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Text and Language

The first three chapters of this book depart from received notions of the dramaturg's role to explore what sort of thinking contemporary dance dramaturgy generates. In this first chapter I take up the association of dramaturgy with text—the word, the text, the language—inspecting it from several angles to illuminate what sorts of thoughts emerge when the dramaturg (or anyone partaking in dramaturgical activity) considers the use of text in and around movement-based performance.

I begin with text because it describes the commonest association with the dramaturg. In the dramatic theater, text serves as both recipe and main ingredient for performance; the dramaturgy of the work inevitably extends from its textual skeleton. Even as a work's dramaturgy addresses how it manifests itself theatrically, conventional priorities tend to focus on how the performers articulate the text, and how that speech is supported or contradicted by the theatrical apparatus that surrounds it. In this mode of theatrical production we always know what came first: the Word.

The historical models readily support this. Lezzen offered us the image of dramaturgy as critic and playwright, generating words constitutive, descriptive, and analytic of the dramatic theater. Brecht as a production dramaturg but also a playwright and director seems more aware of theater's extratextual dimensions, but he nevertheless takes text as his point of departure. And if we look at Rainmund Hoppe, arguably our first dance dramaturg, we find that even though he attended to nonverbal events in Bausch's rehearsal room, he also entered into his new role from a role as a journalist, a wordsmith, just a few years after Bausch's dancers started speaking out loud.

I can easily conjure the stereotype of the text-bound dramaturg, in snapshot glimpses: the dramaturg with her head in a book, planning to move between theory and practice just as soon as the finishes reading up on her theory. The dramaturg lugging books and pronouncing into the rehearsal room to sit in an imposing pile, so that others may read too (though they may be perfectly happy to

return that task). The dramaturg scribbling in a rehearsal notebook, scribing a long process in a string of quotations and description. The dramaturg posing questions and provoking dialogue so that the director/choreographer and collaborators can dissect the work from multiple angles—sometimes in the bright light of the rehearsal room, sometimes after hours in a dark pub, but either way animately verbal. The dramaturg scribbling and compiling text to be spoken on stage. The dramaturg assembling the program notes, laboring with hope to find the perfect combination of words that will bring audience members to the brink of the performance in the most receptive mood possible. In all these snapshots, reductive yet still familiar, we find the dramaturg amid a cloud of words.

Accordingly, collaborators may perceive the dramaturg as entering the rehearsal room as language's special representative, there to interpret the words already present, and to that done add some more. In the case of dance dramaturgy, this allegiance can create suspicion. Has the dramaturg come in to the room to turn dance into something it is not (insofar as we accept the discredited but enduring modernist premise that dance's purview is pure movement), or once was (insofar as the era of the story ballet is past)? Is the there to "translate" dance away from its strength? Might the choreographer have to protect the delicate nonverbal nature of the work from the percussive influence of the verbal dramaturg?

Tailing on the role of dramaturg in movement-based performance makes me excusably conscious of language's role in the room, both within the work being rehearsed and in the interstitial moments when that work is reflected upon. Language's power is also its danger, and as I do my work I find myself meditating frequently on the nuances of usage that might harness the former while shifting the latter. European dance theorist and dramaturg Bojana Bauer writes that one four dancers and choreographers have of dramaturgical work is that it "can 'close things too soon' by naming them." Within the performance work as well, language can also be deployed in backhanded ways that might, for instance, seem to resolve or explain away the questions or sensations left hanging in the air after a particularly evocative nonverbal passage. But just because language can be used that way does not mean it need be.

Movement-based rehearsal rooms, even when dramaturg-free, are not word less locations. It is worth noting the sort of language that is regularly deployed there during the working process. On an anatomical level, where the body is literally limbal, language is as concrete as it can be: poise, fructuation, capillet, rib cage. The part is simply named in order to draw attention there, and perhaps to redirect its use. But other utterances, those that share ideas about what the moving bodies are or are not achieving, are or are not evolving, proceed.
through copious simile and metaphor. Here the figurative language is laid up against embodied experience in order to evoke an overlap, but not an equivalence. For instance, the words now there is a snake curling up and down your spine will conjure a particular quality of movement, without referring to the presence of any actual snake in the studio, or an expectation that the words should operate representationally and conjure a snake in the mind of a viewer. In these instances language does not name as much as create new webs of connection and new potential meanings, in what Andre Lepecki has called "a metaphorical explosion."

Ralph and I have long maintained a playful fight about the use of the word "language" as a verb, as in "If I had to language that I would say ..." or "I'm not sure I can language that yet." This dance/typology (I can only trace it to the New York dance world of the late 1990s and early 2000s) asks me to not end. He is not especially attached to it but still finds it a useful purpose. And it is true that in the midst of my longstanding resistance I nevertheless appreciate what the fact of its coinage reveals. First of all, it is a linguistic shortcut for well-trodden territory—it means that movement artists talk frequently enough about the issues that surround "putting into language" that they would like to save themselves a little time by just talking about "languageing" instead. Secondly, it makes "language" into an active agent, its noon turns into something wielded, or applied, or catalyzing, in order to create the activity of the verb. Language is tool and process, not just result. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, it implies language always comes second, for first there is something to be languageed, to which the languageing process is applied, and that thing is movement, or other embodied experience.

Enter the dance dramaturg into that process, bringing her linguistic affinity, actual or alleged. She is already aware of the potential suspicions around her words—the fear that they might prematurely fix the questions being researched, or reduce the useful indeterminacy of movement. But she may be equally aware that counter to that reductive power of naming also runs a transformative power of framing. She may wish to harness that power. Naming can transform especially if what it named is used then invisible—an unnoticed assumption, an unexamined pattern. The dramaturg—or anyone engaging dramaturgical thinking—may use her words and say, for instance, "This movement always turns to the right. Is that a choice?" or "When there is speech, Performer A always begins. Should we emphasize that?" No answer need be presumed; it could be yes or it could be no; no opinion need be stated, though the dramaturg may also have and share one. But the same way the words "rib cage" simply draw a dancer's attention to that anatomical location, this sort of naming of assumptions draws attention to something that was always there but perhaps not noticed. Deborah Hay, the American choreographer whose long career extends from the Judson Dance Theatre to the present day, once explained that when she began scoring her dances in language, she "learned things about other dimensions of the dance that I did not know were there until I wrote them down."

Of course, naming can still be a horribly blunt instrument. But when activated by metaphor, dialogue, and the play of language, worth gain issuance. In fluid dialogue it is even possible to use words to express one's dissent of language or wish for silence, or make linguistic gestures in the direction of what cannot exactly be spoken. And this kind of thinking about the nuanced use of language crops up for me not just regarding speech in the rehearsal room process but regarding performed language as well. Even though it is convention to make the distinction between rehearsal rooms and performance stages, I often end up with the same line of thought in both locations. In both, words and movement may jostle alongside each other to create the larger range of meaning of "what's going on," to expand or contract experience and understanding.

I have built the first section of this chapter around a meditation on the dramaturg as the friend of words, language, text. Now I would like to complicate that association from two directions:

First, collaborative relationships with dramaturgs may certainly depart from the dramaturg's putative allegiance to the text, but in remaining alive to the work at hand, and entering into the kind of fluid dialogue characterized above, they may travel somewhere where allegiances are less predictable. In work with Ralph, I find this pattern throughout, from our first collaboration to our most recent. For Geography (1999) I began the process assuming that, since Ralph's written proposal and inspirational imagery for the piece were based on Anschuil's Opera, my personal responsibility would be to immerse myself in that narrative and shepherd its translation into dance and poetic text (to be written in order by Tracie Morris, the poet and performer Ralph had invited to collaborate). After the first two weeks of the first workshop, during which Peter and I dutifully carried around dog-eared copies of the play, it was clear that Anschuil's text would never offer anything more than a loose set of imagery, and our task was decidedly not to narrate that story. Instead, through dialogue with Ralph it became clear that the real course of inspiration was to be found in the recursive movement translations I witnessed and helped facilitate daily, as Ralph asked his West African collaborators to perform their versions of his versions of their dancing, or fracture and reassemble familiar movement that flowed with mastery from their bodies according to unformal structural principles derived from his. That mostly wordless story, instead, was the story to which I ended up attending. I may have framed my initial interest in terms of
storytelling, but it ended up being the movement of the rehearsal room, not the text of the Oresteia, that took most of my focus.

Much later with Heat Gun Fo... /foʊ/!, Ralph conceived of a first section ("Sunshine Room") entirely spoken, by himself, sitting solo in a plastic chair in front of a projected film. This was a deliberately, even provocatively, textual gesture. Though there were plenty of film visuals, some of them of dancing inside the rehearsal room, there would be no live dancing, no live bodies save his seated figure. I had first assumed I might have a particular allegiance to this spoken text, if only because I enjoy writing and thinking about words. And I did spend time discussing and editing it in the final stages. However, the monologue was so acutely private to Ralph (narrating the death of his romantic partner, as it also mixed in art-making and philosophy) that my role was limited to a very late editorial dialogue. For instance, I would suggest he omit a sentence when the previous sentence had already done the same job better, or move a pause so that more of a particular section of the film would fall in silence. But my only input into its initial creation was three words, after viewing an early version: "yes, more, please." Instead, the section of the work with which I had a much more active and thorough collaborative role was the twenty-minute passage of wordless, unly, furious movement for six dancers ("Wall-Hole"). This was the product of a much more open, shared process, generated with the cast in workshops in venues across the United States (Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, MANCC, or the Maggie Allese National Center for Choreography, at Florida State University), to which I was witness, sometimes participant, certain interlocutor. More on these discussions follows below.

