

# DANCING INTERVENTIONS

A Feminist New Materialist Engagement in Three Dance Stories



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15 August 2017

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## Acknowledgments

Writing and engaging in this project has been overwhelming and intriguing as well emotionally and physically exhausting. Enacting its topic, practicing an awareness towards corporeal and spatial matters, but also working with open and personal interview situations, has generated unexpected stories and insights. The project has left me with a different relationship to text and writing process, but also a to me new awareness of the complexity, working with theory. Never have I felt so strongly about the responsibility in theorizing, about the consequence telling certain stories over others. Whilst constantly struggling with this complexity, it is also true that I have never before felt so passionate or excited about a project within an academic context. I feel truly grateful to have had the opportunity; the time, space and context to think and write about something which has occupied my body and mind for years.

This thesis project wouldn't have been possible without the support, inspiration and participation of several people. Firstly, I wish to express my deepest thanks the dancers participating in this project. Who were willing to share their stories with me, allowing me to engage with their dancing past and present for the sake of this project. I also wish to express my deepest gratefulness towards my supervisor Dr. Katrine Smiet. Dr. Smiet has offered me highly valuable, constructive feedback and critique, but also left me feeling continuously encouraged and passionate, motivating me to pursue a project which in many ways challenges the normative ways of writing a thesis. I also wish to thank my second reader, Layal Ftouni, for taking the time reading this thesis. I also wish to express my gratefulness to Dr. Magdalena Górska who during this master programme introduced me to feminist new materialism, which was crucial to the emergence of the idea forming this thesis project. To Irene, thank you for your everyday support, for emotional and intellectual guidance, as well as endless hours of dancing. To Matilda for always encouraging and believing in me, for your helpful comments and edits and true engagement in this body of text. To Chrille for his honesty and dear friendship, and for making this thesis look nice. Thanks to Natalia for important conversations over the year, and for her input on this project. My deepest thanks also belong to my dancing family, to Amanda, Lina, Tarra, Carro, Annika and Renata, for invaluable dance experiences and conversations, but also for emotional and physical support. To Kajsa for always embracing me, even when parted. Lastly, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to my father, mother and brother for unconditional love, trust and support, always.

Amsterdam, August 2017

Emilia Thorin

# 1. Introduction

Possible elements of a dance: bodies moving, listening, following and responding to the pattern of the other. Fleshy entanglements, the presence of the body next to you deciding your next move. In *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway talks of a “subject- and object-making dance” (Haraway 2008, 14). As a metaphor, a figuration, or maybe just a noun, it functions to describe the process of changing and being changed, thinking of encounters as intra-actions<sup>1</sup>, no matter who asks the question: “Asking questions comes to mean both asking what another finds intriguing and also how learning to engage that changes everybody in unforeseeable ways” (Haraway 2008, 14). In *Becoming Sensor* by anthropologist Natasha Myers, dancing is made synonymous to the process of the becoming’s of the world, “that this world full of beings, becomings, and processes of coming undone, is pullulating with sensing and sensitive forms of life and death that are attending and attuning, caught up in dances with and athwart one another, composing and decomposing in responsive, repulsive, and propulsive relation” (Myers 2017, 5). With Haraway and Myers, dancing describes a process, a becoming, the ongoing change and changing of things. Despite appreciating these understandings of dancing as a mode of change and becoming, I do not wish to linger too long by the *image* of dance, but rather continue in, through and with the movement: this thesis evolves with and through the dancing body.

Based on three different dance stories, generated from interviews conducted as part of this project, this thesis investigates how identities are negotiated, dancing in the space of a dance studio, dancing in a collective of other moving bodies, responding and adjusting to the materiality of the space. It attempts to ask questions about dancing intra-actions in a human and nonhuman context. It supports an understanding of body as a possible mode of action and production, in Elisabeth Grosz words, “as objects of intense wonder and productivity, pleasure and desire” (Grosz 1995, 2). Hence, it wishes to approach bodies not only as exposed and shaped by its surroundings, but also as shaping and creating. The motivation for this investigation is founded on the understanding of the dancing collective as a possible force of creation, enabling multi-differentiated subjectivities, negotiated differently than “outside the studio”. The goal for the thesis is, therefore, to develop an analysis of the potential of a making of subject positions which takes place through mutual engagement in dance, movement and corporeality. The project intends to emphasize the importance of corporeal safe spaces where multi-differentiated subjectivities can develop through modes of corporeality, trust and collective engagement in dance.

<sup>1</sup>Intra-actions, as Karen Barad has named it, offers an approach to the worlds becoming characterized by a constant reconfiguring where: “apparatuses are not mere static arrangements in the world, but rather apparatuses are dynamic (re) configurings of the world, specific agential practices/intra-actions/performances through which specific exclusionary boundaries are enacted” (Barad, 2003, 816). A more developed explanation of this concept is offered in the theory chapter.

## 1.2 Research Questions and Structure

This thesis project addresses the following research questions: Based on the interviews conducted as part of this thesis project, looking at modes of corporeality, collectivity and space, what creates and determines the becomings, the configuration of the subject-positions of the dancers? How do the dancers negotiate their identity, or loss of identity, becoming with space and body(s)? Scrutinizing the dance stories, the material of this thesis, is it possible to identify new ways of kinship and making kin? As a sub question, through the autobiographical approach and the corporeal engagement in this thesis project, I also wish to ask questions regarding corporeal and linguistic relations, hence, what does it mean to the body of a text, to be physically involved in its topic?

In answering these research questions, this thesis is structured as follows: After introducing research questions, background and purpose, chapter two presents theoretical and methodological engagements as well as motivation for choosing each framework. Chapter three, four and five entails the analysis of the interview-conversations, and engages with the specifics of each situation through three different sections. In the analysis, each chapter starts with a “vignette” where I allow myself to elaborate on personal dance experience through the form of creative writing. In doing so, I wish to continuously situate myself within the project, but also create a more equal dynamic between the researcher and the researched. The last chapter offers a conclusion as well as summery of my most important findings, a reflection on my methodological engagement in the project and, lastly, suggestions for future research.

## 1.3 Background & Purpose

This project is developed on the intersections of the fields of feminist new materialist, corporeal and posthumanities studies, while it is also grounded in my seven-year long practice as a dance teacher and performer. I am a member of a performance group that functions not only as a space for practice and training but also as a form of safe space deeply characterized by intimacy and trust. The group is not explicitly separatist but still only consists of individuals identifying as women. Over the past years, I have observed the tendency amongst the dance groups, that I have had a chance to participate in, to develop and express new forms of collective belonging and kinship. Furthermore, elaborating on my personal experience, I noticed that the dancing and corporeal collectivity allowed me to develop ways of being which were in contrast with an initial idea of “self”. Performing movements, touching and moving my body in ways which didn’t respond to a previous self-image, allowed me to develop multiple ways of being. Having recurring conversations with my fellow dancers on this theme triggered a curiosity to investigate these processes further. In this thesis project, I therefore want to explore the potential of

those forms of collective and corporeal relationality in order to develop new forms of subjectivities, intimacy, and kinship. Due to the central role of embodiment and movement in enacting those relations, I want to focus analytically on the corporeal agency that expresses and captures those new forms of intimate kinship. This thesis does not wish to make any general claims on “dancing” as such, it investigates specific situations of dancing, stories of dance, corporeality and collectivity mediated by the tree interviewees I have engaged with in this project. I thus wish for this thesis to be read as “a series of temporary flashes or illuminations that light up a variety of objects, rather than as the articulation of a position” (Grosz 1995, 5). Inspired by Haraway, I intend to tell stories, in this specific case, *dance stories* which I believe have the potential to enrich the field of gender studies, offering an embodied, dancing approach to knowledge production.

Another important motivation for this thesis is to offer a project which works with body as a mode of production, with matter as an actor which contributes to the worlds becoming. Hence, the project as a whole wishes to problematize, as argued by Barad, that language has become the medium through which matter comes to matter: “it seems that at every turn lately every ‘thing’—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation” (Barad 2003, 801). It does so, avoiding representative pitfalls, staying attentive to and involving in the specifics of each dance situation.

#### **1.4 Previous Research & Why This Thesis Matters**

As mentioned, this project is developed on the intersections of the fields of feminist corporeal, new materialist and posthumanities studies. Starting this project, my initial aim was to engage with dance studies, however, performing the interviews and subsequently reflecting on the material, I noticed that the stories did not focus on the specifics of each dance style. The dance stories tended to immediately interconnect with stories outside the studio, embodied experiences of the past, entangled with a dancing present. Situating this project, I however wish to acknowledge that tying my findings to the field of dance studies would have generated different findings and conclusions. I’m aware that this project is partly determined and enabled through the theoretical decisions I have made.

To my knowledge, much research on “dance” derives from an anthropological approach, scrutinizing a specific style of dancing and its meanings. An example of that is the thesis project: “Embodied Identities: Negotiating the Self through Flamenco Dance” by Pamela Ann Caltabiano (Caltabiano 2009). Without dismissing the importance of such investigations, this project rather wishes to work through dance and corporeality – one could say there is a difference in the direction of the research forming this thesis. However, the applied intersections of corporeal theory, feminist theory and

dance is not unique and occurs for instance in *Engaging Bodies: The Politics and Poetics of Corporeality* by dancer and scholar Ann Cooper Albright. Appreciating this work, I however believe it to operate in a different mode than the intention of this project. While Albright is arguing for the praxis of dance as a valuable way of being in the world: “For me, dancing is a physical inquiry, a way of experiencing and participating in the world [...]” (Albright 2013, 9) the main motive of this project is not to argue that bodies matter, or that dancing matters, but rather to create knowledge from this standpoint, through the specific context of each dance situation.

