Menakem 2017, UBW/PISAB). As an educator, I felt the urgency of collectively addressing not simply *what* we are teaching in terms of content but *how* we engage said content. Activating anti-racism beyond the abstract and practising decolonial political formations from the inside out and in ongoing ways feel like urgent strategies, yet coalescing some form of coalitional community to support the experimentation inherent in the work was equally so. Therefore, our practice as UnCPC is to gather regularly to process embodied teaching but also to move through this work in ways that do not reinforce deactivated norms of academic knowledge production. These efforts nourish our ability to sustain and metabolize our approaches to teaching. Our meetings have only become

increasingly important to our collective thriving as times continue to intensify and the stakes of this work teeter between life and death for too many. And so, We Convene.

**AKJ.** First and foremost, I am frustrated with talk about decolonizing in the abstract. As a Trinidad-born, US-raised, always ready to *bus' a sweet wine*—here I am referring to the rolling-hip dance and not a bottle of fermented grapes—I am sometimes creole, unmarked as Latinx, and always already recognized as “Black” and “female.” I am a Carnivalist, down to my very bones. It continues to be my experience, especially within the US, that there is a profound disconnect between decolonization as a lived experience and decolonization as a theoretical concept (Tuck and Yang, 2012; García-Peña and Lyon, 2020). We are intermeshed, entangled, and messy (Lugones 2003). As a colonized, Afro-Caribbean woman, it is important to foreground that the work of colonization is very intimate, and in my experience, people, especially in the US, often seem to forget—or don’t recognize—that aspect of colonization. In turn, the work of decolonizing requires constant undoing, from how we see and address each other to what we propagate and legitimize as teachers. From this lens, I playfully enter the space, both here on the page and in the classroom. And please know that the business of “playing” is very serious, as it is a vital tool for undoing colonization practices. Here I am specifically referencing the strategies and logic of the Trinidadian Carnival. From play on words to playing masquerade, the act of playing uses pleasure to blur the borders that delineate hegemonic uses of power. Effectively, play shifts both *how* power is understood and *who* accesses power.

**ML.** Ayibobo, Ashe, Amen. I enter the Black studies and anthropology classroom of a minority-serving institution as a self-reflexive Black Haitian creative male-body with feminine tendencies and a non-American accent. I rely heavily on Haitian and Afro-Caribbean embodied knowledge. So, I hear you deeply on this, AKJ. I’ve encountered “decolonizing” used in creative workshops and practices wherein we will decolonize our bodies in the moment during our short time together. There might be an understanding for some that the session introduces a consciousness-raising approach, which acknowledges and aids in destabilizing colonizing aspects of lifeworlds and bodily practices. But what if others are unaware that this form of “digging in” demands sustained and methodical attention or assume that simply doing a workshop is decolonial? It’s a start. Yet, as we rehearse here, through our individual and collective labour, it should be underscored that decoloniality is a performative: a cognitive and physical re-patterning countering racist, xenophobic, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist knowledge and techniques over space-times.

**DAC.** I circulate, I flow, I home, I bridge. I am a white American cisgendered woman, a child of the Jewish diaspora, at times read as biracial, and queer. I have long studied African diaspora techniques and moved through Black dance spaces, accumulating embodied knowledge transnationally and in relation. In action toward accountability and anti-racist praxis, I effort to maintain collaborative relationships that leverage my access to resources and platforms and move alongside ongoing struggles. I teach critical dance studies, performance studies, and African diaspora-centred courses that bring theory and practice together, working with both white and BIPOC students, aiming to offer approaches for acknowledging, analyzing, and undoing racism, facilitating knowledge produced in the body, and forging new collectivities. I am present.

Like AKJ, I am frustrated with the disembodied manner of presenting knowledge in educational settings and academic conferences. Personally, in my work of connecting students to the layers of their bodies, I use movement as a method for learning and engaging with theory, not just technique, end goal, or representative example. Faced with the continued barrage of violent assaults against BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ people in public and private spheres, I notice the effects these violences

have on my colleagues and my students. I witness how movement powerfully aids in our processing of such events and even fortifies us in persevering anew.