The second way in which the association of the dramaturgy with the text can and should be desexualized is simply based on the fact that any ironical opposition between words and motion as forms of theatrical expression cannot hold. Arguably it never could, but especially not now, in light of contemporary performance developments. Artists find ways to make words dance, or words speak, and play one mode against the other so that meaning is carried discretely in word or motion but in another sort of dance, the one to be found in their interaction. Increasingly post-Grotowski and post-Bauch, value is placed on performers who can access and find fluid passage between these forms of expression. Generally this is called "interdisciplinary work," implying a relation to the received disciplinary boundaries that assign words to theater and movement to dance (not to mention visual and conceptual work to fine art), but Lehmann makes a good point when he argues against the "interdiscipli- nary" label and pronounces instead the consideration of a new form (but which, by calling it postdramatic, he unfortunately pins more decisively to its theater legacy). In my own New York performance habits: since 2005, the

Under the Radar festival, while still declaring itself "a festival tracking new theater from around the world," has invited myriad performances that are movement based or wordless; since 2007 we have had the Crossing the Line festival, designed to present the work of trans-disciplinary artists transforming and furthering cultural practices on both sides of the Atlantic:2 and in 2007 the venue Dance Theater Workshop renamed itself New York Live Arts—still describing its primary allegiance to "the nation's dance and movement-based artists" but in that choice of name opening up space for a wider range.

To be clear, this is not to posit some utopian interdisciplinary unity. Rather, it is to assert that to the extent there is a tension between the word and body, speech and gesture, the future belongs to all collaborators—choreographers, directors, dramaturgs, and performers—who are curious about that tension and can imagine how to engage, explore, manipulate, or even undermine it. These are artists for whom that tension is fodder, not limit. And that includes any dramaturgy that is attending to the full range of contemporary performance.

So instead of identifying the dramaturgy as someone who thinks about the word over movement, or floating that for the dance dramaturgy to claim movement over word, I want to instead talk about the kinds of dramaturgical thinking that arise when confronted with the relationship between movement and word. For that, in the final portion of this chapter I share some relevant examples from Ralph Lemon's rehearsal rooms, to illuminate what was at stake in those moments, and the evolution of our dramaturgical dialogue about this realm.

In so doing I offer some ways to think about potential relationships between words and movement in performance, using rehearsal room anecdotes to illustrate four modes that feel to me, at this moment, like familiar fields of play. The danger of creating this provisional taxonomy is the same as the danger of language to which I have already referred: it could close off a process, setting myself up to later match a definition rather than discover something new. Thus what follows should be read as partial and descriptive, not complete and prescriptive, in order to better skirt that danger. The four modes that follow are built of not just my text but my subtext, and that subtext is the desire for opportuni- ties to test these classifications, or discover new ones, in future work. As Tom Michell puts it, inside the "innating process ... dogma never prosper, [and] the surprises of improvisation, mistakes, and changing one's mind are the only certainties worth clinging to."7

Words as Evidence
During the work on Geography (1997), Tracie Morris, the spoken-word poet, Ralph invited to collaborate on text, hit a point of frustration. Back on the
first day of the first workshop, in that innocent time when we were still sitting around wearing Hello My Name Is stickers, Tracie had introduced herself as someone who liked to play with both the abstract sound value of words and the valuable stories they could signify, sliding across a full spectrum of use. Particularly, she told us, for this project she was interested in using her writing to evoke stories of African culture as translated across the African diaspora to the United States. In the monolithic first workshop, sheaves of paper regularly arrived in the rehearsal room, some hand-attested when she was in town, others gorged from the office fax machine when she was not. She offered Ralph poems designed to tease out the themes of his chosen Oṃsème in their collision with the themes of an African American man (himself) encountering African men for essentially the first time. But of these many offerings Ralph selected only the most elliptical halting and sound poetry to deliver himself, nothing that came close to narrating the Oṃsème or clearly articulating Transatlantic culture made the cut. He was interested in one end of the spectrum that Tracie had offered, but not so much the other. Thus Tracie wondered out loud, in a production meeting mid-process: what purpose was the text really serving? As she put it, "The dancers’ spontaneous vocal expressions—when they yell to encourage each other, or when they make rhythms vocally—are grounding this piece in a way [my text] is not." I wanted to help her, but at that point all I could do was agree—yes, the actual, everyday utterances of our dancers were more compelling.

Tracie even made a valiant attempt to write a blues song for the African cast to sing, hoping to create a bit of expression that would bond, culturally speaking, somewhere mid-Atlantic. (Perhaps the transcription of this location, when understood in the context of the Middle Passage, should have given us pause.) It was not easy to find English lyrics for the West African cast that would be intelligible when sung to an American audience. As Tracie went through many drafts, we also rehearsed the cast’s delivery. In the midst of these explorations, I entered the auditorium one day to find, framed perfectly in the prosenium, all seven African men sitting assembled around the feet o’ a white speech instructor. The instructor simply intended, as was his job, to coach better stage pronunciation, but in that one snapshot he looked like nothing so much as a colonial schoolmaster. In an instant it was obvious to me that this particular tack was not working, and I shared my feelings freely with Ralph, Tracie, and Peter. They responded with concern, though Tracie asked for more time to try and make it work. She tried for a week or two more before relinquishing the idea of writing a song for the cast with decelerable English lyrics. These men from Francophone West Africa were not the right performers to narrate a description of Ralph’s cultural position, his particular late twentieth-century “blues,” no matter how much the American collaborators might want that position to be conveyed to an American audience. It was neither their story to tell nor their language to speak.

As I was also discovering quickly, the real course of inspiration for the work was growing within the daily negotiations on sharing and disassembling movement styles in the rehearsal room (as I describe in more detail in chapter 9). Our rehearsal room language was animated, our processes charged, our performances alive. Our language often mantled the outside world, the inside world. That language alternated intense passages of dancing to live drumming with long discussions of what had just happened (or not happened), proceeded in response to Ralph’s prompts and challenges, but without his continued input (as it occurred in an African French far beyond his ken), I jumped headlong into the fray as a second-string movement interpreter—my French was not as good as the hired company interpreter, but I more easily understood Ralph’s dancerly language, both in terms of body-mechanics and metaphor. There was no single person in the room, however, who understood all the words spoken there, all the time. That was the work’s chaos, and joy.

Meanwhile Ralph and my conversations in the interstitial spaces between rehearsals circled around the idea that the rehearsal room activity I have just described, with its inevitable and myriad failures of translation, would always be the most interesting thing created. Agreeing that the Geography process would always exceed the stage product, we searched for more ways to fold the former into the latter. We did not yet know each other very well, but I made a decision to be “noisy” in my interaction with him (as he later put it, affectionately)? I batted him with long strings of prepositions for how this could be done. What if we had one dancer teach another movement onstage? What if he and Djètè did the same choreography simply but differently, side by side? Most of my suggestions were not fruitful in our emerging context. But I nevertheless had faith that they, like projectiles lobbed wildly-nilly at a moving target, might dislodge some new ideas even if they did not hit the target directly.

After relinquishing the idea that I, as dramaturg, was in the rehearsal room to support the intelligibility of the Oṃsème, I had to find the right spoken text to the piece. Why was it there? Ralph had chosen a project that was interesting enough in its wordless incarnation; why was he also so sure that these dancers should speak? Was it just because the Yale Repertory Theater was footing the bill, and he felt obligated to engage with their theater traditions? Or was there something else about the tricky power dynamics of intercultural collaboration between relatively monied Western arts establishments and less monied international artists (as played out increasingly in the 1990s and 2000s) that made it important to hear
the African dancers speak, as a literal way of assuring they were not denied a figurative voice in the making? Would I watch these dancers moving balletically and assured, at least until Ralph purposefully destabilized them differently if I could also hear them speak? If so, what was that difference? How much did it also matter if I could actually understand the words they spoke? Was it more appropriate to hear them speak in French and African tongues, fully within their own competencies, even if that risked mystifying or romanticizing them for an American audience? Or was it more important to hear them speak their limited English, insofar as that might better communicate some referential content to the majority of our audience? What’s more, might that second option also be understood as an honest manifestation of the awkward position they had all agreed to take on, by fleeing to the United States and working here for our audience? I knew that I believed, in general, post-Bauhaus and on the heels of my own practical experience with ERS, in the possibilities offered by bodies both moving and speaking on stage. Now I had to put that general affinity of mine to the test, wondering what it meant, or could mean, in this particular context. I posed the questions above to Ralph, "toingly," over countless cups of tea and in countless e-mails. But I also had faith that the answers, to count, would not spring fully formed out of those conversations. They could only be found in the bodies and voices of our cast.