Researching corporeal collectivity and its potential in offering new modes of kinship for the purpose of writing this thesis, I came across several projects on roller derby. In the master thesis “All-women ‘s flat track roller derby: gender, psychoanalysis”, and meaning by Matthew Newsom, the notion of kinship is explored, discovering that the members tend to refer to fellow skaters as sisters or family (Newsom 2013, 51). While acknowledging the similar approach to kinship here, my work offers a different angle on what elements constitutes the notion of kinship.

This said, I believe this thesis to form its originality through the nature of the research, the questions it wishes to answer and the specifics of each interview situation. The feminist new materialist approach to the dance stories implies a sensitivity towards the process and context of the interviews which generates unexpected stories on the intersections of feminist, corporeal, and new materialist studies.

## 2. Theory and Method

### 2.1 Methodological Engagements

#### *Interviews*

The stories which conduct the material of this thesis is the result of three in depth interviews. Two of the interviews took place in dance studios, in Amsterdam, Netherlands and in Malmö, Sweden. The third interview with Lisa who is based in Tokyo, Japan, was made over Skype. The interviews happening in dance studios were corpo-verbal encounters, entailing verbal conversations as well as dancing and stretching. Letting dancing be a part of the interviews is one of the ways in which this thesis attempts to practice its topic and theoretical standpoints, avoiding giving too much room to language, creating space for corporeal interventions. In the interview conversations with Laura and Naomi, body language was constantly present and often replaced words in the conversations. Wanting to include corporeal expressions in the body of this text, movements are depicted in the footnotes throughout the analysis. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed, and in the case of Laura, translated from Swedish to English by me. In

respect of the privacy of the interviewees involved in this project, all names have been changed and thus are fictional and made up by me. The extracts of the conversations present in this thesis attempts to follow the spoken language of the interviews, and are thus not always grammatically correct and at times lacks punctuations and capitalization. An interview guide<sup>2</sup> was created in preparation for the encounters. However, adjusting to the interview situations, the questions varied and thus deviated from the initial interview script. Starting this project, I Initially had the ambition to explicitly locate the identities of the interviewees and myself. However, throughout the process I, similar to Katrine Smiet in her dissertation “Travelling Truths”, experienced that “the experiment to ‘locate’ the authors I engaged with in the dissertations in terms of their racial, disciplinary and geopolitical positioning turned out to carry within it a danger of reifying identities and flattening out the very nuances that I had set out to capture in the research” (Smiet 2017, 208). In making this decision, I wished to create space for the interviewees to position themselves through the telling of their stories.

The interviews were open ended and semi-structured, in depth interviews which “explores people’s views of reality and allows the researcher to generate theory” (Reinharz 1992, 18). This is a qualitative approach to interviewing which “allows for the researchers to make full use of differences among people “ (Reinharz 1992, 19). As a method, it responds to the motives of this thesis – my ambition is not to aim towards one specific narrative, but to elaborate on the notion of difference and engage in depth with each situation. I approach the qualitative interviews and the way they are conducted in this research project as a feminist intervention per se. “For one thing, interviewing offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher. This asset is particularly important for the study of women because in this way learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women’s ideas altogether or having men speak for women“ (Reinharz 1992, 19). Similar to the method applied by Magdalena Górska in her dissertation “Breathing Matters: Feminist Intersectional Politics of Vulnerability” (Gorska 2016), I wish to approach the interviews as conversations. This requires an awareness of the power dynamics and a sensitivity towards the conditions of the conversations. Thus, it was not my intention to create conversations dictated by the researcher, but conversations attuned with the situations, the participants, the space, the location, and the corporeal circumstances. Put into practice this means that I as a researcher practiced vulnerability and openness. To avoid creating a dynamic where I collect information and approach the interviewee as the

<sup>2</sup>See Appendix



“researched”, the conversations are dependent on a mutual engagement “[...] where the interviewing involves commitment on the part of the researcher to form a relationship, and on the part of the interviewees to participate with sincerity” (Reinharz 1992, 28).

This thesis thoroughly engages with the specifics of each dance situation, of each dance story. The interviews are attentive towards the processes of becomings, collectivity and kinship, but still attempts to operate in an open mode, approaching the interviews as conversations rather than verbal encounters of a specific direction. Similar to the interviews conducted by Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin in *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* they are “intra-actions rather than interactions. Qualitatively shifting any atomist metaphysics, intra-action conceptualizes that it is the action between (and not in-between) that matters” (Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012, 14). In the context of this research, it means that I as a researcher acknowledge that conversations are processes of change and changing going both ways. Furthermore, it means that I as a researcher acknowledge and incorporate the agency of the situation itself, the interview and its context.

### *Autoethnography*

This thesis evolves through its methodology. It is formed, disrupted, enabled, diffracted through corpo-verbal engagements and a simultaneous writing process generating this thesis. Throughout the process of writing and practicing this thesis, I was preparing for a dance event that took place in the beginning of June 2017. I practiced dance routines daily, letting my theoretical engagements merge with my dance practice. In performing embodied research, my attempt was to achieve an involvement in the project responding to its content. I wished to stay well informed, corporally involved, in order to perform interviews attuned with the interviewees, enabling a sensitivity towards the conversations. This method known as autoethnography is “a research approach which draws upon the researcher’s own personal lived experience, specifically in relation to the culture (and sub-cultures) of which s/he is a member“ (Allen-Collinson 2012, 4). In my assessment, practicing autoethnography has the capability of disrupting the hierarchy of the researcher and the ‘researched’. Through its methodological practice, this thesis wishes to offer a mode of research which questions a normative idea of the position of the researcher as “neutral” or “objective”, and rather works through situatedness. It thus supports the idea that: “Autoethnography has challenged some of the very foundations and key tenets of more ‘traditional’ forms of research in its requirement for the researcher explicitly to situate and ‘write in’ her/himself as a key player within a research account” (Allen-Collinson 2012, 4).

As part of the autoethnographic practice, the language which forms this thesis will respond to the theoretical, corporeal and experience based engagements in the topic, this means “to write evocatively, to engage the reader emotionally and empathetically, and

to resonate with the reader's own experiences" (Allen-Collinson 2012, 6). Applying this method, as much as I believe my personal experience and corporeal knowledge to add to the quality of the work, there is also a risk of becoming too self-involved. As stated by Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson "This demands of the autoethnographic researcher high levels of critical awareness and reflexivity, and, many of us would add, self-discipline" (Allen-Collinson 2012). As much as I agree with this statement, in performing research I however believe that the notion of subjectivity and positioning is always to be dealt with, ever more so in the case of more traditional forms of ethnography. Unlike the ambiguity that research methods which produces science in claimed positivist manner holds towards the notion of subjectivity, I believe that the autoethnographic method has the capacity through its explicit engagement in a subjectivity also manage to produce results which are sensitive towards dynamics of "personal and the social, and between self and other" (Allen-Collinson 2012, 4).

### *Storytelling, Dance Stories*

Approaching the conversations and the outcome of the conversations as stories is a methodological decision corresponding to my epistemological approach to the material. Through stories I wish to accentuate that this is a qualitative research project which aims to work with difference as a force rather than forcing difference into standardized understandings, concepts, or approaches. Perceiving theorizing as telling stories is a method practiced by Donna Haraway: "I tell theory stories a lot, and I take them very seriously. I'm extremely interested in the way stories loop through each other and the way attachment sites get built. The continuities are much stronger than the discontinuities, as I think of my own intellectual life" (Haraway 2009)" In my assessment, Haraway's way of telling stories allows for a modest knowledge production that manages to theorize in an open but precise manner. It acknowledges the importance of the stories, without approaching them as fixed or representational, but rather situated in a flow of other stories. Another take on the notion of stories is offered by Clare Hemmings. In *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, Hemmings argues for the importance of becoming aware of the grammar of the stories produced within a western feminist framework when she critiques and problematizes "stories that frame gender equality as a uniquely Western export" (Hemmings 2011). Nonetheless, Hemmings also believes in the potential of feminist theory to challenge these narratives and states that "This book is a claim for the continued radical potential of feminist theory and for the importance of telling stories differently" (Hemmings 2011, 2). This corresponds well with Haraway's notion of "It matters which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts" (Haraway 2015, 160). Writing this thesis, I wish to address the grammar of the stories partly through the sensibility and openness I aim to practice in the interviews.

But also through situated knowledges, acknowledging my position in the project and the position of the project in a larger, epistemological framework. Like Haraway I believe that “We need the power of a modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life” (Haraway 1988, 580). Thus, this project operates through an approach which recognizes the modes of power which create and restrict the stories while simultaneously acknowledging the agency and potential of each story.

### *Discourse Analysis*

Scrutinizing the stories, the outcome of the conversational interviews, I will engage with the material through a way of critical discourse analysis. However, it is important to me to note that I wish to practice a discourse analysis which pays particular attention towards body and materiality. Discourse analysis as proposed by Foucault, allows for a non positivist approach to research, and a criticality that enables an exposure of normative and structural dynamics and hegemonic discourse. As Foucault writes “We must question those ready-made syntheses, those groupings that we normally accept before any examination, those links whose validity is recognized from the outset; we must oust those forms and obscure forces by which we usually link the discourse of one man with that of another; they must be driven out from the darkness in which they reign” (Foucault 1972, 22). Following this extract, discourse analysis applied on this research project will allow me to approach the material, the stories from a poststructuralist perspective, denying essentialist modes of “truth”. It will allow me to contextualize and engage with the sociopolitical dimensions of the dance stories. Applying this critical gaze, it is not my intention to miss trust nor question the stories generated by the interviewees. However, I do wish to acknowledge the workings of power which restricts and creates understandings – this applies as much to me as a researcher, the interviewees and the stories.