**JD.** I traverse academia as an impassioned interdisciplinary artist, scholar, and educator. I am a white, queer, first-generation student raised in a rural, working-class family. My gender identity shifts between nonbinary, genderqueer, and/or woman. I have been seriously dancing since I was two years old. I strongly believe that dance and performance studies offer rich sites of activism and activation. I am deeply invested in the long-term collaborative process of embodied racial justice work.

**QMZ.** I am a Black woman, a Muslima, and the mother of a joyful Black boy. I am a daughter, sister, friend, aunty. I am a sociologist, a dance and performance artist, and an anti-racist community organizer. As an educator, I employ an “engaged pedagogy” that works to create a classroom space where all students feel their contributions matter and “we honor all capabilities, not solely the ability to speak” (hooks 2010, 22). This Un/Commoning Pedagogies space is urgent because engaged pedagogy is often filled with tenuous and difficult moments, and, as an educator, I need spaces where I can make sense of these moments. As I work with students to increase understanding across differences and create “meanings through collaborative inquiry” (Brookfield and Preskill 2005, 24), many points of divergence in the larger social world play out in the classroom. Un/commoning pedagogies allows me to make sense of these points of divergence, share resources, and collectively create knowledge that helps me to continue to teach from/through a social justice perspective in the contemporary moment.

**SFK.** I live, make work, teach, and move in contingent ways. My white, Eastern European, Jewish, English-speaking but French-inclined Quebecker, American-educated, cisfemale body is pushing me to consider not what it is to be from a place but to be of a place. Through explorations in site-specific work and a critical approach to anthropologies of performance, I am recognizing how locally engaged work lays bare and destabilizes settler colonial logics of place-claiming. This inquiry is activated by my West African dance training, infuses my parenting, and mobilizes my interest in collaboration.

**LW.** I hover, crash, step into the dance classroom as a white queer nonbinary feminine body with Ashkenazi Jewish and Anglo-European roots. I am also a mixed-class person who has worked many domestic labour and service jobs along a circuitous, ongoing route with higher education and the professional experimental dance world. Currently, I teach at a transformative, precarious liberal arts institution where whiteness dominates and where students hold a wide diversity of gender, race, and class identities. I witness my students simultaneously seeking to learn, survive, and heal (both personally and intergenerationally) through their academic and creative work. This makes it necessary to question habitual modes of advising, feedback, and evaluation and to consider the students’ dancing and dancemaking within a much wider frame than the one I was trained within.

*Movement Prompt #3: To activate your body, tap your fingertips over your heart, at the centre of your sternum. Take this moment to remind yourself that you are here, you exist, you matter. Start with light taps, then increase the tempo until the sounds of your tapping echo through your chest. Continue tapping as you read the following . . .*

## Frictions

*What are some moments of friction that you've experienced? And what do these frictions show us about the possibilities, limitations, and risks of radical praxis in the classroom?*

**ALL.** When we consider frictions, something strikes us: What we do in our classrooms with movement is a “working-against” on multiple levels: against colonial parameters for knowledge, neoliberal norms of evaluation and success, student learning habits, white social decorum that evades addressing race and difference, our own positions of authority, and how people conceptualize what bodies do. Frictions occur between students and teachers, between students themselves, and within the Self. At their foundations, these frictions ignite between our work and the institutional norms of higher education and dance. We are actively creating friction against the purportedly empty space of the studio and kinetically rubbing against a strictly discursive mode of critical inquiry.

*Movement Prompt #4: Notice where these frictions land in and on your body. In an effort to embrace the discomfort that might be arising, clench all the muscles you can. Squeeze your eyes shut, make fists with your hands, clench your jaw, hold your breath, curl your toes, etc. . . . Release it all with a deep sigh. Repeat, as you read the following.*

**QMZ.** I often use embodiment exercises in the classroom to examine how macro and meso level social forces play themselves out on the micro level. Embodiment exercises also generate dialogue about emotions and how the very ways that we feel in our bodies are impacted by larger social forces (Collins 2004). I enjoy using one exercise I learned in a Congress on Research in Dance pre-conference workshop in Gainesville, Florida, that Urban Bush Women facilitated, where the artistic director Jawole Willa Jo Zollar engaged participants in an embodied dialogue about democracy. During the workshop, Zollar placed an object in the middle of the dance studio and said the object represented democracy. She then invited us all to position our bodies around the object in a way that represented our relationship to the concept. At the workshop, I was blown away by the depth of the dialogue and the complex emotions revealed through our sharing. I have since used this exercise in a variety of settings, using different concepts to generate dialogue and exchange.

