

Improvised forms of life: Negotiating ideological formations within contemporary dance

RMA Thesis
Media, Art & Performance Studies
Utrecht University
July 2020

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Abstract

Can dance improvisation be cast as a site for the production of concepts and practices supportive of contemporary forms of life? In this thesis, I start with an acknowledgement of both the promises and pitfalls of lives lived in an open relationship to form—liberated from normative ideas about what a life should or can be, but precarized by the techniques of neoliberal governance—and investigate the potential of dance improvisation in relation to negotiating the conditions of collective ongoingness in the face of material and epistemological uncertainty. To do so, I begin by mapping a critical discourse within dance studies which *problematizes* the ideological trappings of contemporary dance improvisation, framing dance improvisation as a biopolitical mode of subjection. Normative understandings of movement, essence, and therapy cast dance improvisation as a field which is, according to the biopolitical critique, *not yet* an adequate site of support for collective ongoingness. However, by showing that the clusters of concepts which define dance improvisation as an ideological assemblage take on alternative meanings in other fields, I demonstrate a certain flexibility within dance improvisation. Acknowledging and enacting this conceptual flexibility frames dance improvisation not only as a possible source of support for the complex challenges of the present, but indeed as an object with the potential to continue to adapt to the critical demands of the future.

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Introduction

Bit by bit, the city robs you of certainty. There can never be any fixed path, and you can survive only if nothing is necessary to you. Without warning, you must be able to change, to drop what you are doing, to reverse. In the end, there is nothing that is not the case. As a consequence, you must learn how to read the signs. When the eyes falter, the nose will sometimes serve.

Paul Auster, *In the Country of Last Things* (1987)¹

In the Country of Last Things—written during the second Reagan administration, in the early days of the neoliberal turn—describes a brutal city. Divested of any dependable governmental or social structures, the narrator lives the city in an improvised state of pure transition or pure immanence, gathering strategies for sensing, moving through, and living on in a destabilized and destabilizing environment. In 2020, the dystopian future which Auster describes is still eerily resonant. If anything, the neoliberal processes of attrition and precarization which informed his speculative vision have only intensified. So have other, more hopeful processes—and here I am thinking about the ground gained in struggles against the colonial, racist, sexist, heteronormative, elitist, ableist, and anthropocentric metanarratives of modernism—which, albeit in a more positive sense, have also led to a certain destabilization of both western knowledge and modern forms of life. These disorientations, both productive and destructive, raise the question: in lieu of the structures and narratives which formerly gave some lives a hopeful and more-or-less definite form, what supports are still available for orienting lived understanding and organizing lived continuity?

In this thesis, I formulate an embodied theory of *improvisation* as a strategy of ongoingness and knowledge production in the face of both epistemological uncertainty and material precarity. In particular, I focus on dance improvisation, a field in which I find the discursive groundwork for such a theory has already been laid. In dance improvisation, the question of how to read the signs, test the waters, manage energy, navigate space, establish and break patterns, and enter and exit flows is always already thought in terms of

¹ Thanks to Lotte van Gelder for introducing this book to me.

dynamic embodiment. Dance improvisation, therefore, is a promising site for the production of practices and vocabularies suited to living and theorizing lives lived in an open relationship to form, whether by choice or by necessity.

On the other hand, dance improvisation is also a field strongly influenced by certain problematic discourses, as a small but persuasive body of recent dance studies texts argue. Because my research question has to do with dance improvisation's potential in relation to theorizing and navigating new forms of life, I'm particularly concerned with the dance studies discourse which points towards dance improvisation's imbrication with biopower. This is what I have chosen to call the 'biopolitical critique' of dance improvisation. Closely reading and thinking along with the authors of the biopolitical critique, dance improvisation emerges as a field thoroughly implicated in the stylization of lives in certain normative ways, and especially along hegemonic political lines. In other words, these texts demonstrate that dance improvisation—as an actual field of discourse and practice, not simply as a concept or a theoretical possibility—is in many ways *complicit* with neoliberalism, as well as with the effort to *resist* the dismantling of certain modernist metanarratives ('essentialisms').