## **2.2 Theoretical Engagements**

### *Intra-activity*

My interest in the corporeal relations and spatial matters rests on a feminist new materialist tradition with scholars such as Karen Barad, Stacy Alaimo and Nina Lykke. Barad’s concept of intra-action is crucial for the way the conversational interviews are performed and perceived, but also my analytical engagement with the stories. As Barad depicts in “Posthuman Performativity”, intra-activity describes the process of mattering and agency making:

The world is a dynamic process of intra-activity in the ongoing reconfiguring of locally determinate causal structures with determinate boundaries, properties, meanings, and patterns of marks on bodies. This ongoing flow of agency through which “part” of the world makes itself differentially intelligible to another “part” of the world and through which local causal structures, boundaries, and properties are stabilized and destabilized does not take place in space and time but in the making of spacetime itself (Barad 2003, 817).

Following this, approaching the world through the process of intra-activity, the notion of “internal” and “external” is made impossible or irrelevant. Such is also the case with the Cartesian split, the proposed split between body and mind. Barad’s intra-activity rather supports “the local condition of *exteriority-within-phenomena*” – the ongoing reconfigurations gives a becoming where there is no room for a proposed “observer or observed” (Barad 2003, 815), as both are equally involved, stabilized and destabilized, in the process of intra-action. Applied on the interview situations, this approach acknowledges the agency of the situation itself, the material conditions and ongoing intra-actions. In supporting the idea of intra-activity, this thesis is sensitive towards the idea of representation, to ascribing standardized meanings without letting matter come to matter and “[...] the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent preexisting things” (Barad 2003, 802). To avoid forcing standardized meanings onto matter, this thesis attempts to operate through an openness, practicing an attentiveness towards the interview-situations, giving room for unexpected elements which challenge normative understanding and perceptions. In avoiding representative modes, Barad “[...] shift the focus to physical optics, to questions of diffraction rather than reflection” (Barad 2003, 803). As another important concept in Barad’s work, diffraction and diffractive readings allows for understandings which do not operate in a reflective mode: “Diffractively reading the insights of feminist and queer theory and science studies approaches through one another entails thinking the “social” and the “scientific” together in an illuminating way “ (Barad 2003, 803). Thus, in working with diffraction, this thesis attempts to avoid oppositional readings and argumentations. The three dance stories are not scrutinized through a comparative lens, but rather read as if through each other.

### *Performativity & Posthuman Performativity*

In the search for identity-formations, or dissolving of identity, it is important to note that this thesis does not support stable or fixed identities, but rather performative, nomadic such where the intra-activity plays a central part in the way they become. The notion of performativity is to find both with Judith Butler and Karen Barad. With Butler, performativity accounts for a non-essential view on gender, gender is performed and thus created through an act of repetition. In the words of Butler, performativity is “a repetition and

a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 2002, xv). As noted by Butler in the second addition of *Gender Trouble*, this repetition does not only apply to language, but bodily acts just as well: “what we take to be an “internal” feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 2002, xv). Whilst the position of bodies in *Gender Trouble* have been critiqued and problematized<sup>3</sup>, my reading of Butler does not imply a negation of the agency of body, but rather a non-essential approach to identities and gender where corporeal and verbal actions matter in creating the formation of different subject position. Thereto, In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler responds to this critique when she discusses modes of constructivism, stating: “What I would propose in place of these conceptions of construction is a return to the notion of matter, a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter” (Butler 2011, 9). Hence, in my assessment, matter matters with Butler and is compatible with Barad’s notion of post-human performativity. Posthuman performativity as proposed by Barad, critiques the modes of constructivism, and its way of turning materiality “into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation “ (Barad 2003, 801). Barad’s notion of performativity offers an understanding of discursive practices that “challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent preexisting things” (Barad 2003, 802), and “shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (e.g., do they mirror nature or culture?) to matters of practices/ doings/actions” (Barad 2003, 802). Hence, the performativity through Barad applies to the becoming of matter, that is, matter becomes through the ongoing reconfigurations which it simultaneously creates and is an effect of. In my assessment, this resonates well with Butler’s argumentation in *Bodies That Matter*. Here Butler problematizes and discusses the (miss) understanding of performativity as the passivating of bodies, offering a rethinking of construction stating: “For surely bodies live and die; eat and sleep; feel pain, pleasure; endure illness and violence; and these ‘facts’, one might skeptically proclaim, cannot be dismissed as a mere construction” (Barad 2003, xi). Hence, Butler’s concern captures the need of a rethinking of construction as the denial of a “real”, with Barad this concern motivates a different notion of performativity emphasizing the agency of materiality in its own becoming. This said, I let Barad and Butler’s different but similar notions of performativity characterize and support the argumentation and analysis of this thesis.

<sup>3</sup>Butler addresses this criticism in the second addition in *Gender Trouble*, acknowledging its importance “clarifying and revising the theory of performativity” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 2002, xiv).

## *Corporeal Engagements*

Looking at modes of becomings, I turn towards Rosi Braidotti and nomadic subjects “A nomadic vision of the body defines it as multifunctional and complex, as a transformer of flows and energies, affects, desires and imaginings” (Braidotti 2011, 25). With Braidotti, through Deleuze, the becoming equals an ongoing transformation where “the emphasis on processes, dynamic interaction, and fluid boundaries is a materialist, high tech brand of vitalism, which makes Deleuze’s thought highly relevant to the analysis of the late industrialist patriarchal culture we inhabit” (Braidotti 2011, 246). In the context of this thesis, I’m interested in the becoming, investigating how the dancers enact difference and how dancing enables difference. Hence, it supports sexual difference theory, and Luce Irigaray “as a thinker who combines issues of embodiment with an acute awareness of complexity and multiplicity and defends a nonunitary vision of the subject in general and of the feminine in particular” (Braidotti 2011, 92). Investigating the becomings in this project, the negotiation of subject positions, the “complexity and multiplicity” is crucial to the way subjectivities are approached and dealt with.

Engaging with bodies, dancing, and corporeal intra-actions, feminist corporeal theory plays an important part in how this thesis approaches corporeal matters. This thesis dismisses a dualistic, Cartesian split of body and mind, and wishes to complex this perception, viewing bodies as agential, thus not only as exposed to social conceptions and inferior to the mind. However, it is not my intention to create a mode of corporeality nor a mode of dancing which appears as “outside” social discourse but as part of it, thus as an active and productive actor. As with Elisabeth Grosz, “The bodies in which I am interested are culturally, sexually, radically specific bodies, the mobile and changeable terms of cultural production” (Grosz 1994, xi). Engaging with corporeal theory, I identify a tendency writing about bodies in terms of lack – how they have been abused and misunderstood, rather than capacity. In *Space, Time and Perversion*, Elisabeth Grosz writes: “Only very recently has the body been understood as more than impediment to our humanity; and it is even more recently that feminists have come to regard women’s bodies as objects of intense wonder and productivity, pleasure and desire, rather than of regulation and control” (Grosz 1995, 2). This expressed caution towards ascribing fixed or representational meaning to bodies, connects to Barad’s concern expressed in “Posthuman Performativity”:

“What compels the belief that we have a direct access to cultural representations and their content that we lack toward the things represented? How did language come to be more trustworthy than matter? Why are language and culture granted their own agency and historicity while matter is figured as passive and immutable, or at best inherits a potential for change derivatively from language and culture?” (Barad 2003, 801)

By incorporating this critique in this thesis, this project simultaneously wishes to account for the complexity of bodies, and how matter matters beyond human interpretations. At the same time this project consciously struggles with the conditions of writing this thesis – to some extent attempting to capture corporeal matters in the body of a written text. Allowing an uncertainty to be part of the writing process, through “staying with the trouble”<sup>4</sup>, I attempt to avoid overwriting the corporeal intra-actions and material conditions of the dance stories.

### *Making Kin*

The curiosity towards the potential of dance collectives to generate modes of kinship derives from a personal experience, where I over the past years have been relating to my dance collective as family and identified a strong need amongst my companion dancers to do the same. Hence, one of the entry points to the dance stories is that of different modes of kin and making kinship, letting this topic be present in the conversational interviews. Different modes of kin, and the notion of “oddkin” appears with Donna Haraway. In *Staying with the Trouble*, one can read the following on kin:

“Kin is a wild category that all sorts of people do their best to domesticate. Making kin as oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and genealogical and biogenetic family troubles important matters, like to whom one is actually responsible. Who lives and who dies, and how, in this kinship rather than that one” (Haraway 2016, 2).

Haraway also stresses the importance of kin to be “[...] resignified, repopulated, and reinhabited. “Making Kin Not Babies” is about making oddkin [...]” (Haraway 2016, 217). Hence, Haraway stresses the importance of modes of kin which does not respond to normative ways of family. Kin as it appears in this thesis correlates with this understanding, investigating common, sustainable ways of living in a togetherness which doesn't not require biogenetic relations.