Meanwhile, Tracie continued to work through the role of the words in the rehearsal room and the piece. She created a sound poem using the interventions she had overheard in the cast’s everyday deliberations—a collection of short words and exclamations from French, English, and several African tongues. The text was deployed so as to focus on its musical sound value, and in rehearsal it was orchestrated in detail. Already this was a move toward putting the language of the rehearsal room onstage, but Ralph found it too carefully composed. After a week of trying, this scripted poem disappeared. In its place Tracie provided the cast with a divisive subject—in a nod to the Oceanic, she chose capital punishment—and created the conditions and a structure within which the cast would enter into an argument on stage. It would be minimally orchestrated but retain the rhythms of their daily conversation. It was dubbed “Fire Talk,” as it began with the cast rolling out chairs built by visual artist/set designer Nari Ward from repurposed automobile tires. They sat in a closed circle center stage and deliberated. Ralph was included in the group, though just as in the rehearsal room, he had a hard time keeping up. Tracie, Peter, and I sat outside the scene and helped to score it, as Ralph had no access to the audience’s point of view. The episode began with a verbal explosion from Angola and was modulated internally by subtle physical cues from Nai, but within the set frame we asked the performers to conduct themselves freely, as they might in their everyday rehearsal room deliberations.

The chosen topic did alter the stakes in comparison to those deliberations, but in which direction was unclear. It raised the stakes insofar as political stakes toward human life, not a few tricky dance steps, were at issue. It lowered them insofar as the cast discussed a hypothetical scenario instead of their actual dancing. But either way, the topic of the discussion was never easily apparent to an audience—visually, that was part the point. The language was not deployed for the audience in terms of what it directly, as words, signified—it was deployed as evidence of something else.

In the final performance version of the piece, several of Tracie’s more abstract sound poems remained, delivered primarily by Ralph and Carol (the one other American dancer/performance artist). There were also two sections in which the African cast, led by Djéblé, sang songs they knew well, with lyrics in several different West African languages. But the “Fire Talk” section felt like the real spoken-word discovery of the piece. Here language made a claim to reveal backstage behavior and a glimpse at the actual conditions of production for the work. In other words, the spoken language onstage resembled (without equaling) the spoken language of the rehearsal room, reaffirmed. Here words were not declaimed and delivered so much as offered up as evidence of the work behind
the performance, even if that authenticity was inevitably a theatrically framed fiction. This gesture was able to both demystify the usually mute dancer’s body (see, they are speaking human like the rest of us, not aliens from Planet Virtuoso) and to reveal the cultural specificity of that body (here through a range of West African languages).

Geography’s conception as an intercultural collaboration made this deployment of words as evidence of the work process and the performers’ cultural specificity particularly important. Accordingly, when Ralph prepared Ten, the next work in the Geography Trilogy, and conceived it as an intercultural collaboration as well, our early conversations built on the assumption that we would begin with this mode of language and push it even further. In Ten the interculturalism was compounded, as Ralph’s collaborators came from not two but six different cultural locations: China, Taiwan, India, Japan, Africa, United States. In e-mails, Ralph declared that he wanted to work on the “basic experiment of talking and dancing and who we are.” I found it very easy, as dramma-turg, to be intrigued by this line of inquiry. Ralph also asked me to take on the function of “Text Arranger” for the piece. My task would be to find text and to help generate spoken material by suggesting improvisations for the performers.

An early workshop in August 1999 contained a battery of text-driven experiments. In my notebook I wrote down one of the rhetorical questions that drove our initial rehearsal tasks: “What if Chinese, French, Japanese, English, and Dance were all equivalent terms?” We devised, and continually readjusted, a series of improvisational games that would require dancers to speak. Ralph also decided to give the act of translation greater emphasis in speech as it had already had, in movement, with Geography. And so our experiments with exploring what was for us a common “backstage” act, language translation, began.

For instance, performers David Thomason and Atsuko Takami read out loud excerpts from e-mails chronicling the actual bureaucratic negotiations that had been required to secure travel visas for performers Wang Eliziang and Li Wen Yi. The e-mails were already written in Chinese-inflected English, revealing one imperfect act of translation. Then Ralph asked Pehoua Zerheyto, sitting on the sidelines, to periodically interrupt David and demand he explain what was going on in French, on the fly. David’s French was passable but certainly not perfect, and the pressure to immediately produce a translation flustered him. This particular exercise did not continue past the first New Haven workshop, but the idea of pressuring David to spontaneously alternate between the two languages did make it to the final stage incarnation. As we went on, we affirmed that “letting the real problem [of rehearsal room translation] become part of what’s investigated” was a priority. My attention was often absorbed in the mechanics of a number of spoken translation game structures, noticing the range of outputs we would get based on an initial rule, and how they would shift if that rule were adjusted. Improvised speech was orderly, and that was part of the point. But exactly how much urdudin had we signed up for? When did we want to tinker with the conditions of the translation game to exercise a measure of soft control? How and how much were we finessing and manipulating this evidence?

Words as a Field for Movement

Ten also deployed spoken word in a different manner, not as evidence of the conditions of the piece’s creation, but as a more composed delivery of information to an audience. Within those spoken words, the dance could then play. I imagined this mode as words generating reverberations that would linger, into which the dancers bodies would then move, glossing and expanding upon the more literal information.

As a result movement did not take place in an allegedly abstract field, aspiring to refer only to itself, as it might in the modernist tradition of a Ballaustine or Cunningham. Instead, movement engaged wordlessly the reverberations left behind by words; it operated within an articulated context but moved freely within that bounded area. Sometimes this mode might also operate in reverse—where movement first established an event, perhaps mysterious, and the language then offered a description of that field of play. There is nothing groundbreaking new about this mode. It has been in play since early Modern dance choreographed to spoken poetry, if not before. It had not always worked so well with Tracie Morris’s poetry in Geography, but I felt sure it was open to new discoveries.

In Ten this mode began with a road not taken. I was not present for Ralph’s first workshop, which was a solo residency at the Miller Theater, his only collaborator being sound designer James Lo. He undertook it just after having returned from his research travels abroad in India, and he used it to process that raw experience and think about how it might become creative fodder. The resulting informal performance made much use of excerpts from Ralph’s journal entries during the trip, alternating and overlapping them with minimalist physical actions. He told matter-of-fact stories about the details of his days visiting temples, responding as a Westermer to aggressive beggars, witnessing the aftermath of copious traffic accidents, shouting on sand dunes, and noting the vaudous sexual habits of his paid guide. Meanwhile he dropped a rock repeatedly at his own feet and performed slow variations on repeated sitting and lying, with bows of the head and washings of the feet—all reminiscient of the physical components of devotional prayer. Text and movement interweave with stark contrast: profane versus sacred.
Ralph asked me to be at the showing and share my reactions. We had already had many discussions about the initial framework for The I knew he was planning to use his travels and collaborations with a series of Asian artists (as-of-yet unknown) both to explore his Buddhist-influenced spirituality and to challenge his assumptions about how and why he continued his work as a performer. But this was the first I saw of anything participatory. The e-mail I sent him after the performance was lengthy. A portion of it went like this:

"I was very inspired and engaged by all the physical rituals you came up with for that concert/showing... My only hesitations would be about the text. You warned me it would be a little too much like a travelogue, and I agree. The way I saw it, you used the India travel experience to let the words drop from your eyes, and see things fresh, but India in its own self-knowledge couldn't get a voice in the piece... there has to be a way, ultimately, to allow elements that aren't entirely mediated by your point of view into the piece, like there was in Geo 1. In the end the whole piece is framed by you, but there have to be more elements that give up that power, however provisionally.

I know you're trying to acknowledge and even embrace the extent to which the piece is about YOUR experience of Asia. I'm trying to think through how you can do that and yet at the same time not make a piece about being a tourist. Maybe the answer is just more time, more time for the narratives to settle, and feel a little deeper than the description... and then this, and then that of a travel journal. I think the intensity with which one observes even the most everyday things in a strange new place might be a bit of a red herring.

A few days later I talked about the showing with a friend of mine, an anthropologist student... She said she thought that contrast [between sacred and profane] didn't really portray India, because in India the contract wouldn't be possible, the whole point is that sacred and profane are intermingled. So for her the attempt to set up the contrast was the most Western-oriented part of all.

I wonder why three issues of cultural interpretation came up for me with the text, but not with the movement. Perhaps with the movement it was much clearer to me that you had been inspired by the India experience but weren't attempting to represent it in a definitive way.

I could not imagine how Ralph's particular journal material, spoken aloud, would construct a field of reverberations in which a larger group of Asian dance artists would find a way to move in and play. But the part of the e-mail above that is most interesting to me now is the final two sentences above. Why did it seem to me that Ralph was attempting and failing to "capture" his experience in India in words, while in movement I was willing to grant that he was expressing an influence without attempting to define it? In other words, why, with the written word, did his inability to get past a limited viewpoint seem like a liability, whereas in movement, did it seem like a confession and exploration of those limitations? An analogous "failure" in both media had, for me, a contrasting effect. The text seemed like a simple failure, failing flat, whereas the movement seemed like an interesting failure, revealing difficulty and dissonance.