When seen through this lens—as a biopolitical *mode of subjection*²—dance improvisation would seem an unlikely candidate for the role I describe above; that is, as a dialogue partner or guide through a process of social and epistemological opening-up. But do these critiques rule out the possibility? Is dance improvisation fundamentally tainted by its current ideological orientation? My proposal in this thesis is that the biopolitical critique does not 'cancel' improvisation, nor assign it a particular ideological baggage which it will never rid itself of, nor frame it as irremediably passé; instead, the biopolitical critique opens up space for rethinking dance improvisation for the 21st century, as both a relevant artistic practice and an important guide and partner in thought. Indeed, in the coming pages, I delve deeply into the biopolitical critique of dance improvisation, in order to show how these critiques can be *generative* for dance improvisation, rather than corrosive. By paying close attention to the claims

² In *The Use of Pleasure* (1984), Michel Foucault defines the 'mode of subjection' as "the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the [normative] rule and recognizes himself [*sic*] as obliged to put it into practice" (1990/1984:27).

made within the biopolitical critique, I show how this critique reveals a potentially affirmative approach to dance improvisation which is, at the same time, not naïve about the treacherous biopolitical terrain within which it operates.

I write this thesis in 2020, a year in which many of the quietly- or not-so-quietly-brewing crises of modernity—colonial, racial, environmental, democratic, epistemological—seem on the verge of tipping into chaos. What emerges most strongly for me in this moment is the sense of the interconnectivity of things: we emerge from and are sustained by complex and fragile material-discursive ecologies, ecologies which require care. Operating ethically within these ecologies, as artists, movers, or knowledge-producers—or perhaps simply as participants or *actants*, to use Bruno Latour’s term (Latour 1996/1990)—requires both nuanced critical thinking and a principled consideration for ongoingness.³ This thesis emerges from just such a careful engagement with dance improvisation and is written with flourishing in mind.⁴ Attending to dance improvisation as I do so here is therefore not a neutral act of description, but rather a performance of knowledge production born from optimism about a world which is *not* like the one Auster describes in his *Country of Last Things*: vicious, meaningless, and overwhelming. In this thesis, I demonstrate that dance improvisation has a part to play in navigating the difficult moment we find ourselves in. Rethinking and reframing dance improvisation in response to the insights of the biopolitical critique, I show the ways in which dance improvisation not only remains relevant today, but also points towards a possible future and future forms of life wherein ongoing open-endedness receives adequate conceptual and material support.

The biopolitical critique of dance improvisation

What is the biopolitical critique of dance improvisation? The theorists of the biopolitical critique—many of whom are also involved in the contemporary dance field as dramaturgs—problematize dance improvisation by reading it as a

³ My use of the term ‘ongoingness’ in this thesis is informed by Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble* (2016).

⁴ I am inspired to think with care by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa. In particular, her reading of Donna Haraway in *Matters of Care* (2017) prompts a reflection on the entanglement of researcher and research object. She argues for the ongoingness and flourishing of existing ecologies or assemblages as an important aim within practices of knowledge production.

biopolitical mode of subjection. In other words, they examine the way dance improvisation teaches, rehearses, and enforces a particular understanding of body, self, and world (kinetic and essentialist), as well as a particular way of relating to the effort it takes to abide by and embody that understanding (therapeutic). Moreover, by showing how the kinetic, essentialist, and therapeutic aspects of dance improvisation relate to a certain normative organization of power, and by insisting on the deleterious effects of this organization of power, the biopolitical critique of dance improvisation seeks to demonstrate that the embodiments produced and aestheticized within dance improvisation have political effects, and not always in a salutary sense.

The writers whose works, when read together, spell out the biopolitical critique of dance improvisation occupy a certain small corner of the academic field of dance studies, and do not themselves claim to represent a movement, a 'turn', or even a unified viewpoint. In this thesis, I *produce* the biopolitical critique by gathering various dance studies texts together and highlighting what they all have in common. Concentrating especially on André Lepecki, Bojana Kunst, Andrew Hewitt, Bojana Cvejić, Ana Vujanović, and João da Silva, I draw out the way these thinkers propose connections between dance improvisation and biopolitics. By grouping these different theories together, what comes to the fore is a many-layered critique which problematizes dance improvisation on multiple grounds. According to the biopolitical critique, dance improvisation is deeply imbued with certain modernist, essentialist, and/or neoliberal values, and therefore is part of what keeps endemic inequality, exploitative labor practices, and a whole host of other toxic doxa in place. The biopolitical critique is extensive, broad-ranging, and serious in its implications, and I dedicate the first three chapters of this thesis to mapping it in depth.