<sup>4</sup>An expression coined by Donna Haraway, implying a living and engaging in the troubles of the present: “In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (Haraway, 2016, 1).

# Dance Stories

## 3. Naomi

*I land softly in the arms of women in whose bodies I keep finding comfort. We are many now, the group seems to be growing. When side by side, in a brief moment, I glances over and our eyes meet. We know, as the stage fall apart under our feet. The vibration stays with me for months.*

Naomi is a dancer based in Amsterdam. She teaches and performs and sustains a life working as a dancer. Having studied afro-brazilian dance styles as well as sabar, ballet, jazz and modern contemporary, her classes respond to this dance trajectory, combining different styles. Naomi being a teacher generated different stories – in addition to her individual dance experience, she elaborated on group dynamics and the responsibly and possibility of a teacher to create a safe space, or a space characterized by trust. Naomi was passionate talking about her dance and kept expressing affects through body language throughout conversation. The interview conversation with Naomi took place in a dance studio in Amsterdam. We met a sunny morning, a heatwave had just hit the city. Our encounter that day started with three hours of dancing. Throughout the practice we continued shifting roles, I was the teacher, then Naomi. At the time of the interview, we had been dancing together for a month or so, exchanging dance practices, learning from each other's differences. The interview conversation took place on the floor of the studio, stretching while talking, expressing our stories through different postures, movements and words. With Naomi, breaks and silences became a natural part of the conversation, it was a slow conversation of ninety minutes. Beginning and endings were not apparent, the interview conversation rather appeared as part of a longer, ongoing exchange, us meeting early that morning to practice. As we had done in the dance, the interview conversation also implied a shifting of roles. Naomi asked me questions, commented on my dance style and dance presence. We finished our encounter that day with a stretching session, Naomi taking the lead. A physical exhaustion also influenced the talking and was very much part of what created the circumstances of the interview. As we started, I was aware of simultaneously catching my breath while asking questions. Our body temperatures changed rapidly throughout the course of the conversation. I believe that the awareness of our bodies in that moment, having danced for three hours prior the interview, created an interesting interruption of the understanding that “[...] matter is figured as passive and immutable, or at best inherits a potential for change derivatively from language and culture” (Barad 2003, 801).

Me and Naomi communicated in English, a language neither of us grew up speaking.



Our somewhat restricted English, together with the strong presence of body language, the dancing and stretching, created a conversation intervening with the superiority of language, questioning its representative capacity.

### *Negotiating, Dancing*

Naomi's dance story unfolds over many different places and contexts. It still being quite recent, Naomi fully identifying as a dancer, she previously had been struggling finding a place for her dance, both in a spatial and affective way. She tells me how she has always enjoyed dancing, but that she initially was extremely shy:

I've always been shy, but I always liked to perform, for example I had a girlfriend and we lived together, and I was so shy and when we went out she couldn't see me dance. So if we went out, she had to go the other side of the club – she there and I there<sup>5</sup> and then I could dance.

Naomi also tells me how she used to perform as a go-go dancer, and that this to was associated with anxieties, having to drink in order to feel relaxed enough to perform. The space that she has created, the classes that she gives, depicts as much her own need for a place to “be free” as her perception of what dancing should offer:

With my dance I noticed everyone feels so happy after class, become more confident and stronger and they are really there to express themselves in their dancing. I see them growing for example Sandra<sup>6</sup> when she started she was like this<sup>7</sup> and now she is like opening up, and a lot of people have that and that also works on in their daily life, in their jobs or when they have to do a presentation, how they feel about themselves, when they see someone, how they feel about themselves, I think that's super cool, and they can free themselves, put all the energy in the dance and let it go out and it's like getting to know yourself in another way, yeah I think that's good

Naomi tells of a becoming which enables a simultaneous process of “letting go” and getting to know oneself. Subject positions are negotiated through a becoming which does not respond to a static idea of subjectivity, but rather a movement, as with Butler's performative notion of gender it is a “[...] kind of becoming or activity” (Butler 2002, 143). Thus, somehow, according to Naomi's story, the letting go of the self, also generates a deeper knowledge of the self. Following this, subjectivities in this specific dance context

<sup>5</sup>Naomi stretches her arm and opens her hand towards the direction of the window.

<sup>6</sup>The name of Naomi's student has been changed.

<sup>7</sup>Naomi curls her back and directs her face towards the floor.

do not evolve through a linear process where you are the sum of your previous acts, but rather an ongoing construction and deconstruction taking place in the moment of the dance. Important to note, is that whilst this “freeing” is happening, one still operates through and with previous, embodied, experiences. That said, the dance studio and the dancing is not perceived as an autonomous space or act, operating beyond dominant discourse. Almost immediately discussing her dance practice, Naomi tells me of a past suffering from eating disorder, leading a life characterized by a destructive self-image. Hence, Naomi telling me about her current dance practice, also implies telling me about previous corporeal experiences and challenges. As argued by Iris Marion Young, “We often experience our bodies as a fragile encumbrance, rather than the media for the enactment of our aims. We feel as though we must have our attention directed upon our body to make sure it is doing what we wish it to do, rather than paying attention to what we want to do through our bodies” (Young 1980, 144). Listening to Naomi’s story, it appears as the dancing enables an intervention of this binary: As much as she dances with and through previous, embodied experience, she simultaneously manages to create new, or rather different, corporeal expressions and relations. “It is this potentiality of nonrealization, of dispersion, of remaining inert and refusing to be oneself that frees matter from the human, through the human” (Colebrook 2008, 82). A freeing achieved through previous experiences, affirming different ways of being and taking up space. For Naomi, the freeing also implies being able to perform movements differently than those of “everyday life”:

...well normally in your daily life you just move around walking go from A to B normally like walking sleeping or standing but now you can really let your body go and move and be free, let your body be free. So, you see your body in a different way

As much as the freeing seem to appear in the movement, in the dancing, the dance studio matters as a space differently informed than an “outside”. In allowing for different corporeal expressions, or even encouraging it, it also enables interventions. In Naomi’s words “you see your body in a different way”.

Another important feature to Naomi’s story is the way the individual/ collective process seems to overlap, also in the way she uses the studio, the space. Responding to whether she likes the mirrors, she tells me:

Yeah haha, so that you can see yourself and the way your body moves but for me the connection to the dance studio is class, students, so it’s also something nice to make connection with other people and dance together and work on something together and grow...

Naomi tells of a becoming which transcends division of self/other, where the individual process is connected to the collective process. A becoming which “implies both an ongoing coordination with another, or a group, and a coherence with something beyond the dancer: for example, the space, and the music together with the perceptions and mood that are evoked “ (Bunell 2015, 100). Naomi also tells me about the importance of dancing together, and how to enable this as a teacher:

Yeah, I do my best to make so, because in a lot of classes it's so individual, you come there and you don't make... people don't even look at each other, the teacher also, no connection at all so I think it is really important that we look at each other, and that we dance together

Reflecting on her performance group, Naomi states:

Yeahhhh that's also the nice part its really you work together with your group members you get to know each other better you really feel strong together because you have to make something together do it together so that is also super nice it brings everybody together

A notion of togetherness is created through what appears as a mutual project—the group creating something together. Whilst Naomi is skeptical towards the capacity of her dance context to offer ways of intimacy and friendships different to an outside, she also tells me that she would not really know, as all her friends appears to be dancers:

I don't know what the difference is, if there is a difference, because all of my friends, we dance, I dance with them at home also, we do the same thing so actually, I don't see any difference

It seems that without being fully aware of it herself, Naomi's dance practice has also become an important social context and way of spending time together with friends.

### *Dancing Circumstances*

It appears that for Naomi, the being free is partly a relational condition, where the dance studio and context offers a different way of being and expressing than an outside. Hence, the space she has created for her dance practice, is a condition for the freeing, for being able to enact difference:

it's about letting go, so you have to feel safe in the class with the other people

As the above extract describes, feeling safe is a condition for the “letting go”, and it is apparent that Naomi is occupied with setting up a space offering this dynamic. However, as Naomi’s story tells us, the dancing simultaneously also changes the space and the bodies of the space:

With my dance, I noticed everyone feels so happy after class, become more confident and stronger and they are really there to express themselves in their dancing I see them growing

The situation captures a material/ discursive interplay where interventions are made possible through the circumstances of the dance and the circumstances of the dance changes by the materiality of the dance. “It postulates a sense of ‘exteriority within,’ one that rejects the previous geometries and opens up a much larger space that is more appropriately thought of as a changing topology [...] Hence, no priority is given to either materiality or discursivity” (Barad 2003, 824). Naomi’s story tells of a process much more complex than the “claim that cultural practices produce bodies” (Barad 2003, 825) and supports bodies as “multifunctional and complex, as a transformer of flows and energies, affects, desires and imaginings” (Braidotti 2011, 25). In her story, this complexity and capacity becomes apparent partly through the constant presence of motion and change. Naomi’s dance appears as if more focused on processes than a fixed, static goal. The “freeing” and the “letting go” are processes tied to moving, and sensations appearing in that moment, in a “thick present” (Haraway 2016, 1). Neither does this process have an ultimate goal or aim, its value lies in the ongoing reconfigurations. Discussing dancing as a way of discovering your body in new ways, Naomi tells me that she believes this discovering to be indefinite: “I think there will always be things”. This motion is also apparent in our dance exchange the day of the interview. Reflecting on the different modes of teaching and being a student, Naomi tells me:

It’s funny because when you teach me you are like<sup>8</sup>, and when you become student you change this also and you are like a completely different person you look completely different, it feels like

The dancing that day is characterized by a sensitivity, us alternating taking the lead, practicing an attentiveness toward each other. Rather than establishing a certain, static structure, we both continuously engage with the different roles as teacher and student.