After this e-mail Ralph shelved the idea of working with his travel journal on-stage (though he did publish much of it in his book, Text/Rel/Cell/ual/ Balance). Many years later, when I commented on how much I valued the highly personal text he spoke on stage for How Can You... I laughed at me and said I had scared him away from using anything too personal for years, with the dialogue that had been triggered by this one e-mail above. My jaw dropped. Really? I tried to remember our subsequent conversations, of which I can find no written record. Might I clumsily have dismissed all varieties of personal text with a single gesture? Or if not, had I still been heard by Ralph in that way? Such are the vicissitudes of collaborative communication. There is no way to go back in time to clarify an opinion or point toward a road not taken.

In any case the pendulum, at that moment, swung far away from journal material. The text we began working with has been more tone. My task was to research and gather a selection of scientific texts about natural disasters—moons of profound disruption to the earth, the kind of events to which our non-growing and diverse earth, by virtue of being citizens of the unstable earth, could share some relationship. The theme was born in part from the lived experiences—Manosaranaj Pradhan and Rajya Barbek had recently been fortunate enough to survive a cyclone in Orissa in which more than two thousand people died. Chong-Chiieh Yu had recently been fortunate enough to survive an earthquake in Taiwan in which more than two thousand died. And Aasko Takami had lived through a massive Japanese earthquake as a four-year-old child preserving the experience in a child's vivid memory fragments. A piece of Ralph's inspirational imagery also fed into the theme of natural disasters. The Tree of his title was a plant representing the cosmos, with roots in the underworld, trunk in the known world, and branches in the heavens—in early anchor for the intended spiritual focus of the piece. Gradually we began to see the inter-relationship of those three levels implicated in all natural disturbances. As Ralph wrote in his journal: "Cyclone = sky comes down to earth. Earthquake = underworld opens up to ground level." Thus a disruption of the usual physical order of heavens and earth might imply disruption on a spiritual order as well.
I looked for scientific texts that both described an earth event of some magnitude and might do so in a way that reverberated, creating a fertile field for the performers to move through. All the texts I brought in laid bare a basic condition for human existence: that we are granted the ability to live on this earth only as long as massive potential energies, operating on a scale way beyond our usual experience, remain dormant. We heard many such texts spoken aloud, watched them in juxtaposition with many different movement passages, and continued to work with any combination that seemed greater than the sum of its parts. I certainly had some idea of what might work as I porred over scientific books and gathered a selection—anything that hinted, with a bit of tension in the midst of its scientific tone, at the mysterious tremor or the fact of having a body—but we had no magic formula for discerning in advance when that reverberation would occur. We had only the art of trying, and noticing, and naming what seemed to resonate.

In the final stage incarnation of the work, we ended up with performance moments such as Cheng-Chieh Yu describing plane mechanics during an earthquake. Cheng-Chieh Yu delivered this directly to the audience, near the end of the performance, soon after Nari Ward's set wall had fallen and landed at a dangerous-looking angle, hovering sailant over the stage floor. Meanwhile the entire cast assembled in a simple line, facing the audience, all smoking cigarettes and matter-of-factly presenting their differences for inspection. As Cheng-Chieh launched into her text, Asako Takami, standing stage rightmost, fell against her neighbor David Thomson, who then fell against Mr. Wang, and so on down the line—a small impetus of physical force continuing like a wave through the collective. Their modest body experiment with cause and effect echoed the much larger cause-and-effect relationships in Cheng-Chieh's bookshelves, but added something more—a sense of moody, temporary community in the midst of relentless force.

Another moment in this mode: David Thomson's delivery of the "Modified Mercalli Earthquake Intensity Scale." This was a list that attempted to take the usual effects of disruption to the earth's crust and neatly categorize them in twelve marvellable categories. The cool scientific tone contrasted alarmingly with the nature of what was described, in its progression between levels "One: Not felt except by very few under especially favorable circumstances"; "Two: Felt by nearly everyone. Sleepers awakened, liquids disturbed, some spilt"; "Nine: General panic. Weak masonry destroyed, ordinary masonry heavily damaged. Buildings shifted off of foundations"; and finally "Twelve: Damage total. Waves seen on ground surface. Lakes of sight and level distorted. Objects thrown into the air." This text reverberated both forward and in reverse, coming as it did soon after a disorienting "force duet" for David and Ralph.

**Figure 3.** The five left to right: Asako Takami, David Thomson, Wang Liliang, Bijaya Barik, Li Wen Yi, Caoek Funm, Wu Hui, Munsugag Poslan, Ralph Lemon, Cheng Chieh Yu, Yoko Ida候选者. © 2013 Charles Erickson.

Moments before, David had held a microphone while Ralph repeatedly and vigorously contacted him and threw him off balance. Ralph pulled, pushed, swang, and dragged him as they tumbled across the floor, mic cord tangling and flailing. David's subsequent delivery of his text spokey out-of-breath into that same microphone, resonated as both a recovery from the previous turmoil and an evocation of it. Then as his text established its tale of mounting forces, Bijaya, Mr. Wang, Mr. Li, and Marco entered to drop palm-sized rocks at their own feet, always pulling away at that last minute, flinging with a small taste of that large destruction.

Ten years later: the text for How Can You...? offered me a very different means to think about this mode of language use. Ralph's aforementioned "Sunshine Room" monologue begins each night's performance. He delivered a highly personal lecture directly to the audience, as he sat in front of moving images that ranged, in their relation to his words, from illustrative to associative to mysterious. As mentioned before, I had little to do with the creation of this spoken text. Early on, the most input I gave was to affirm that I found three
words—which recounted, among other things, the illing and death of Ralph’s partner, Tree-collaborator Asako Takami, and his subsequent attempts to create an invisible, furious, flailing dance with the reconvened cast of Patton—quite moving. Late in the process I helped edit it, gently.

I did, however, have a lot to do with the creation of that allegedly invisible dance. In numerous workshops across the United States, the cast, Ralph, and I gathered to experiment with the devising of a structured improvisational dance that might “disappear,” possessing “no form and no style.” We would not start from scratch; the point of departure was a three-minute improvisation titled “Exstasy” that had concluded the previous work, Patton. Ralph’s idea was that this three-minute flight of nonstop unruly movement, already exhausting at that length, would now expand to an impossible twenty minutes. He titled it “Wall/Hole,” as a nod to a Buddhist perspective of walls as illusion. In brief intensive work periods spaced over a longer stretch of time, we worked to develop a physical language of improvisational “fury.” We shaped it in discussion, with scores and keywords, with instructions and assignments. But the heart of the work occurred mutely, in sustained passages of high-velocity physical exploration, never the same twice. Ralph encouraged me to join many silent improvisations, which I did gladly, intuiting that there would be no good way for me to help develop this material from the remove of an outsider observer. In the final performance version, which was moderately shaped but never pinned down, our audience was invited to consider a silent stretch of slippery motion that purposefully frustrated any attempt to coherently view or interpret its Ralph thus hoped, impossibly, that the dance would go so far as to become “invisible.” I go into more detail about how this movement section was built to evade clear perception in chapter 3 on audience. For the moment suffice it to say that the “Wall/Hole” section offered a sometimes-frustrating, but often-captivating invitation to get lost within a whirl of constant mute motion.

Yet this mute movement passage was also preceded by a long stretch of Ralph’s words, unaccompanied by movement. After trying out so many different ways, since the start of the Geography Trilogy, to interweave spoken word and movement, Ralph starkly resegregated them and mystifyingly began what was marketed to audiences as a dance piece with his twenty-minute “film talk.” Ralph spoke elliptically, poetically, yet unmistakably about love and harrowing loss. He talked about his dancers and the dynamics of the rehearsal room; he exposed some of that room in footage on the screen behind him. He also shared video of his collaboration with a ninety-eight-year-old man, former sharecropper Walter Carter, whose imminent departure from the mortal world was made poignantly concrete by his donning a low-budget astronaut costume and dambiring into a homemade spaceship.
The furious, unceasing movement of the "Wall/Hole" section may have occurred on an empty stage, with no set and minimalist lighting, but it by no means occurred in an abstract field. It occurred within the reverberations still lingering from Ralph's words. The dancers were moving furiously as their particularized selves, hurling themselves up against their mortality: both private and shared, as mortally always is. They were also moving furiously as surrogates for Ralph, in his achingly love and deferred mourning. And for Anasko and Walter, in their trip to the beyond. Ralph's words at the outset did not name this, or plan it, but the reverberations from those words did prepare a field that would allow us to sense it.

Next time I work with text and movement on stage, with Ralph or anyone else, this starkly segregated relation between them will be on my mind. Perhaps it will even offer a model from which I want to depart. Not to repeat it--in particular content will never repeat. Rather to test it, to see if it has another variation, to see if I have, in fact, learned anything.

Words Moving and Dancing

The text for Geography and Tri was more direct, and serious, than not. Tracie Morris's poetry in general could be quite playful, rife on multiple meanings and words that poppex between sound and signification. But the text she wrote for Geography, combined with the way it was delivered on stage, rendered her work less playful than her usual output. Tri found a measure of play in the translation games improvised on stage every night, but the scientific texts we chose to convey natural disasters were, as one might expect, earnest and grave. Within this manner of delivery we wanted things to be, more or less, what we said they were.