It is not simply my intention, however, to draw attention to this critique and inscribe its authors within a critical turn; rather, I spend time on the biopolitical critique because the insights it raises are crucial to the larger task at hand, which is reframing dance improvisation affirmatively, both as an ethical and sustainable field in and of itself, and in relation to managing and conceptualizing new forms of life and lived experience. Moving towards this affirmative analysis means that I also track what is *difficult* about the biopolitical critique from the point of view of dance improvisation's ongoingness, the challenges it poses and the moments at which critical eagerness slips into what

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick might call paranoia (Sedgwick 2003 & 2006). Resisting the contagious momentum of paranoid thinking, I instead identify a space of possibility for improvisation in the midst of the biopolitical critique, which is opened up, according to my own analysis, by the way these texts frame dance improvisation as a research object. The writers of the biopolitical critique are concerned with dance improvisation in its grounded specificity: as an actual material-discursive assemblage, a collection of bodies, practices, concepts, sensations, scenes, and so forth, and not as an essence. With great acuity, they show the ways the particular arrangement of concepts which characterizes dance improvisation today is ideological rather than necessary. What is problematic about dance improvisation, when criticized through the lens of biopolitics, is its *ideological morphology*, the specific—that is, historical and contingent—way it links heterogenous materials together, which poses a problem but also gestures towards a possibility. If the biopolitical critique is to be faulted for something, I suggest, it is not for the accuracy of its analysis, but rather for its tendency to buy into this contingent arrangement, to represent dance improvisation as something fundamentally characterized by its ideological morphology: in so doing, it fails to take the processual and multiple nature of assemblages into account, as well as their capacity for change. Instead, thinking from the perspective of care, I highlight the affirmative possibilities arising from the sense in which the contingency of ideological arrangements implies the possibility of things being otherwise.

Some definitions: biopolitics and ideology

Two related terms come back again and again in this thesis: 'biopolitics' and 'ideology'. For my purposes, biopolitics is a rather broad term, covering all the ways political power is tied up with stylizing forms of life. Admittedly, this way of thinking biopolitics is rather capacious compared to Michel Foucault's more narrow definition—"the attempt, starting from the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems posed to governmental practice by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings forming a population: health, hygiene, birthrate, life expectancy, race" (2008/2004:19). Dance improvisation is *not* biopolitical in this strict sense, given that governments are often not directly involved with dance practice, nor is dance *primarily* framed as a health practice

(although it is often *also* a health practice; see chapter three), and it is worth bearing this divergence from the Foucauldian formulation in mind. Certainly, some of the specific power of the term is lost in the more open definition I propose. But I contend that a more open definition of biopolitics—one which does not think biopolitics as a relation between the population and state governments, but rather between that same population and ‘techniques of governance’ more generally—is in line with a contemporary, expanded usage of the term.⁵ After all, it is clear that the lines of force which shape lives in particular ways today—as fit, healthy, and mobile, but also as entrepreneurial, individualistic, consumerist, flexible, and skilled or skilling-up—emerge not only in the context of things like public health initiatives, but also within the cultural arena in discourses or scenes which appear on the surface politically ‘neutral’ or unaffiliated, like dance improvisation. Biopower, then, is not only something exerted by governments: it is also a more diffuse force, which can just as easily appear in the guise of a desire as in that of a command.

In the context of neoliberalism, biopolitical subjectification binds the mechanisms through which we become ourselves with the mobilization of production and consumption, and with covering over or covering up for the variously egregious damages which rampant production and consumption cause (racialized exploitation, environmental degradation—the list need not be enumerated). The term ‘biopolitical’ also emphasizes the sense in which subjectification here is not about an abstract set of values, tendencies, and convictions held ‘in the mind’, but rather functions through embodiment, and eventually also exerts its violence on bodies. In that sense, dance is a prime