<sup>8</sup>Naomi stretches her back and raises her head.

### *Becoming Dancer*

Naomi becoming a dancer is a central motive of her dance story. Without me asking her to many questions, she tells me in detail about how her dancing and dance practice came to be. What is intriguing to me, is how much it was both a process of corporeal knowledges, dance practices, as a cognitive, performative process, Naomi performing dancer and thus becoming dancer:

I was like I'm a dancer I'm a dancer I'm a dancer I said it so often when I had to drive from east to ADC 30 min on the bike I was like I'm a dancer I'm a dancer I'm a dancer and after I don't know how long I did it maybe a month or something I started to believe in myself and felt like yes I'm am worth everything and I'm, and then I just started working at ADC and took these classes and maybe this is the dance academy that I always missed in this way and in the dance and I also noticed I was so shy in the beginning to do the classes and it was so difficult because suddenly you have to do the technical dances and I wasn't used to that so I sucked big time because I was a soccer player I played football for a very long time on a high level so I wasn't used to all these "moves" and then for a movement I was so shy I remember that my boyfriend came to watch me and was too shy to show myself and at a certain point I was like ok I just started to do the advanced classes from everything also ballet even though I sucked I was like eyy ok I can or be shy dance small or I could just do everything what I do dance big and if I forget something it doesn't matter and but make it big and pretend like you are on stage and full of confidence, then I decided for myself to dance like this always. And that made me feel sooo confident

Thus, Naomi becoming a dancer was as much a decision as a corporeal achievement. The story tells of possible modes of interventions whilst also responding to restrictions dictated by power and discourse. It tells of, and announces the agency of bodies to change, create and oppose, but also how its shaped and determined by the gaze of the boyfriend, or specific expectations of what it is to be a dancer. The interventions and constrains are not oppositional, but rather taking place simultaneously. Rather than thinking of power here as "[...] the constitution of the very materiality of the subject, in the principle which simultaneously forms and regulates 'subject' of subjectivation" (Butler 2011, 34), the discursive circumstances is also what creates and enables change: Hence, the situation requires a more complex definition of discourse and its impacts: "For discourse to materialize a set of effects, discourse itself must be understood as a complex and convergent chains in which "effects" are vectors of power. In this sense, what is constituted in discourse is not fixed in or by discourse but becomes the condition and occasion for further action." (Butler 2011, 139). As shown by Naomi's example, discourse does not determine modes of bodies, but bodies are part of what constitutes material- discursive practices. Naomi's dance story tells of a process: Initially feeling uncomfortable and shy dancing, much in relation to others: girlfriends, boyfriends, to creating and embodying

a “safe space” characterized by trust where the dancing should be about “feeling free” and “letting go”. Naomi responds to societal expectations, normative modes of power, a but at the same time also works through and with it.

#### 4. Lisa

*I recognize the pattern of her dance, as if it was my own. Motions transcending a present, carrying the memory of us all. Exhaustion replacing excitement, and then we start over. The extremes allow us to rest in a nowness of which we cannot speak.*

At the time of the interview, Lisa had been living in Tokyo a little over a year, moving there after several years spent in London. I was made aware of Lisa’s dance practice via social media, noticing her repeatedly expressing strong emotions towards contact improvisation (CI). The interview with Lisa was the only one taking place outside the dance studio. Due to the distance, we met over Skype. It was a dynamic and rich conversation but the material circumstances did indeed influence the way of the intra-action. Before performing the interview, I noticed being nervous in a different way, this also applied to Lisa. I felt restricted, knowing that I had to trust the efficiency of words for the conversation to proceed. Furthermore, the transfer from talking to not talking became more apparent, such as the starting and ending point of the interview. Despite being extremely fruitful, the interview was the shortest of all the interviews. It was harder to allow for breaks as a natural part of the conversation, as if the verbal encounter required a certain tempo, a certain pace responding to a normative idea of a conversation.

Even though Lisa expressed feeling challenged talking about her dance practice, it appeared as if she had done a lot of thinking dancing, or dancing thinking. Letting our dance practices merge, I was surprised by reappearing similarities in experiences regarding corporeality, collectivity and intimacy – especially considering that we had never engaged in a conversation on this topic prior the interview.

Despite both of us growing up in Sweden, we decided to carry out the interview in English. Lisa spent most of her grown up life in the UK, and grew up bilingual, speaking English to her mother and Swedish to her father. Engaging with this thesis project through English, I also felt more comfortable performing the interview conversation using this language. However, Lisa growing up speaking English, her capacity of using the language notably exceeded mine. In the context of the interview I believe this asymmetry to have had a positive effect on the interview conversation: It being my ambition to create a safe environment for the conversation, less characterized by the power dynamic of the researcher versus the researched I believe Lisa’s advantage in English to

have generated a healthy disruption of this structure.

### *Performing & Enabling Trust*

Talking to Lisa, the notion of trust appeared on an early stage in our conversation. Responding to the question what contact improvisation (CI) meant to her, Lisa stated:

Ok...so contact as most people know it, is tied in with contemporary dance but in a lot of countries including Sweden but also particular Japan it has been taken as its own thing. And contact for me is a multitude of things, it's a way to express yourself but also a way to be close to people without anything sexual and a way to be close to people where you have to be very trusting you have to trust yourself and you have to trust them and you are always in communication but it is not verbal so you have to listen to the body and listen and you have to look at each other it's not only a physical contact but all the other, but emotional bond as well because you dance differently with different people so with some people you have a great connection with and it's easy to dance and with others its really difficult and it's a real struggle to get any kind of smooth movement

Trust in contact improvisation as perceived by Lisa, seem to appear both through an ongoing process where the notion of trust increases gradually, but also as if through a performed notion of trust. The contact improvisation requires trust for the dance to proceed, and thus also affirms trust through the expectation that trust is needed.

I think you have to go into being quite trusting to start off with and that was difficult for me in the beginning I felt very awkward very self-conscious but once you can just relax and show that you are trusting, then other people more easily show that trust to if you come to a space and its full of people and its very open and themselves very trusting and you relax a lot easier it becomes easier

Following this extract, the notion of trust is performed and embodied, created and required. Performing trust, as it is expected of the space and the dance, also appears to generate embodied trust which builds and creates the dance. It appears as if a space, informed in a specific way, has the capability to create a form of intervention through practice. That mode of repetition of a different kind “also constitute the occasion for a critical reworking“ (Butler 2011, x). CI with Lisa offers ways of being which allow for encounters driven by a power dynamic different to that of an “outside”. Through the repetition of certain acts, through an embodied and performative notion of trust, other subject-positions appear.

Lisa depicts trust as a mutual process: “a way to be close to people where you have to be very trusting you have to trust yourself and you have to trust them”. Furthermore, in the context of the dance, she states that “you are always in communication” and

accentuates the importance of listening to the other bodies. A process of mattering: “That is, it is through specific intra-actions that phenomena come to matter—in both senses of the word. The world is a dynamic process of intra-activity in the ongoing reconfiguring of locally determinate causal structures with determinate boundaries, properties, meanings, and patterns of marks on bodies” (Barad 2003, 817). Hence the process and mattering per se seem to be what constitutes the dance - there is no “initial state” which is disrupted by interaction, but an attentiveness towards the ongoing intra-actions which constitutes the foundation of the dance. In my assessment, the attentiveness towards the mattering has the capacity of creating trusting environment: Lisa and her fellow dancers seem to dance as if through entanglements, acknowledging a mutual dependence. A becoming with the present which requires an awareness and a sensitivity towards the ongoing process, towards space and bodies.

### *Becoming with Whilst Letting Go*

Lisa repeatedly put emphasis on the collective aspect of the dance, the social context and the importance of the group dynamic. She talks of a positive dependence, a needing of each other which is essential for the continuation and creation of the dance:

...yeah because you can't do it without other people it's a definitely needing something that's giving me a nice feeling of needing people because often in society there is the idea that needing someone is looked down upon and you should be strong and manage everything yourself which is impossible we all need people and in CI you physically need other people and otherwise you can't do it and it has been a really good lesson in learning to need others

Hence, the dance through Lisa offers intimacy and caring generated by the acknowledgment of an interdependence which is not dictated by biogenetic relations. It supports the understanding that “[...] our bodies depend on one another for their literal survival—not only through entanglements of gestation, childbirth and lactation, but also through networks of care, and material and affective patternings of bodies, subjects, communities, and worlds, whose ligatures extend far beyond the female resexual womb” (Åsberg och Neimanis 2013, 3). Lisa also describes how the CI has changed her, over time made her more confident and transformed her physical appearance – friends tell her she walks differently. At one point, discussing vulnerability, Lisa also describes how CI is also just about “letting things go”:



Yes I would say largely due to the group of people that I practice with both of them that I find that relatively easy to be vulnerable with because I trust them but and during some jams that vulnerability has helped me with just letting things go

Elaborating on these two extracts, I identify an interesting relation between “letting go” whilst becoming with the collective. It seems that that the collective engagement and the need of each other enables a making of subject-positions whilst simultaneously letting go of the self and becoming with others.