That mode of language shifted with Pattn. After venturing abroad with the first two sections of the Trilogy, Ralph had set this third piece up as a return home. He planned to approach the United States with eyes made strange by years of travel. What's more, he planned to take on the American South, where he had never lived but where his mother and paternal grandparents had grown up, and which he dubbed the "Ground Zero of black American history."13 Pattn was, among other things, an opportunity to wrestle with America's checkered racial history and his own place within it.

It had been safer to consider issues of race in the first two parts of the Trilogy, where they were upstaged by starker differences of nationality, culture and language. Now he was up to consider race in an American context--a subject significantly more fraught, personally and professionally. He might even have to tell some stories about himself--an idea to which he was allergic. It had been easy enough to consider personal journal entries about travel in a riverside land as text, but addressing his own upbringing, and the fact of being African American, without falling into embarrassing self-exposure or cliché, seemed daunting.

In an early e-mail to me, at the outset of the research process, Ralph asserted a positive spin on these anxieties, explaining, "I'm very excited about part three. If only because my ambivalence MUST become a house, acknowledged and offered as an interesting place to visit."14 I recognized this statement as a keeper, one of those early assertions I should remember, vow to support, and remind him of at key moments later on. Which I did. Ralph's ambivalences towards his subject matter needed to be the point of, rather than the obstacle to, his work. We--the collaborators, the eventual audience--should all visit that house, together.

At a 2002 residency showing at the Walker Art Center, Ralph took a step away from literal self-exposure when he had performer David Thorson begin the evening by walking up to a microphone and saying, "Hi, I'm Ralph Lemon." David then explained the nature of the residency, what we had achieved--all accurate information except for his identity. It did not seem a coincidence that during this same showing Ralph told a personal autobiographical story for the first time, a story about growing up as a teenage boy in mostly white Minnesota and running away from a white bully at a school dance. The David-as-Ralph falsehood released Ralph from his literal identity, and paradoxically freed him up to try out autobiographical material for the first time.

We ran one of those ubiquitous Q&A sessions at the end of this performance. Ralph took the opportunity to confess his true identity. He then called on a college-aged woman in the front row who identified herself as a literature major. She told him that his approach reminded her of the literary technique of the "unreliable narrator." By the next rehearsal that term had become a touchstone--the only time in my memory that a post-show Q&A has had such an impact on a work's development. From that moment on, it was woven through our conversations on how the storytelling in Patten might operate.

Ralph asserted we were no longer going to be so "direct and honest" with the audience. Instead we'd work with a slippery mix of truth and fiction, playing with the audience's perception of what might, and might not, be based on truth. He had already been traveling through the American South, tracking old blues singers and Civil Rights protests, components of a heightened and fraught southern history. He later noted of those trips, "once you start negotiating something as elusive as history and memory, it becomes slippery--and it becomes what the art process always is for me--part fake, unreliable."15 Now instead of trying to "correct for" the unreliability of the art-making process, we would try and emphasize it.
I thought of the advert of this mode as a moment when movement and dancing entered into our use of language, instead of just operating alongside it. Linguistic meaning was freed to jump and leap instead of attaching so tightly to the truth of "what happened" or "what we want to express." The tool of the unreliable narrator also implied that the particular manner in which one danced away from the literal truth could, in itself, be a source of interest. The release from the imperative to describe exactly "what happened" opened up a whole field of playful possibility. The lies that wove through a narrative could themselves be evocative. Of course, to the extent that they were evocative, they could open up the work to other registers of "truth."

Soon after, three performers—David Thompson, Okwui Okpokwasili, and James Hassnhah—worked to build up a portfolio of unreliable storytelling. Ralph asked them to think about either the first time they were called "nigger" or the first time they had a heightened awareness of being black, and to tell a story about it—but he did not actually have to be true. He clarified, "Tell us this story about this thing that happened to you, but maybe it didn't happen to you, and that's OK. But I still want to believe it happened to you too." He then requested they add particular enhancements to their stories—for instance, they had to include a reference to classical music and a drum, or they had to include a reference to the South. And once the three narratives were under development, a chosen element of each one—something as incidental as a name, or an object—would somehow have to be inserted into the other two. These processes of unreliable alteration we dubbed "infesting." From these instructions the performers found a liberating sense of play—and this within a confessional monologue, a form allegedly dependent on staccato.

My major task at this time became working with Okwui Okpokwasili on the construction and delivery of her story, the only one that made it to the final stage performance. We would duck away together to another room while Ralph used the main rehearsal room for movement, joining the group hours later to show-and-tell the results. Some measure of her tale was true, but we added many more new details to "infest" it—she gave herself an "Aunt Tempe" to match a character in another story Ralph would narrate, she included references to both African drumming and Verdii's Othello (anticipating the latter's use as sound score, stay on), she put a quote by James Baldwin in one character's mouth. To preserve the fluidity of the way these elements had been added, I suggested that the text should never be set. Instead, Okwui would just memorize the points she had to hit, and the order in which she would hit them, but use different language each time. At this time, in that circumstance, I felt my dramaturgical job was to protect Okwui as a performer, to make sure she had the space to be spontaneous in the moment storytelling, while at the same
time defining the structural skeleton that would best allow her the safety to roam. The story, despite its serious premise, was told funny. We worked hard to keep it that way. It was set in a racially mixed elementary school classroom in 1970s Bronze, as young Okwui was under the care of a white art instructor who liked to play the janitor as the students worked on their art projects. Young Okwui makes the mistake of saying out loud that all this drumming gives her a headache, and that in fact what she's really like to hear is an aria from Verdi. A white classmate named Lily jumps on the unprompted incoherency, trying to put Okwui back in her place: "yeah whatever, nigger." Young Okwui threatens to slap her if she says that word again. Lily does, and Okwui slaps, adding, "you're the nigger." The interaction devolves into a rhythmic back and forth that goes on just a little too long: "nigger / Slap, you're the nigger / Nigger / Slap, you're the nigger," and on and on. Finally Okwui's teacher stops playing the drum (arguably Okwui's goal all along) and comes over to her charges. When young Okwui explains that Lily has been calling her a nigger, the teacher is appropriately outraged. But when Lily counters that Okwui has also been calling her a nigger, the teacher turns, looks confused, and then offers, "Well, Okwui, Lily can't be a nigger." The last sentence landed as if it were a punch line, given all the laughter that Okwui's telling had generated so far, but then immediately cut against the humor as the teacher's misguided pedagogical impulse sunk in. It was always interesting to listen to the audience's reaction live, and hear the laughter stop short, to listen to who was caught off guard versus who saw it coming. (Further consideration of the language used in this story, and poignantly not used, arises in chapter 5.)

In the opening pages of this chapter I mentioned how the dance dramaturg, as a collaborator perceived (accurately or not) to maintain a particular allegiance with language, might be seen as a threat to movement-based performance. Might she limit the wordless expression of dance by fixing meaning in language? Might she name things too soon, thus prematurely narrowing the range of potential meaning and encouraging etching text that would do the same? The use of language that we discovered in the Future rehearsal rooms countered this fear. This was, for me at least, one of the largest discoveries of this working process. The fear of the reductive, labeling power of language has not caught up to the last centry of fiction writing, which has embraced the limits of linguistic meaning into its field of play, with techniques including the unreliable narrator. The realization that language has the playful power to redirect and misdirect is freeing. When we explore language as material that can dance in how it signifies, or move in its import, it becomes much less a threat to the way dance and movement make meaning. The impulses of a choreographer suddenly have
relevance in words as well. This is not the same as saying that words in dance performance should be abstract, referring only to their own sound value. Rather, I'm speaking of allowing a spirit of play into how words mean what they mean, and thinking of that play as dance.

Words Creating a Negative Space

During Futton, disagreements between Ralph and me were more uncomfortable than they had been before. They were, in retrospect, probably still more constructive disagreements, but in the moment they just felt disagreeable. The stakes of this piece were higher. In this third part of the Triptych, Ralph was turning back to reflect on his own culture after going outwards at Africa and Asia and dealing with the American South as that "ground zero" for the African American experience. The nature of his research material, preoccupied in part with the grave history of racial violence against black Americans, made me feel that it was more important than ever that his research be "legible" to an audience, that our viewers understand what he was grappling with. As a result I grabbed onto that "advocate for the audience" aspect of my role a little more firmly than I had before. At the same time, here I was as his white dramaturg, whose ruddy cheeks threatened that she might not really, fundamentally, understand. Exactly what audience was I standing in for, anyway?

We bustled heads over the larger context for a particularly evocative and sobering flight of choreography. We both loved it—no disagreement here. "Mississippi/Duluth" was a collection of relatively simple gestures and actions for a cast of five—Dje DJè Djè Gervais, Okwui Okpokwasili, David Thomson, Darrell Jones, Cool Mason—arrived in a simple line across the stage, their medium-to-dark-skinned bodies in colorful clothes against a stark white background. The dancers' actions were similar without being the same. Something uncanny, hard to place, was going on in how they created visual "rhymes" without creating union, how they seemed to be sharing something sobering over a distance, while remaining in isolation. They moved without words, without music, with only the sound of their bodies as they occasionally slapped a leg, or fell to the ground, or whirled, or hyperventilated for a few seconds.