Once, I facilitated the exercise in my class and experienced a moment that brought me to my growing edge and raised a number of questions about how to engage in anti-racist pedagogy with care. In this particular class, we were trying to engage in a collective inquiry into how white supremacy as a structure impacts all of us on a micro level. Students were told that the object in the centre represented white supremacy, and everyone in the classroom was invited to embody their relationship to white supremacy. I also participated in the activity because I feel deeply that if I am asking students to be vulnerable and share from a personal space, I must do the same.

The first time around, everyone shared without words. The second time, students were asked to state one word that represented some aspect of what they were embodying. The third time we shared, people were asked to embody their shape and talk about their motivations for positioning their body that way. We all shared a number of personal stories about white supremacy empowering, shaping, limiting, enabling, and constraining us in complex ways. It was an intimate sharing as folks often talked about events in their family, childhood, and daily life. It was an emotional sharing as we heard about individual struggles of trying to undo socialization and conditioning.

Many of the white students in my classes not only spoke about the privileges that white supremacy provides but also discussed how they were actively trying to undo how this structure shapes their own identity and interactions. Bodies in close proximity to the chair, leaning on the chair, standing on the chair, or hands and feet entangled with the chair . . . the white students in my class found complex and interesting ways of conveying their understanding of the advantages that this structure provided and how their own complex identities shaped how much and when they benefit. During one class, when explaining her position, a white female student uttered a problematic phrase she learned as a child from a trusted adult, and I could feel the entire class cease breathing temporarily due to the weight of her utterance. We had to address what she said. With caution, I asked her to explain the phrase a bit more. As she started to talk and reflect on her words, she became aware of their entanglement, which heightened the emotions. [*Fast audible inhale*] As an educator who invites students to share from personal experience, a high level of emotion is always a possibility. Additionally, how I hold and navigate these moments sets the tone for the entire semester and can be the difference between a student feeling marginalized in a classroom and/or engaged. In this case, I was having my own emotional reaction to what this student said, which impacted my ability to hold things together. We had to take a break to collect ourselves. I talked to the student privately to check in with her before we resumed the dialogue. I did my best to address her utterance because not doing so would further marginalize some of the students of colour and white students in my classroom seeking knowledge and belonging at the predominately white institution at which I teach. We proceeded with caution and discomfort as we reckoned with her utterance that took everyone's breath away.

**ML.** I empathize with this story. It intersects with how I contend with frictions between faculty and students of colour at my minority-serving institution. In the evaluation of my course on embodiment and performance in/as protest, a self-identified Black female STEM major disliked that “we needed to be open and trusting of our peers to think about issues too early and too often.” She fidgeted and seemed lethargic during an embodiment workshop based on Haiti's undulating Yanvalou movements in preparation for a “living statue” installation on campus. Afterward, she stayed behind to express a sentiment much like the words above. Weeks later, she kept silent when students and I used our own experiences to think through Audre Lorde's “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (2007). A high-performing student, her silence spoke loudly when she didn't submit a critical response to the text.

To be fair, she also noted the positive attributes of my pedagogy in the course evaluation. Months later, we spoke about how she has learned to appreciate what she perceived as “holes in my qualitative performance-based pedagogy.” As a recent transfer student, she was going through some distress and felt very vulnerable on campus. I reiterated that it was her right to question and be vigilant about the instruction she receives insofar as her inquiries were made in a respectful, constructive, and generous manner. How fragile am I that her critique looms large for me? Is it because I assumed that her Blackness made us co-conspirators? Or that she would have accepted these experimentations from a white body?