Whilst expressing that “letting go” is as an important feature to her dance, Lisa also describes how she has changed as a result of her dance practice:

I see there has been a lot of physical changes but I feel I’m much more confident and much more relaxed in general we all struggle with being quite anxious and nervous in social situations but that’s kind of not gone away completely there are situations where I am uncomfortable but I find myself much more relaxed

Hence, the CI enables a becoming, a collective worlding which resonates on the self. In my assessment, a creative confusion which does not respond to a linear, static idea of subjectivity or how subjectivity is created. Reflecting on Lisa’s story, there is little focus on what she wishes to achieve through CI – she rather accentuates the process itself and the importance of a presence in the process. The encounter taking place in the CI bares similarities with what Natasha Meyers call “involutionary” encounters: “Such “involutionary” encounters have a metamorphic effect, one that changes not only what practitioners come to feel and know, but also the very meanings of the concepts and metaphors they set in motion to story nonhuman worlds” (Myers 2017, 4). I would argue that the very fundament of Lisa’s dance is to be found in the sensibility towards these changes. The explicit mutual dependence and instant corporeal impact is an ongoing agency making process where bodies and difference matters and constitutes the condition of the dance. Reflecting on the modes of the dance, Lisa states:

That is different from person to person when I’m dancing with a very close friend then it becomes quite loving not at all in a sexual way and then you perceive each other’s bodies in a very caring way when you dance with each other it becomes very caring and if its someone new maybe you perceive then in a more of a curious explorative way or if the bodies are very soft or very muscular then the feeling is different of the person next to you then the dance becomes different and the perception of strength is different it’s always nice

Following Lisa’s story, CI requires a sensibility towards the self and others – you must listen to become in the dance, of the dance. This process, with Haraway known as

“worlding, becoming with” (Haraway 2008, 301) requires a receptivity towards the “ongoing reconfigurings of the world” (Barad 2003, 818) . The reconfigurations, and being receptive towards the ongoing changes and changing is what generates the dance. The sensibility applies not only to humans, but spatial matters. To Lisa, the space also decides the way of the dance:

I don't know there is something about being outside, for example being outside or in the park people start being really silly and you just kind of throwing yourself around its really childish in a really nice way and then in a dance studio if it's more of a workshop its more serious everyone is being more serious

The dance with Lisa is not only a becoming with other humans, but with the materiality of the space in which the dance takes place. The dance is continuously changing and adjusting to its surroundings.

Throughout our conversation, I notice that Lisa makes little or no difference on corporeal and mental matters, her story operates in a non-dualist manner, she describes corporeal consequences of the dance and in the same breath expresses “personality changes” such as becoming more relaxed, and confident. When I ask her whether she ever is confronted with a complexity, translating her CI practice into words (and thereby confront her with the Cartesian split) she responds:

Yeah definitely when people ask me to describe what it makes me feel I'm like ohhhhh I don't really have the words for that but I don't really know how to talk about it it's hard to describe exactly how it makes me feel but yes its but then it's the thing of like I liked to but also don't really feel the need to explain why it's important to me

Thus, Lisa affirms this complexity but also states that it is not of importance to her, being able to make the process accessible through words. Hence, CI to Lisa offers a different way of meaning making, where matter matters not through a representative mode, but through a located, ongoing, process of agency making. Lisa appears to appreciate CI due to the process rather than its intentions.

## *Dancing Kinships*

Lisa tells me that she started CI much due to a close friend encouraging her to attend her class. Also, reflecting on being new in a place, she told me:

I mean three weeks after I moved to Japan and I kind of, you know, moved half way across the world, and to make friends I think I need a new attitude Tokyo in particular is also quite isolating, the hour's people work and such and you know to have a good time here I have to say yes to everything

Thus, more than anything Lisa taking CI classes started off as a social project, as an attempt to make friends. Following up on the social aspect in our interview-conversation, Lisa confirms that this has remained an important motivation for her to proceed with the dance practice. When I ask here whether making friends through CI differs from making friends outside this specific context, she tells me:

Yeahhh I guess you just become closer a lot quicker because you are beginning your friendship with your, you know, bodies pushed up against each other you become really, you become close physically so quickly that... ehmmm... the process to friendship goes really fast and the people there are very warm and open anyway so it's, there is definitely a particular kind of friendship that I find just really lovely

Lisa seem to interpret the corporeal engagements and physical intimacy as a shortcut to friendship, a speeding up of the process towards becoming close. However, she still distinguishes the relationship from other forms, calling it “particular”. Lisa never refers to the group as family, or anything alike, but it is apparent that the group offers a specific form of intimacy which to Lisa is unique to that context.

Throughout the conversation, Lisa recurrently accentuates the importance of CI constituting a non- sexual space:

I think it is amazing it has completely changed my relationship to my body, it has completely changed my relationship to physical touch and my relationship to other people. Growing up I felt a huge amount of discomfort when it came to physical touch because I perceived it always with some slight sexual undertone and especially that kind of touch from many men where as I have danced with a lot of guys and I'm very comfortable and there is nothing sexual and it has helped my own relationship to not see it as this thing that's constantly sexualized but that it is also MY body

It appears as if the space appearing as non-sexual to Lisa, is a condition for the emergence of the intimacy. Furthermore, unlike her previous experience as told in the above extract, intimacy in CI is not determined by the touch of men but rather a mutual

interdependence where touch is part of the entanglements of the dance. Elaborating on this, the CI space, as any other space, is not immune to the aggressions of patriarchy, but it does in Emma's case seem to create and offer an intervention.

Problematizing modes of patriarchy, Elisabeth Grosz states: "Women thus function as the body for men – correlative with the effacement of the of the sexual concreteness of their (women) bodies. If women are represented as the bodily counterparts to men's conceptual supremacy, women's bodies, pleasures and desires are reduced to versions or variants of men's bodies and desires" (Grosz 1995, 38). Following Grosz's observation, women operate through lack, a being always relational to man. In the interview-conversation, Lisa expresses an awareness of what Grosz problematizes, a past where the touch by men was related to their desires. To Lisa, CI has offered a relationship to body which rather is characterized by self-determination, even though involved in a collective process. Lisa tells me how CI has generated a different relationship to her body through the awareness and experience that "It is also MY body". Following Lisa's story, the intimacy appears as possible only when there can be a self-determination, a relation to body enabled through an ethical, trusting and responsible environment.

The dance is determined by and attentive to the circumstances of the moment but resonates on a self, outside the dance. A making of kin where: "The task is to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response. [...] The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present" (Haraway 2016, 1). Lisa's story tells of a practice of the present which however has the capacity to create sustainable entanglements.

## 5. Laura

*At the end of the day I tend to cry, lying on that floor. Nowadays the relive is instant. Sometimes, elsewhere, I catch myself imagining motions. I notice my breathing changing, they tell me there is a slight change in the way I move my hands.*

The third and last interview took place a Tuesday morning in June, in a dance studio in Malmö, Sweden. Laura and I belong to the same dance collective, and we have gotten to know each other dancing. Laura has been dancing with this particular collective for about five years, successively taking more and more classes and spending more and more time in the studio. She goes there after work, often taking three classes after each other. This past year Laura also traveled with the group to Salvador Bahia, Brazil, where the collective originally started its practice. The collective offers dance styles such as samba, baile funk and capoeira. Laura is a student but occasionally also performs with the group.

The interview conversation took place on the floor of the studio, eating breakfast to the sounds of seagulls crying outside. That morning we were both struck by how different the space appeared in daylight and without the presence of our teacher or fellow dancers. The interview-conversation with Laura was intimate and emotional, I left the studio feeling noticeably influenced and somewhat changed. As with Dolphijn and Tuin in *New Materialism*, I with Laura fully had the experience that “it is not the interviewers or the interviewee or even the oeuvre of the interviewee that deserves our special attention, but it is the sense of orientation that the interview gave rise to (the action itself) that should engender us. For it is in the action itself that new materialism announces itself” (Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012, 14). After having established a trusting and safe environment, our encounter that day was as if continuously reshaping itself, taking unexpected directions for both of us to engage with.

Being attentive towards beginning and endings throughout this project, and how it differed depending on the specifics of the encounter, I noticed both Laura and me starting off slightly nervous. Where with Naomi, dancing before talking, the physical exhaustion somewhat eased the tension, present in the other conversations. However, sitting on the floor of the studio, eating while talking, enabled a less formal encounter and made it easier to disrupt a more normative interview structure. Together me and Laura managed to build up a trusting environment. During the interview, Laura asked me questions as well and we allowed for the conversation to take time. I was open with my vulnerability and Laura explicitly told me how this made her feel more at ease, sharing personal stories as well. The interview conversation with Laura was the last of the three interviews performed for the sake of this thesis project: Hence, I noticed how I had been influenced by the previous encounters and could practice what I had learned and experienced in the previous situations. I was less intimidated by silences and felt more comfortable asking open questions. I was also more attentive towards the situation itself, letting the encounter guide the conversation rather than my preset questions. Me and Laura finished of the conversation with a stretching session, led by her, she showed me movements which I repeated.

### *Fearless Dancing*

Despite taking slightly different expressions, dancing in all of the stories appears as a process of freeing. Lisa and Naomi talks of a letting go, whilst Laura repeatedly talks of a dancing without experiencing fear, a fearless dancing. In the case of Laura, this experience appears to be both relational, hence in relation to a sensation of not being free, as well as an action and act of its own.