They were, in fact, all responding to common keywords that Ralph had assigned them, each in his or her own way. And the keywords referenced ghastly events. Ralph had derived them from his research at sites of historical lynching, most in Mississippi but one in his home state of Minnesota, in far northern Duluth. For example, the slaying of civil rights leader Medgar Evers was translated into the four keywords "open car door" (referring to the fact that Evers had just exited his car when he was shot), "shot," "crawl," and "frozen in time" (referring to the decision of Evers's widow to preserve their home exactly as it was on the day he was shot). Some of the other keywords were "whistle" (Emmet Till's alleged action that triggered his lynching) and "lie on ground" (from Ralph's own ritual at the site of the Duluth lynching, imitating one of the three bodies in a horrific souvenir photo of the event). Ralph asked that the performers respond to these words in a cool and task-oriented fashion as possible, without showcasing an emotional reaction to the material. As Okwui put it, "we focused all that is to just do these things, instead of creating a movement vocabulary that was redolent with weeping."

The resulting flight of movement was, to my eyes, deeply moving. I watched these dancers' bodies set through their paces, making connections with past atrocious events, conjuring the image of a community of people, each made to feel isolated in the midst of the group, responding to the same situations but somehow prevented from banding together. And yet the sounds they made—the falls, the hyperventilations, the slaps—created a music that allowed them to synchronize actions. After watching a while one realized that they did connect, albeit across a distance.

At the same time, I was very conscious that my knowledge of the source of these movements, these keywords and their referents, was feeding the way I read the choreography. There was no one in the room innocent of these associations.
More of us had joined Ralph on the day he made his pilgrimage to Duluth and performed the source ritual there. I tried to imagine, improbably, how this movement would be seen by someone without the layers of information I had. Yes, there was something haunting captured in movement alone. But how far would that carry? Ralph had told us all that he did not want his lynching research to be translated into just a "compelling little movement study," that it needed, ultimately, to be something more than that. So was it not my job to hold him to that standard? Was "Mississippi/Duluth" in danger of being read that way, if its source material was not made more evident?

I argued strenuously that we had to let our audience in a little more on the context for this movement, else it be misconstrued as abstraction. I felt that we, in the room, were currently the ideal audience for "Mississippi/Duluth," with all that we knew, and we had to generously provide so that other audiences could also find their way in a little more, somehow. Ralph, while appreciating my argument, rejected all my fledgling proposals for how this might be achieved as too blatant and reductive. I did understand his reluctance—he was worried about cliché and worried that the big word "Lynching," once uttered, would cut off access to the specificity of the atrocities he was looking at, or the specificity of his response. He did not want to cheapen a specific instance of atrocity by using it as a metaphor for a whole past of racial injustice. And he was afraid the "L-word" had become the sort of buzzword that no audience member could get beyond. Nevertheless, that was the word for the pattern of past behavior he had chosen to research over the past several years of his life.

Into this tense stand-off, thankfully, entered a piece of earlier inspiration. I recalled the concept of the countermemorial, a term that Ralph had used to describe much of his early research, when he was creating private, solo rituals at sites of historic violence across the South. The idea of a countermemorial was borrowed from a German movement in contemporary art, in which anti-monuments, conceptual and ephemeral, mark a process of memory but do not try to substitute something solid and knowable for the absences of the past. In Germany they appeared primarily as Holocaust countermonuments (Gedenkstätten). Ralph had visited one when in Germany for a Berlin workshop—Horst Hoebel's negative-space fountain in the town of Kassel. The original fountain was a Gothic spire built by a Jewish businessman in 1908, and in 1933 the Nazis dismantled and destroyed it, three years before they also destroyed Kassel's entire Jewish population. Hoebel built a hollow concrete form of the original and sunk it, spire first, into the ground on the original site. What is there now is essentially a hole in the ground with running water, which instead of falling delicately over Gothic spires rushes into the negative space below. Only the sound of the water indicates that there is something of importance underneath, and the viewer standing above, atop the grill and glass that cover the hole, becomes the "true monument" and site of remembrance. As art historian James Young has helped clarify, whereas traditional memorials may actually trigger forgetting, as the viewer displaces a responsibility to remember onto an inanimate monument, a countermonument is crafted to trigger thought. Its incompleteness makes the viewer confront absence and complete a memorial process by wondering "what is missing here?" The project of memory is thrust upon the viewer, who finds the active memorial within his or her own mind.

What if that word "lynching" were just another traditional monument, a monument of language, which by standing in for unspeakable acts made it too easy to think one had understood and digested them? Was Ralph's resistance to using that word on stage—even though it did crucially describe his subject—part and parcel of his countermonument impulse? This thought seemed right. Now he and I had a dialogue again, instead of a stand-off.

I characterized our problem: if we edited out all reference to the word or concept of lynching, we risked creating a countermonument that worked only for us. With Hoebel's negative-form fountain, it was still important that the absence be a conspicuous absence—a hole in the ground, noticeable, that would serve as the trigger to contemplation. Likewise, we did not have to use the word "lynching"—yes, I understood how its use could flatten and resolve the confrontation with history and memory. But we did need to feel the space where the word would go.

From here it started getting easier to know how to proceed. We never put the word "lynching" into the show, but its absence was made more conspicuous, the outlines of its negative space were felt. Okwui told a story transcribed from Ralph's then-ninety-four-year-old collaborator, Walter Gatterer. Walter had offered Ralph, at the latter's prompting, the story of the one man he knew who had been lynched, for sleeping with a white woman. But in the midst of the transcription, when Okwui came to Walter's sentence "they hung him from an old plum tree," she left a silent pause instead. Likewise, near the end of the show, when Ralph narrated a video of his countermonumental actions at the lynching site in Duluth, the most he said was that it was where "something bad had happened." Meanwhile the video showed him leaning against, then laying down at the base of a single traffic pole. The listeners had to confront the gaps and complete the missing information themselves.

In the final stage incarnation of Patanjali, the Mississippi/Duluth choreography occurred twice. Once was at the near-beginning, establishing the cast and a tone for the piece. But besides the slight initiation that the cast was dealing, simultaneously but separately, with unspecified noise and danger, this viewing did not reveal much below its surface. Yet we would let the audience see this
choreography once again. When "Mississippi/Duluth" came back around for the second time, even if its exact references had never been spoken, their outer boundaries had been well traced. We had used words to circumscribe the subject of "Mississippi/Duluth," and let the movement do all the talking within that space.

The recognition of this mode of language use—very similar to the second mode, in that movement operates within a field established by language, except now the field was defined indirectly and negatively—felt like a gift to me. I would recognize it again in How Can I Be . . . ?, though more offhandedly than on. Ralph's spoken film talk did leave plenty of lacunae for the unsuspecting, but the place where I felt this mode most acutely was in the rehearsal room use of language.

Before the cast could throw themselves into the twenty minutes of furious movement that constituted the "Wall/Hole" section, they needed to discuss what they were doing. This kind of experiment admitted no marking or breaking down. The only way to rehearse it was to dive in, full throttle. Yet it was difficult to measure anything that could be called progress. What would make doing it a second or a third time more valuable than doing it only once? Ralph and I could share with them some very basic notes about the shape of the external view, stating, for instance, that it seemed more promising in a particular section when everyone was within close proximity. But the most important arbiters of how things were going, and of whether we were experiencing something that might, perhaps, be called progress, were the cast's own reports of their internal states in the midst of this fury. Thus we all talked a lot, a LOT, in the spaces between each attempt. And we devised, used, discarded, and reused endless keywords as tools.

One of my dramaturgical tools for this piece was to be the compiler and keeper of the score. I interviewed each dancer about his or her passage through the improvisation, noting the formal constraints and cues it was structured insofar as each performer had several "appointments" he or she had to make with another performer during the course of the twenty minutes and eliciting from them the keywords they were using to bring their attention and energy to the desired state. Sometimes these were keywords that had already been assigned to them in rehearsal (e.g., "empty the tank"); "spine and pelvis fury"); "chemical body"); "rescuing"). Sometimes they had been privately generated, and the performers were sharing with me their until-then-secret discoveries (Obwuiw confided how in one section, when she stretched her long arms wide, she always thought of them as reaching from the beginning to the end of an entire lifetime. I married all these interviews into one document, tracking what each performer was doing, and on what they were concentrating, at what time. But

Figure 8. How Can I Be . . . ? workshop residency. From left to right: Omagbemi Onagbemi, David Thomson, Ralph Lemon, Gisela Munoz, Darrell Jones, D. J. Edje Emefionu, Obwuiw Obiwowo. (MAMC / Courtesy of Ralph Lemon)

my task was impossible, for the score could never be finished. It was never complete for more than a day after the last version had been written. A keyword that had been valuable inspiration one day was tossed aside the next, spent, as the work of this section continually slipped outside any attempts to set it in words. And I marveled at the negative-space use of language once again. It was not that we did not need words—we needed them badly. We needed to talk, to process, to decide what this unready experiment was, in order to spur it to slip outside of our discussions again and again. With no language at all, there would have been no notion of escaping language. That was the motor of it.