*Movement Prompt #4, revisited: Clench and release. Notice any residual sensations in your organs, muscles, and skin.*

**SFK.** There is this strange expectation that a professor emerges from their doctoral education a fully formed academic and educator. Whether we choose to admit it or not, each of us in our own ways has had analogue experiences, experiences that fell flat and left us educators feeling astounded and

surely at times defeated by the fact that our best pedagogical intentions have somehow gone awry. As the semesters move on and my teaching ripens, I have come to realize that teaching critical thought through teaching critical movement is, just as my one-time student suggested, about taking risks. And risks, as calculated as they may be, have the potential to backfire, which, pedagogically speaking, is an incredible and challenging opportunity for learning, teaching, and growth. Making space for students to have the answers and preparing oneself to integrate student critiques in constructive ways might, in the short run, test our sense of instructor-ly expertise, but, in the long run, improve our teaching and models a performative suppleness that I believe is essential, most especially in this historical moment.

From classroom frictions and misfires, I am coming to realize that by setting the studio/seminar room/classroom as a container of learning FOR ALL, space is made for me, the instructor, to step off of the sidelines and into the inquiries. I remind my students that “We are all here to learn. There is newness for each of us in the material. And this includes me.” And so, instructors and students alike should expect redirection from our missteps, our misnaming, our inadvertent biases, our triggering, knowing that our hard work of building together begins through moving dialogues in our spaces of learning.

**LW.** Thank you all for your vulnerability and realness. The learning I do with students and the work to be accountable to them is key to growing as an educator. It’s essential to the kind of space I want to create in the classroom. And questions arise: Are there best practices for admitting shortcomings, acknowledging biases, and naming mistakes? What does accountability look like, and how can it be real rather than lip service? As a female young-presenting contingent faculty member, I find that many students aren’t as likely to see me as an authority as my male colleagues, nor is there a general culture of respect for and understanding of faculty labour at the college. So, I’m often reticent to enhance this by naming my growing edges and inviting critique. Your writing reminds me that anti-racist, transformative pedagogy is necessarily humbling. And this humility is not the same as inadequacy. Sharing stories with other educators about what we’re working on and don’t yet know is a necessary part of the work.

**ALL.** There are many reasons why our students seem resistant, affectless, staid, or suspect to fully engage with what we teach. This work is impossible to anticipate and at times feels dangerous. Even if we have tools for doing this, the difficulty does not go away. The work is always a risk, but we are differentially risked, or at least are differentially received, based on our compounded racial, gender, class, and nation-based performances.

## **Remaining Open**

*What strategies do you use to remain open to and nimble in teachable moments?*

*Movement Prompt #6: Reflect. Using your whole body, notice what reflection looks, feels, and sounds like to you.*

**QMZ.** Breathe . . . Breathe. I tell myself to keep calm and watch my facial expressions. I am committed to an open classroom where people can feel free to say challenging things and make mistakes. However, that sometimes produces situations where I experience pain from what someone has said; and, importantly, I can read the faces and body language of the students in the classroom and tell they are managing the weight of a fellow student’s utterance. I tell my students that they can feel free to bring whatever they need into the classroom, but that we are going to “unpack” and



analyze what they bring in. I tell them that they don't have to censor their emotions, and even though this is not a therapy session (I am not trained as a therapist), they can be fully emotionally present in the classroom.

**ML.** I too breathe. As I near the classroom, I decelerate my pace. I practise several of the movements documented herein because, during the session, my body will contract and tense up. I will walk out of the classroom feeling sore. I take deep, methodical breaths before and after the class because I often forget to breathe in a relaxed manner as I facilitate questions, reinforce and correct answers, and encourage care, responsibility and appreciation of difference. I also encourage my students to be conscious of the necessity to breathe during situations that might trigger them to backbite rather than remain committed to be reflexive and to engage their interlocutors in collaborative work. For instance, my students participate in the following exercise, which focuses on stillness and active listening. After reminding ourselves of our class guidelines, students pair up and choose a current situation in local, national and/or world events that they are experiencing and in which at least two sides have been locked in enduring opposition and conflict. I remind the students that the onus does not fall on the bodies who feel oppressed and disenfranchised to activate the dialogue, nor is it an opportunity for some to use discriminatory and offensive language and behaviour as some play devil's advocate. Each presenter then takes a few minutes in silence and rehearses breathwork as they prepare remarks from their side. Then each speaks for their side with sincere, calm, and thoughtful persuasion and belief. As they do so, students are encouraged to take brief pauses to maintain a body-mind connection in regulating their breath and easing bodily tensions. They continue to do so as they absorb their peer's perspectives. Then, to interpret the situation and make change, they outline how they can find common ground as engaged humans and researchers. They breathe as they dialogue, pause, and reflect.