In the beginning, discussing trust and the importance of trust in the studio, Laura tells me:

It plays an important role, and also I believe that it makes a big difference, it only being women attending these classes and for a long time I had no interest in going outside of that, it was enough for me, but now I'm starting to enjoy taking it outside this space as well and that it's ok with men in the audience, but for a long time I didn't even want that....and Mestra often tells us how what she wants most of all is freedom, and that there is a freedom in being able to dance without being afraid and I believe that you have so many fears in the beginning before you have the experience and technique and plenty of practicing hours behind you, and then trust is extremely important

Fearless dancing as a relative condition for Laura partly relates to an assault she experienced three years ago. She tells me how she after the assault, struggled in proceeding with activities which normally made her happy. However, throughout the recovery process, she kept on dancing, and the dance studio became place where she still was able to be “expressive” and take up space whilst feeling safe and familiar. Discussing the notion of feeling free while dancing, fearless dancing, Laura finds it challenging with words describing the process which takes her to this place. Even though she acknowledges the importance of trust and the space being separatist, she also accentuates the importance of the dance practice, of repeating movements, continuously practicing technique to reach this state. In the end, telling me how being able to perform on stage without fear is “even bigger” she tells me how “hard work equals that feeling”. However, the hard work, a corporeal engagement and repetitive act over time, is according to Laura not about perfecting movements but the process itself.

Despite being utterly aware of the male gaze, and Laura initially not wanting to dance in the presence of a male audience, it is not what dictates her dance practice. It appears as if the ongoing dancing involvement in process, doesn't respond to the language of patriarchy and thus enables a position which isn't relational but different. Returning to our conversation there is an interesting moment where Laura describes to me how she initially was complexed by the “show group” of the dance collective and their way of performing:

Maybe I needed that, in the beginning, really not wanting it, not wanting men to watch and when I spoke to the onse in the show group and you told me about the instructions you received about how to be a showgirl, I though it almost sounded like...well not like an abuse but that you were extremely limited in how you could, u know I would often end up having fights with men going out because I tell them no and then they get angry and stuff, and when you told me you always had to smile and be the face of the dance collective, and wear a thong it appeared to me as a very very exposed situation. My feeling around this as understanding has changed drastically throughout this process, I came with a lot of set ideas and opinions which has changed and it has also made me way more modest.

As we together elaborate on this, we reflect on the importance of embodied experience, Laura adds:

You only get so far in theory, that's so god damn true, that can't be said enough, it feels like you say that in so many different situation but then you just end up doing the same mistake over and over again

Hence, both extracts tell of situations which appear utterly different when interpreted rather than practiced. An expression which initially appeared as problematic to Laura, offered unexpected sensations and changes when practiced. "Beginning with material substances rather than already constituted social groups may, in fact, allow for the formation of unexpected political coalitions and alliances" (Alaimo och Hekman, 2008, 9). Laura's story reveals the limits to representational modes and supports an "[...] ontology that rejects the metaphysics of relata, of 'words' and 'things' " (Barad 2003, 812). To Laura, the dancing has resulted not only in different ways of taking up space, but also a modesty towards process and experience over set meanings and understandings.

### *Dancing Interventions of Body Image*

In all three interview- conversations, discussing body and corporeal matters depicts different live stages of the interviewees. Talking about the body in the dance studio, stories transcending a corporal, spatial and temporal present unfold. It appears that in different ways we all have had a complex, sometimes destructive relationships to our bodies, resulting in eating disorders and/or mental illness. While feeling free in the studio, we also carry these stories with us. A past does not necessarily dictate the dance but is apparent that the perceived "freeing" and "letting go" is not about forgetting, denying or opposing. When I explicitly ask Laura about body, I at first sense an unwillingness to discuss this topic – we both confirm what a comprehensive and complex question it is before both we both become silent. I tell Laura about my eating disorders and how I found a way out of it through my dance practice. Discussing possible reasons for what we both understand as a positive change in regards to our relation body Laura states:

I think you know what I said before about everything being in the same place, that the mind settles fully in body, for example if I walk in the street my mind is in a thousand different places and if everything is in the same place then I also feel like I'm fully in myself and if I have such restrictive ideas about my body then I'm not in myself so I believe that existing In a grounded self, settling in yourself like mind is here body is here everything is an organic entity and its extremely healing and when that separates then I look at my body as separate things and I think that's a precondition to even have that picture.

Prior to this, in the very beginning Laura also tells me the following:

...what happens is that mind and body is in the exact same place doing the exact same thing, a holistic experience which I almost don't have anywhere else

Elaborating on Laura's story, I find the "holistic" experience she describes intriguing. It appears that the experience of a merging of body and mind, allows for a different way of perceiving the self. It offers a becoming which attentive towards process, which foundation is in the movement and practicing of a dance technique rather than the desire for becoming a static image. Laura talks of a "separation" as a condition for a destructive self-image, and to her the dancing prevents this split. As the conversation proceeds, we discuss the moving body as an alternative to the static image. In my understanding, without questioning its positive impact or potential, the "body positive" culture is also very much centered around the static image. Even though these images may work with difference, the static notion is likely to entail an objectification of women. A condition where: "[...] women are not subjects constitutive of space and spatial relations, they are objects located in space (Ferguson 2009, 48). Unlike being an "object located in space" Laura's dance story tells of subject-positions constantly negotiated through the process of movement, an intense dance practice:

I believe technique and training to be an important part of being able to dance without fear, I don't think it's only positive thinking or so

Hence, it's a place, or a state, which is not accessible through a preset image of something but through action and practice.

Laura's story depicts difference which interferes not only with patriarchy but the making of subject positions offered by patriarchy and the resistance towards patriarchy. In my assessment, a purely oppositional mode might create new restrictions: That an acting in opposition to, offers an existence which still is relational to the very structure one wishes to subvert. In Laura's story, there are several examples capturing this complexity. In the interview conversation Laura tells me about her skepticism towards the show group and show girls when she started, how they in her opinion, were utterly exposed and defied by the male gaze. She also tells me how this "image" eventually changed, getting access to the process behind the "image", the dance technique and the hard work. Elaborating on this, I believe there to be much potential in the corporeal process Laura describes. That Laura's dance practice offers a becoming which has the potential of being less about changing an image and more about the agency of the process per se. A "subject- and object-making dance" (Haraway 2008, 14) operating in a diffractive rather than opposite mode, enabling subject-positions intervening with patriarchy.



### *On the Dancing Family*

Despite Laura being extremely apparent with the importance of her dance practice, describing it as a life changing experience, there is a modesty in Laura's way of sharing her story. I ask her open questions and she partly gives me open answers, constantly expressing the complexity and multifaceted nature of the situations we are discussing. This becomes specifically apparent discussing the notion of collectivity. When I ask her to reflect on the modes of collectivity in the group she responds:

Mmm... that is also such a complex question for a short and simple answer, I could say that it's amazing and so important and that I've made so many new, real friends, but it is also so complex, really - sometimes I've noticed that I tend to compare with others in a bad way, but most often I don't. Most often I feel that you lift each other, looking into each other's eyes, and instead of dancing against each other you dance with each other, I'm not sure what decides which way it goes, but it is a fine-tuned thing group dynamics... but when it functions at its best, then you really feel that the sum of everyone together is so much bigger than the separate entities.

In conjunction with the preparations for a big performance, Laura tells me how they all had been looking out for each other, providing different kinds of support:

this spring, I guess it was partly like that last spring just as well, when you work intensively on something, the people attending most often, the once you spend a lot of time with ...everyone tends to have a break- down, for different reasons, people have been dumped, people have no money, all sorts of things and we just help each other so much, it's so beautiful it's like.... now this word comes up, which we have talked about before, but I guess we have been acting like a family...like "take money from me" or whatever it could be

It appears that the conditions of the collective do generate a quite unique intimacy, however, as Laura expresses, it is not always and only a simple process. She talks of a comparing and the complexity of group dynamics. However, much of the positive changes and processes Laura describes can be connected to the specifics of the collective: that it's women only and has a female leader who constantly accentuates the collective achievement rather than individual. The collectivity, and its capacity to create a safe space, appears to be one of the conditions for Laura to be expressive and lose herself in her dance, to have this "holistic experience", she talks of. Like Lisa's dance collective, Laura's collective is founded on a mutual dependence: needing each other preparing for a performance, needing each other to get dressed, but also for emotional or economic support, as Laura describes. Despite hesitating using the word family, the situation offers a reworking of family and kin in its normative notion, thus "something other/

more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy. The gently defamiliarizing move might seem for a while to be just a mistake, but then (with luck) appear as correct all along” (Haraway 2016, 102).

In addition to context, I would like to argue that the becoming with each other, the “practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present “ (Haraway 2016) has the capacity to create alternative modes of family or kin. This mode of “kin” is founded on a caring which is generated through the involvement in the dance moments, practicing a sensibility towards the process and the present. Laura becoming in her dance, the sensation that everything is one place, requires a safe and trusting environment, which she simultaneously creates and is part of. Hence this is a caring which is “not about letting an object go but holding on to an object by letting oneself go, giving oneself over to something that is not one’s own” (Ahmed 2010, 186).