Coda: Narrative

I cannot conclude a chapter on the potential roles of language in movement-based performance without touching upon a distinct but associated term: "narrative." When we talk about narrative we first think of stories told through language, but of course that does not have to be the case; narratives can be wordless as well. There is something about even wordless narrative, however, that has a whiff of language. It implies that a process of translation either from or to words is possible. Either it has already occurred silent enactment of a
familiar narrative we previously learned through words) or it is waiting to happen (once we assign words to what we are seeing, we have expressed or marked our narrative perceptions of events).

The process of making dances involves framing movement for perception in sequence and over time, and as a dramaturg I repeatedly find myself wondering about how something resembling narrative arises from perception in sequence and over time. I am in sympathy with William Forsey’s observation that even performance conventionally considered nonnarrative has a “narrative quality” insofar as the viewer perceives “alignments” over space and time and can “watch the emergence of patterns and relationships.” That is the basic thinking I wish to expand here. Forsey seems to be arguing for what I shall call a “soft narrative understanding” — nothing quite so distinct or representational as the tale of a three-act story ballet, but nonetheless a form of understanding that is bound up in what Manfred Jahn calls “the storied nature of perception.” I would like to argue for the reimagining of “narrative” to apply much more broadly to how a viewer perceives movement that unfolds and emerges through time, as well as all performance inevitably does. Time-based arts, insofar as they sequence events, engage narrative understanding. Sometimes they neatly satisfy it, sometimes they complicate or frustrate it, but in being temporal they are never able to entirely disguise it, so they are always in relation to it. And if that is true, this “soft narrative understanding” deserves full consideration, both by those who would make dances and those who would view, think, and write about them.

Dance makers have spent many important years claiming the territory of text and analysis as their own — this was, in the wake of the last century, arguably crucial to Western concert dance’s finding itself as an autonomous art form. Indeed, it was a distancing from the particular narrative goals of theater and opera that allowed Western concert dance to come into its own. Cunningham and Cage led dance away from a preoccupation with psychology and dramatic arc and thereby opened up a broad new vista. Thus the implication that narrative could still be relevant to the perception of contemporary movement performance might seem like a threat to the hard-won innovations of the field. But now there might also be a residual blindness to how, in simply creating work that extends actions through time, dance makers enter into a realm open to narrative understanding perhaps encouraging it, perhaps frustrating it, but unable to delete it entirely, so engaging it in some fashion.

Peggy Phelan writes about a “deep resistance to narrative common to some of the most significant performances ever made” and places the present-tense nature of performance in tension with the proposition of narrative: “Performance exists in the arc of its enactment; while sometimes this arc is structured as a narrative, the ontological quality of performance rests on its ephemeral nature.” For Phelan, the ephemeral, hyper-present moment of much contemporary performance is precisely what makes it resistant to story; a performance renounces narrative insofar as any given performance moment renounces its connection to a before and an after and lives only in the disappearing “now,” what Gestalt theorist Gestalt called the “continuous present.”

To be clear, I do not suggest the perception of movement narratively relies on a reading of movements as a code. This would align it with the understanding of dance in late Renaissance geometrical ballets, described by Mark Franko and others, where single poses or configurations of multiple bodies stood in for written characters or words. In this historical manifestation of dance as text, the dancer’s body operated as a sign through the careful display of an interpretable pose. Thus paradoxically it took on the most meaning in moments of halt, in temporary suspensions of the dance. Accordingly, the pieces of text that these poses signified were either static characters (an alphabet used to spell out the monarch’s name) or near phrases such as “Powerful Love,” “Happy Fate,” and “Crown of Glory” — all appropriately unchanging in their framing tribute to the king’s power. What was missing in the moment of decoding was not just the movement of the dancer’s body, but the movement potential of words: there were no verbs, no expressions of action and change. The type of text did not evoke a full range of narrative options, since it was itself static, operating as a list. If this particular reading of dancing created a narrative, it was a simple narrative of the subjects’ inexhaustible forays into the display of devotion, since its central subject was poised as unchanging. In his writing about geometrical ballets, Franko calls our attention to the unstable moments between those interpretable poses, what he calls the “flight from the figure,” and in which he finds a “textless body” engaging in an autonomous, proto-modernist dance that refers only to itself. Yet I would like to examine the contemporary off-spring of those moments of flight — the moments that seem at first glance to escape all textual equivalence — for hints of narrative.

Franko clarifies that the “textless body” suggests “an independence from verbal, Aristotelian theater whose model is the rhetorical one of verbal and phonetic communication and whose goal is the imitation of human action in a progressive and linear sense, and the psychological consistency of character that imitation also implies.” This sounds like nothing so much as the post-dramatic theater described by Lehmann and the theater after the “death of character” described by Pfitz; in other words, the world of contemporary interdisciplinary performance that has released itself from complete obedience to these codes. Yet in doing so, that variety of performance has not released itself from text and narrative entirely. Even within Franko’s seventeenth-century
example, the textless body writes an alternate story of escape, as it evades the monarch’s controlling narrative. Certainly by now one can discuss narrativity in dance without implying the specter of Aristotle or other single-minded linear plot constraints. To wonder about narrativity in movement-based performance is not to imply that one might always prefer to watch a story ballet, because narrative’s purview has shifted and expanded. Franko addresses this when later he adds, “the vanishing of figure implicit in writing’s temporary disappearance also partakes of textuality. Flight is part of the writing process.”35 And thus that “textless body” in flight might still offer some connection to a narrative, after all.

For Gérard Genette, narrative was defined quite basically as the “development” or “expansion” of a verb— that part of speech devoted to action, perhaps the very action of that textless dancer. “The dancer flew from the pose” tells us, according to this most basic definition, a very small story, driven by the word “flew.” To be clear, Genette also thought expression in words was a prerequisite for narrative. Yet Roland Barthes, who like Genette thought a sentence showcasing a verb was the basic unit of all narrative, offered a broader definition when he asserted, “[Narratives are] able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances.”35 Thus Barthes tells us if we have actions extending in time, whether carried in language or image or gesture or combinations thereof, we already have the ingredients of story. And these sorts of actions are, of course, in plentiful supply in movement-based performance.

Other definitions of narrative require a little more; for instance, a perception of cause and effect. To satisfy this definition viewers would need to form impressions about what triggered the dancer’s flight, or what event it subsequently catalyzed. “Disgusted with the pose, the dancer flew from it” or “The dancer flew from the pose and collided with the dancer next to him.” This slightly more restrictive model still seems relevant; it seems fair to say that when we watch movement, and we watch actions extend, iterate, or sequence through time, we form impressions about how these sequential events might be causally related. We may even jump to hasty conclusions. Barthes had something interesting to say about that jump. He noted: “the mainspring of narrative is precisely the confusion of conclusion and consequence, what comes after being read in narrative as what is caused by; in which case narrative would be a systematic application of the logical fallacy . . . post hoc, ergo propter hoc.”36 It follows that the tendency to see something coming after as something that is caused, in being the “mainspring” of narrative, is a generative fallacy. It is the error from which new stories inevitably spring. As a dramaturg watching performances develop and wondering what diverse things they will do when they land in front of audiences, I often feel like playing both with and against the creative potential of this error.

What my definition of narrative does not require is overt character or psychology, beyond the fact that human performers may be read as the actors of the relevant actions. Along the same lines it does not require mimetic representation, for it is always possible to tell a story about what range of actions is possible, and what might seem to cause what, within the confines of onstage space and time. Lastly, it does not require that audience members agree on what narrative is being told—the relevant aspect is that they are all engaging this “soft narrative understanding,” even if through it they construct very different stories.

I bring my conviction about a “soft narrative understanding” and its relevance to movement-based performance with me whenever I enter any rehearsal room to watch. Because of it I attend carefully to what might come first and what next, what might establish a code or break one, how patterns form, whether causal links between events are suggested, encouraged, or discouraged. I have no particular agenda to create or enhance narratives; my conviction is that they are always already present, as engaged through the act of perception. My agenda, insofar as I have one, is to notice them, or their potential, and fold that awareness into our conversations. As an example, I offer the following excerpt from an e-mail I sent to Ralph during the Tree rehearsal process:

I was thinking the other day about a particular sensation I get from certain moments of your work—a pattern where you have me look at something, then you have me look at it with a new element added, and then you take that new element away and I look at the thing as before. [This ABA pattern is] telling me that change happens, certain events are evanescent, and other conditions endure regardless of those changes.

I get this feeling in moments like: Asako’s brief appearance and disappearance alongside the circle in the Lotus choreography, or the use of the gongs during the Memory choreography [now it’s silent, now they’re here and very loud, now moment they’re completely gone, silent again].

I love this aesthetic, and at the same time I recognize that it’s anti-dramatic—the principle in drama being that a new event occurs and catalyzes the whole, spinning it into a new direction, thus the stage can never be the same again. In a dramatic structure [ABC] we can’t go back to A after having seen B. So maybe it would be interesting to talk about the structure of the piece in terms of these two competing kinds of structure, and ask [when do we want to engage each?].37

Note that I was not expressing that ABC was a story and ABA was not. Both structures of events happening in time carried, for me as a viewer, a narrative implication. Even though ABC was the shape of a flashier story with
dramatic cause-and-effect. 