*Movement Prompt #5: Pause. Notice what pausing looks, feels, and sounds like to you.*

**JD.** Pause. Active Listening. Allow the sounds to come to your ears, to vibrate your flesh. Allow the words to be seen, let the images your eyes translate come to you rather than reaching out to them.

**SFK.** One of the things that I found challenging with the initial workshop we facilitated as a collective was that we really did not have a chance to PAUSE and REFLECT after our gathering was done. Our group reflections felt incomplete to me, and now, as we write together, I wonder if this is where our debriefing PAUSE is actually happening . . .

*Pause*

**JD.** I struggle with moments of the collective in relationship to cultural differences. I desire to be part of a we from our various complex and nuanced identities, without inflicting the harm that comes from a we that privileges white supremacist, colonialist, cisgendered, classist (and other) violences. My experience in most environments, especially in higher education, is one of exclusion and difference. A moment of respite aids me in moments of difference—notice your breath, the shape of the container of your body, feel your feet on the ground, the weight of your head.

Still mired in white postmodern dance, with its universalized experience, decentralized identities, and neutralized white privilege, I desire to continue to facilitate dialogues and experiences around strategies, tactics, exercises, and conversations about how to be together with difference in our collective movements (Chaleff 2018). How do we model something different together in our

differences? How do we exist in difference, together, with the utmost care? How do we promote inclusivity without defaulting to a universalism that is inherently white supremacist? How do we experiment and be open without expecting everyone to have the same experience? How do we un-privilege the calm rather than the anxious or uncomfortable?

## The Circle<sup>2</sup>

*Movement Prompt #7: Breathe. Move in a way that evokes what you are feeling in your body, at this moment. Pause. Whether you are standing or sitting, feel the soles of your feet on the floor, spread your toes wide. Reflect. Stay present to your experience. Inhale. Hold it. Exhale, making whatever sound comes up.*

In this essay, Un/Commoning Pedagogies Collective emphasizes the urgent need to craft spaces for co-creating knowledge through our bodies and across our varied positions. As public political scrutiny of education intensifies, so too do the stakes of the work we do in the classroom. Our writing models the ways we build spaces premised on staying open and nimble in spite of the varied challenges we continually face. As we manoeuvre to transform our respective institutions, we recognize the pain caused by brushing up against structural inequities. We use the space of collective gathering and improvisational movement practice to air out, work through, elaborate, and co-create ways of moving intentionally against the grain of institutionalized white supremacy.

In this writing, we invited you to hone your bodily intelligence by toggling between your discursive cognition of what you are reading and what is resonating within your body. When facilitating experiential workshops, we invite participants into the work of addressing, unfurling, and tapping into the intersectional valances of the body in spaces of teaching, learning, moving, and becoming. In both our teaching practices and in our writing, we effort toward building a communal foundation; we do so by attending to the experiences, tones and tenors of our bodies, the strength of our differences, and our willingness to adapt/change/grow. Through dialogue, dance, embodied exchanges, and inquiry, we foster critical forms of collectivity that forge common ground, which feels even more crucial in this current political climate. Yet and still, we remain wary of commoning rhetorics that fail to address power differentials in the classroom and in our dance spaces. Our existence and humanity depend on these critical formations.

## Seeds for an Embodied Anti-racist Classroom<sup>3</sup>

- Be present and stay engaged in one's body.
- Hold space for understanding, not for debate.
- Contribute to the listening process.
- Push ourselves to the growing, uncomfortable edge of teachable moments.
- Respect that we all arrive from different points.
- Acknowledge that our embodiments and words have real impacts.

**ML.** I make from, with, and through Haitian/Africanist ancestral legacies in teachable moments, within and outside academia.