## 6. Conclusion

### *Material/Discursive Negotiations*

In all the interview conversations, talking about dancing triggered stories of an “outside the studio”. All three stories, as of my own, retold of past with a problematic relationship to body, eating disorders or mental illness. Furthermore, all the interviewees had a much-developed awareness of the male gaze, marks on the body, caused by patriarchy. Hence, the interviewees as if unconsciously situated their dancing amongst a lifetime of different corporeal processes and intra-actions. In none of the cases, dancing was perceived as an autonomous act, but still offered interventions which resonated on a self, outside the studio. Crucial to the becomings, the negotiation of identities, was a notion of simultaneously carrying with and letting go of previous embodied experience. As much as Laura, Lisa and Naomi had been shaped by a past, a specific social and cultural context, the dancing also generated new, different ways of being, a becoming with the present, the space and the other dancers. The dancing enabled actions/doings which were not relational to a past, but different. Not operating in a directly oppositional mode enabled a practicing of bodies “[...]as a transformer of flows and energies, affects, desires and imaginings” (Braidotti 2011, 25). Furthermore, following the dance stories of this thesis, the dancing can be doings/actions which contest representative modes of the notion of real. As with Laura, who described her dance practice as a holistic experience where everything is in one place. This holistic sensation, the ongoing involvement and attunement in process, contested a representative notion of the self. The dancing for Laura in that moment left no room for perceiving herself.

The three situations supported a complex understanding of body, acknowledging

its agency, without necessarily being able capture it through words, a verbal meaning making. It showed of a material-discursive interplay, challenging the “claim that cultural practices produce bodies” (Barad 2003, 825). In none of the cases the dancing was described as a practice, fulfilling preset expectations or goals. Instead, the dancers described what happened once dancing, surprising and unexpected elements which at some cases even would challenge previous understandings (as with Laura and the show group). This gave a negotiation of identities receptive towards ongoing reconfiguration determined by a becoming with. As the conditions of the dance, through the dance kept changing, the bodies, the space, and the dynamic of the collective – the dancing required an attentiveness towards these processes.

At all occasions, it became apparent that context mattered, the conditions of the space was crucial for the dancers to feel safe enough to “let go”, “feel free”, or be “expressive”. It mattered to Laura that her dancing space was a separatist space, it mattered to Lisa that her CI-space was characterized by trust and sensitivity. To Naomi it was important being able to create a space dictated by collectivity and the sensation of “freeing”, rather than perfection and individual progress. Hence, to feel safe was a requirement for the dancers to involve, engage and become with the unexpected and surprising ways of the dancing. However, simultaneously, their engagement in the collectivity and space was also what created these safe spaces. Following this, the dance stories told of an ongoing interplay, intra-actions with no separate entities, but complex entanglements.

In all three cases, the dance stories told of a particular intimacy and mode of collectivity. To Lisa this was a crucial side to her dance experience, she described it as a “positive needing of each other”. Something she felt wasn’t really allowed outside the studio. Laura described the complexity of collectivity, but also told of a situation which offered strong emotional and at times economical support. Thereto she described the sensation of a togetherness, which was different and much bigger than the “separate entities”. Naomi wasn’t as explicit in her feelings towards the dance collective, nor the idea that her dance context offered a specific social environment. However, while discussing this topic, it appeared that all her friends where dancers, friends made in a dance context. Reflecting on this, I believe there to be much potential in the “positive needing of each other”, that it has the capacity to enable a caring which can be perceived as a making of kin or “odkin”. As stated by Haraway: “The task is to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response. [...] The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present” (Haraway 2016, 1). The three stories told of dancing as a process requiring a certain sensitivity and attunement towards the present, but also processes which had the capacity to transcend the notion of self and other. Thus, without it appearing

as an initial motive for their dancing, a certain collectivity, a making of kin, appeared. A kinship, not determined by biogenetic relations, but a togetherness characterized by mutual involvement in process, a needing of each other and sensitivity towards the ongoing reconfigurations.

### *Agency Through Movement*

In a much explicit way, the limitations to words became apparent both in the interview conversations and in the process of writing this thesis. In the interview conversations with Laura and Naomi, taking place in dance studios, corporeal expressions were crucial to the way of the conversations. Furthermore, all the interviewees expressed feeling challenged, trying to capture the value of their dance experience in words, however, they also confirmed that this wasn't really of importance to them. Rather than defining the most important feature of the dance as the perfecting of movements or achieving a certain goal, process appeared as central motive of their dance practices. Reflecting on the three stories, it appeared as if this appreciation of process, was not to be captured in a linguistic – discursive understanding of the world, the width of the dance moments did not find its counterpart in concepts or words. In an attempt to write and think about these silences (silence from words) the notion of intra-action in all cases left less of a void and also generated different understandings than a discourse analysis not taking materiality into account would. The becoming with, the practicing of a sensitivity and attentiveness towards fellow dancers, group dynamics, and the space of the dance, was a mattering which in itself created agency. They found value in experiencing a sensation of body and mind merging and not being able to perceive oneself (Laura), and with Naomi and Lisa it was the notion of “freeing” and “letting go”. Hence, the enthusiasm towards the dancing was not motivated by the achievement of a certain, static goal (such as reaching a certain level or profession in their dancing) but rather the involvement in the dance process per se.

Furthermore, all having fought with destructive self- images and in different ways being exposed and marked by the male gaze, the dancing had the capability to create a relation to self, not determined by the restrictive modes of images. The dancing, in these three specific situations, offered material/discursive interventions: Not responding to a destructive image by creating a new image (which is still determined by the previous one) but rather through becoming in a different way, through doing, acting differently. This was present with all the dancers, but Laura commented on this explicitly, telling me how she previous dancing had been trying to overcome eating disorders, creating an opposite. Thus, she would aim not at all to care about the things which previously had occupied her mind. However, in creating the opposite, she remained tied to the very

image she tried to escape. In the dancing, she, as well as Lisa and Naomi, was instead able to create a condition which was not directly relational to a past but doings/actions characterized by an involvement in a motion of the present. They were dancing as if through and with a past, rather than continuously responding to it.

### *To be Corporeally Invested in a Thesis*

As methodological ambition of this project, I wished to investigate the possibility of being corporeally investigated in a thesis, in the body of a text. Attempting to practice a cautiousness towards language in the interview conversations, its power and restrictions, it felt utterly important to also apply this awareness and approach to the project as a whole. In doing so, I set up situations which would not let me apply the position as an observing and evaluating researcher, but where I would be involved in and practice the project. Thus, simultaneously with the writing process, I was involved in an intense dance practice, altering writing with dancing on an everyday basis. Not only did this generate a different writing process, but also a more modest approach to my work. Being able to theorize from a position where I could relate to the material in a corporeal, embodied way, enabled multifaceted insights and reflections. However, it also made the writing process more complex: I constantly struggled trying to capture the different modes of the project in an academic text. I found it more of a challenge to make certain statements and arguments: practicing the project, intervened with the logic of a chain of thoughts, the actions and doings were not necessarily compatible with words.

Applying this approach also to the interview situations correlated exceptionally well with feminist interview techniques, practicing an awareness towards hierarchies and structures. The interviews taking place in dance studios, intervened with the normative power dynamics of the interviewer and the interviewee. Setting up a different corporeal environment, mattered for the possibilities of the interview conversations. With Laura and Naomi, sitting on the floor of the studio enabled a relaxed and open interview situation. Together, we were able to create a less formal environment, where there was room for sweating, stretching, dancing, physical contact, and tears. Avoiding a more formal and thus normative interview technique, I wasn't able to rely on preset ideas on the meanings and implications of interviewing, but had to stay attentive towards the unexpected ways of the conversations. On my side, this generated a sensitivity and sensation of responsibility, being aware that "Particular possibilities for acting exist at every moment, and these changing possibilities entail a responsibility to intervene in the world's becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering" (Barad 2003, 827). Engaging with the present of the interview conversations, the ongoing reconfigurations, I was open to the conversations taking unexpected turns.

This generated a more unstable and more vulnerable position, where I couldn't rely on the implications of being "the interviewer" but instead continuously was "staying with the trouble": "In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (Haraway, 2016, 1). As pointed out by Haraway, one has to learn how to stay with the trouble. Thus, it is not that the different interview setting automatically generated more open conversations, it required a mutual effort and actual will to break the hierarchy of a normative interview situation.

## **7. Suggestions for Future Research**

It has been a real struggle, fitting this project within the word count responding to the rules of this thesis. Pursuing this thesis project, I have started something I wish to continue and expand on, partly through more interviews and dance encounters. Due to the restricted space, I have in this project chosen not to expand much on the specifics of each dance style. This has been a conscious but ambiguous decision, partly caused by the silence on this topic by the interviewees. Nevertheless, engaging with the specifics of each style would have given other valuable and important insights. I would have been intrigued to be able to elaborate on this further, even more so through a feminist new materialist perspective. Despite this project having a performative aspect to it, if given the time, I would have wanted to expand on this notion further. To give justice to the topic of this thesis project, I would have wished for the results not only to be presented through a text, but a performance, embodying its topic.

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**Cover Photo**

**Christian Michel Echenique, *Untitled* 2014**

# Appendix

## Interview Guide

1. What is this space to you?
2. When did you start dancing with this group and why?
3. Dancing with your fellow dance companions, how do you perceive the bodies next to you and yourself among the other bodies?
4. Did you ever experience a conflict talking about you dance practice? Like there are things you appreciate in your dance practice which are hard to describe to others not in the dance group?
5. Sometimes you perform with your group, how would you describe that process?
6. Can you describe the process of getting in to the dance? Like is there some kind of transfer from not dancing to dancing which is important/ interesting to you?
7. Can you describe your dance relations as in relations to people you have met through dancing. Do they differ from other relations in your life?
8. Do you experience that in your dance practice, you are able to enact “you” differently? If so, how has this difference influenced your ideas about yourself over time?
9. There are only women in your dance group? How does this influence the dynamics of the space you think? How does it influence you?