Through the conversation began by this e-mail, I realized that Tim, built as it was on an attitude of spiritual contemplation, was a rite with ABA structures, micro-narratives that told a larger story of continuity underneath change. But it also had a few large contrasting moments that told a more dramatic story: the massive fall of Nari Ward's back set wall, which triggered a falling, in extremis solo for Cheng-Chieh Yu. Or the improvised narrative that David Thomson attempted to tell the audience every night, until he found himself interrupted first by Wun Hui and then Djëdët Djëndé Gervais, their interventions catalyzing a very different telling than he had intended. The ABC stories were appropriate enough for a piece in which the irrevocable events of natural disasters were inspiration—if B is an earthquake, C is likely to be a very different state than A. But in a piece that attempted to take a more distanced, Buddhist-inspired view on those disasters and see them as common events all destinations of the world could share, the ABA story was also appropriate. Clarifying that these patterns operated as small stories, and as such were building impressions about the on-stage world we were creating, helped me, and Ralph too, better understand what was taking shape in front of us.

Beyond the narratives constructed by a series of actions within the frame of the performance event—be they characterizable by ABA, ABC, or any other constellation of letters—a dance also weaves corollary narratives into its performance. I am thinking here of the work of Ann Cooper Albright in exposing how the dancer's on-stage presence engages with the way it is culturally coded, or situated within a culturally specific context. Those codes imply a "backstory" that is imagined retrospectively, leading up to the present moment of performance. Thus even the first instant of a dance is already rich with implied narrative. As Susan Leigh Foster suggests, the performer's backstory then becomes entangled with the evolving narrative of the performance. She writes: "choreography theorizes corporeal, individual and social identity by placing bodies in dynamic rapport... that suggests an unfolding of their relations that inevitability charts a narrative trajectory."

I remember watching rehearsals and helping shape one moment of Tim, where Ralph, marked as an American postmodern dancer in dress, carriage, and manner of moving, improvised a duet with Djëdët Djëndé Gervais, correspondingly marked as a contemporary West African dancer. Every time Ralph jumped on Djędé's back, attempting to engage him in his own mode of contact improvisation, Djędé reacted by tossing him off and continuing impossibly with his own step. In that single gesture a whole story sprung up about their contrasting histories and the implied imbalance of power within their intercultural collaboration. As the duet unfolded, this story was challenged and became increasingly complex, with Ralph's aggression seeming more and more of a realist tic and Djędé's movement slowly flowering in response to the stimuli he shrugged off. As we observed this passage, we considered not just the movement itself, but how the stories legible from the performers' bodies in motion were both engaged and destabilized.
Thus far, a narrative sense may arise from the simple sequencing of actions, with the invitation that sequence makes for cause and effect interpretation. And it may arise from the implied backstories keying the performers’ physical presence, which may in turn inform or complicate the interpretation of those on-stage actions. But the most crucial narrative in question, and the one to which the dance dramaturg ultimately attends, is the narrative told by a putative spectator, responding to a friend who confronts her after the performance and asks, “What did you just experience?” This overarching narrative may include, but is not limited to, the types mentioned above. It is the narrative that the spectator writes as well as reads, for it is the narrative of an encounter over time. When we derive meaning from motion, we inevitably find that meaning in motion—changing, evolving. And when viewers track those changes over time they construct narrative.

This narrative has as many potential incarnations as potential viewers. It may jump in time, as the spectator narrates actions that connected powerfully for her, and then flash back as she recalls earlier actions that related secondarily; it may offer alternative versions of a single event or alternative backstories to the performers’ projected personas; it may question its own construction and narrate the process of that questioning. The putative spectator’s narrative can be as fractured and self-referential as any found in a postmodernist novel. But it is, still, in noticing events over time, narrative. An attention to actions in sequence, and their relationship, has been engaged, and the resulting encounter with those events can be told.

The field of computer gaming studies offers a useful distinction, discussing “embedded” versus “emergent” narratives and considering both types as part of the total narrative potential of a game. The former are stories authored by the game’s designer, to be told at designated interludes. The latter are stories created on the fly by the gamer in interaction with the game, arising “from the set of rules governing interaction with the game system.” With the current emphasis in contemporary performance on an “emancipated spectator,” who also creates her own meaning on the fly from her interaction with the events before her (and who is discussed further in chapter 3), it seems apt to think of performance in terms of its “emergent narratives” as well.

In concentrating on perception of the performance event as the creation of an emergent story with the viewer as protagonist, I am encouraged by recent work in cognitive science that focuses on the construction of consciousness as an ongoing process, always built and rebuilt in relation to perceptual input. In the words of Antonio Damasio, “the self comes to mind in the form of images, relentlessly telling a story.”

For Damasio, the self needs to “protagonize” in relation to those stimuli, and this continually renewed protagonist stars in what he takes care to clarify is a “wordless narrative.” For Damasio, the creation of self-story precedes anything coalesced into a grammar; it is absolutely nonverbal, occurring in image and in motion. This is the same self-story that is incessantly emergent, then, for the spectators who find their perceptual stimuli in the nonverbal images and motion of movement-based performance. While the watcher watches the dance, the dance constructs the watcher, through a narrative activity that enfolds them both.

The most eloquent challenge to my assertion that a “soft narrative understanding” imbues allegedly nonnarrative performance arrives via Stein’s concept of the continuous present. Stein famously asserted that watching plays inevitably made her “nervous” because “the scene as depicted on the stage is . . . almost always in syncopated time” in relation to the emotions of the spectator. In other words, the viewer was always temporally located a little bit behind or a little bit in front of the events unfolding on stage, either ahead of the narrative or struggling to catch up. Stein acknowledged that syncopation could be a productive tool for a jazz band, but she resisted it herself, preferring to write a new kind of play that would keep the viewer suspended in the present moment. She declared, anticipating Phelan’s description of performance’s ephemeral ontology, that “the business of Art . . . is to live in the actual present . . . and to completely express that complete actual present.” Stein explicitly linked her temporal adjustment to the rejection of narrative, saying, “I tried to tell what happened without telling stories” though of course the ambivalence of “telling without telling” signals how difficult this is. Stein’s continual present does not narrate and is not narrate-able, it just is. It denies connection to a before and an after, denies temporality, to live in a suspended instant instead of within story.

And yet: even when as a viewer I feel a flight of movement performance entering that “continuous present” — not referring to any moments before or after, but just the electric now—that elusive sense of presence is fruitfully impossible to sustain. It eventually syncopates and spawns a narrative of how we entered or exited that particular state of grace. I construct a story for myself about the moment I realized I was in that state, what it felt like while I was there, and how I eventually fell out of it. In other words, syncopation is our inevitable fallen state, but a fruitful one, generating not just musical intricacy but the kind of narrative understanding that allows perception to make and retain an impact.

To finish this chapter I have to acknowledge the residue left by my assertions. I am left with a question I cannot answer. Damasio may assert that the “self-story” precedes language, but nevertheless I am only able to think about how nonverbal events engage narrative sensibility insofar as I translate them, later on, into language. Thus does my belief about the soft narrative understanding of movement-based performance depend on both language and
memory? For that narrative to exist, does there have to be a spectator who could later on, if asked, articulate it out loud? Is a narrative understanding still evoked in the viewer even if that viewer is unable or unwilling to put what he or she saw into words? Is my narrative understanding—my curiosity about what happened after what, and what that particular order might mean—still engaged in the heat of the moment even if I cannot, later on, remember the sequence of events? Do I think a narrative sensibility still has an impact on how spectators view the ephemeral, the moments of presence that do not translate well or at all into language or the future?

I can’t prove it, but I think so.

2

Research

In Europe in 1999 a group of dance dramaturgs and writer/researchers held two public conversations about the nature of the dance dramaturg’s role. According to the published transcript, when the dramaturgs of the group were asked to “try and tell us what you do,” only one of them, Heidi Gilpin, then dramaturg with William Forsythe, mentioned research in her response. After leading with her role catalyzing “endless conversations” with Forsythe and translating ideas from one form to another, she spoke of bringing in “packets of information” for the dancers. Immediately she qualified this, saying that this was not so that the performers would have to “understand in a didactic sense.” Gilpin’s hesitation toward allowing her research work to cast her in a dry pedagogical role is reflected in my own experience as well, as someone whose interests often include the location and curation of disparate pieces of information, but who experiences a careful dance around when, how, and if to bring this information to a working process.

“Research” may offer a conveniently succinct way to label one facet of the dramaturg’s labor, but its importance and implications are far from straightforward. The dramaturg’s relation to the research function varies, both from dramaturg to dramaturg and from project to project, perhaps more than her relation to any other function. What’s more, thinking closely about what exactly constitutes “research” in an art-making context leads into a thicket of complex issues, including how art builds on or generates what we understand as knowledge, the unreliable framing of what is inside and what is outside the rehearsal room or analogous sphere of inquiry, the capricious nature of creative inspiration and how it may be kindled or extinguished, and ethical responsibilities to collaborators and sources.

In the pages ahead I first take up the definition of research—a word we may think we know, but the shifting implications of which we may not always recognize. I offer my own thoughts for understanding what is behind the word when it is used in common parlance, and engage briefly with the extensive discourse on practice-as-research (and other variations on that term). I then land