**AKJ.** I continue to roll my waistline. Re-/Membering my hips, I wine to remember that this most intimate space houses a life-affirming portal between the spiritual and physical realm. Thus, with

each and every gyrating roll, I rebuild my heart and remember that my pleasure and power effect real change in the world, including my classrooms. And so, I endure.

**DAC.** I circulate, I flow, I home, I bridge—recognizing how my ease is structurally facilitated and reinforced, growing new pathways for courage and for my mobilities to subversively break through exclusionary barriers.

**JD.** I traverse—listening, activating, making in collaborative process with care while undoing white supremacy with urgency.

**LW.** I hover, crash, step into the dance classroom—working to be accountable to my imprint in the space, the history I carry in my bones, and the power of my location.

**SFK.** I move in contingent ways—honing nimbleness as I move toward expansive learning, teaching, and facilitating in collectivity.

**QMZ.** I move with polyrhythmic sensibilities—listening with head, heart, and soul to a multiplicity of expressions and organizing to collectively create knowledge and transform spaces.

\*\*\*

Thank you for reading-thinking-moving with us.  
The circle opens out, gains volume. You are now part.

\*\*\*

## Notes

1. I had been inspired by the generative Syllabus and Teaching Workshop at the Dance Studies Association Conference in 2016 at Pomona College facilitated by Rosemary Candelario, Meiver de la Cruz, José Reynoso, and Brandon Shaw.
2. The Circle is an Indigenous technology of gathering, participation, relationship-building, and knowledge production. As many of us are steeped in and influenced by Africanist aesthetic frameworks, we engage the circle as both strategy and metaphor for the recognition of lineage, building collectivity, convening equitably, and for the continuity and necessary ongoingness of this work.
3. These guidelines, which we offer as seeds to readers, emerge from our three-year process of working together and continuously refining the principles by which we want to abide. Our practice of devising agreements and guidelines adapts strategies from Urban Bush Women (UBW), the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB), and the Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance (AORTA). Often called “collective agreements” or “community agreements,” these guidelines should be agreed upon by an assembling group. They serve as important foundations for forging anti-racist and equitable spaces that allow participants from marginalized socio-political locations to be fully present and heard, while also decentering whiteness. This requires buy-in from the group with which you are working and should be continuously revisited and revised as needed. The agreement is an ongoing process and practice. In our classrooms, we devise agreements together with our students. When facilitating workshops and here in our writing, we share these principles as offerings for moving both outwards and inwards into the work of embodied anti-racist practice.

## References

- Brookfield, Stephen D., and Stephen Preskill. 2005. *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*, 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Chaleff, Rebecca. 2018. "Activating Whiteness: Racializing the Ordinary in US American Postmodern Dance." *Dance Research Journal* 50 (3): 71–84.  
<https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/715529>.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2002. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2004. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Dixon-Gottschild, Brenda. 1997. "Some Thoughts on Choreographing History." In *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, edited by Jane Desmond, 167–77. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Dixon-Gottschild, Brenda. 1996. *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- García-Peña, Lorgia, and Mordecai Lyon. 2020. "Decolonizing the University." *Boston Review: A Political and Literary Forum*, June 2, 2020. <http://bostonreview.net/race/lorgia-garcia-pena-mordecai-lyon-decolonize-university>.
- George-Graves, Nadine. 2020. "Discussing the Undiscussable, Part 2; or, This Might Hurt Your Feelings." In *Conversations across the Field of Dance Studies: Decolonizing Dance Discourses* 40:20–21.
- Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. 2020. "Coming Back to Breath."  
<https://www.alexispauline.com/now/2020/5/27/coming-back-to-breath>.
- Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. 2013. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions. <https://www.minorcompositions.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/undercommons-web.pdf>.
- hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2010. *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*. New York: Routledge.
- Lorde, Audre. 2007. *Sister Outsider*, Reprint ed. New York: Crossing Press.
- Lugones, María. 2003. *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Menakem, Resmaa. 2017. *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Nevada: Central Recovery Press.
- Monroe, Raquel L. 2011. "I Don't Want to Do African . . . What about My Technique?": Transforming Dancing Places into Spaces in the Academy." *Journal of Pan African Studies* 4, no. 6 (September): 38–55.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. 2012. "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1 (1): 1–40.  
<https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630>.