⁵ Thomas Lemke’s *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* (2011) attests to the “range of diverse and often conflicting views” (2011:1) concerning the meaning of the term ‘biopolitics’. While it literally “denotes a politics that deals with life” (2), the notion of the biopolitical opens out onto diverse and often contradictory perspectives about just where the border between politics and life is located, whether the political is modeled on the biological or the biological on the political, and so forth. Lemke reads the Foucauldian tradition as an invitation to track the governance of individuals and collectives “by practices of correction, exclusion, normalization, disciplining, therapeutics, and optimization” (5). While Foucault’s discussion originally revolved around the role the social and life sciences played in stylizing life in certain ways, scholarship since Foucault has emphasized the complementary role of non-scientific discourses and practices—such as, in the case of this thesis, dance improvisation—such that biopolitics comes to represent a form of “control that extends throughout the depths of the consciousnesses and bodies of the population—and at the same time across the entirety of social relations” (Hardt & Negri 2000:24). It is this approach, which doesn’t split the biological from the subjective, nor the strictly governmental from more diffuse, ‘cultural’ forms of control, which I pick up in this thesis. Biopower, in other words, is here a way of thinking about the normative and normatively productive stylization of lives, “the power to regularize life, the authority to *force* living not just to happen but to endure and appear in particular ways” (Berlant 2011:97; emphasis in the original).

suspect for biopolitical critique, as it allows us to zoom in on not only the way a set of values and concepts come to define a certain understanding of self, body, and world, but also how they come to be embodied and function through embodiment.

If biopolitics names the relation between power and embodiment, then how does it differ from ideology? Indeed, ideology and biopolitics are in many ways complementary or even overlapping notions: both ideology and biopolitics can, in the context of dance improvisation and other 'therapeutic' (rather than explicitly coercive) instances of the biopolitical, be understood as the manner in which certain understandings come to be naturalized as 'common sense', especially when those understandings are of a political character or have a political effect. But when we say that something is ideological, we point to something other than the traffic between power and the body of the populace; we point specifically to the way a mobile set of concepts and practices hardens into a kind of stable arrangement, thereby becoming an entity which condenses and conducts the movements of power, including biopower.

In this thesis, I write about ideology following Michael Freeden, who theorizes ideology in terms of *morphology* and *decontestation* (Freeden 2003). An ideology is *morphological* in that it orders political concepts and practices such that some are central, others peripheral, and each stands in relatively fixed relation to the other.⁶ An ideology, moreover, does something else to these ordered concepts and practices: it *decontests* them. While, Freeden argues, the longevity of historically persistent political concepts lies in their polysemy—'equality', for example, can mean many things, "some of them [...] mutually exclusive" (53)—ideologies are "the systems of thought through which *specific* meaning is conferred upon every political concept in their domain [...] achieved by legitimating one meaning of each concept and delegitimating others" (53; emphasis mine).

When concepts are processed in this way into ideological units, decontested and arranged, they produce clear and mobilizing meanings. Within the discourse of dance improvisation, freedom, movement, truth, expression, the self, the body, energy, presence, and healing are all concepts which take on

⁶ Think, for example, of the difference between an ideology which associates change with freedom and another which associates change with disorder.

specific meanings, and which, by taking on these specific meanings, facilitate specific kinds of moving, thinking, and signifying, and not others. Pointing to the sense in which a claim, a demand, or a practice is ideological therefore amounts to pointing to the way it becomes meaningful only by erasing other possible meanings (which nevertheless remain latent), naturalizing a particular and contingent set of assumptions. While ideology, then, is a critical category, it is also a generative one, insofar as highlighting ideological blind spots can also open the door for something or someone to start moving and signifying differently.

In this thesis, biopolitics and ideology are two conceptual tools for getting at the big picture emerging from various commentaries on and critiques of dance improvisation. 'Biopolitics' is a way of naming more specifically what appears in these critiques as a shared orientation, flavor, or set of concerns. 'Ideology' helps us understand the status of dance improvisation as an object of critique. While these two terms do different conceptual work, they also tend to intersect and bleed into one another. Attending to the intersections as well as the differences between the concepts of biopolitics and ideology allows us to be specific and rigorous in the analysis below.

Dance improvisation as a research object

Which dance improvisation is under discussion here? In this thesis, my argument is based on an analysis of critical interventions in the context of European and North American contemporary dance, rather than on dance improvisation in a general sense, as a cross-cultural phenomenon or something which sometimes just 'happens.' I choose to narrow the scope of my study in this way because contemporary dance provides the framework within which improvisational experimentation can be both explicitly critical and explicitly the locus of conceptual and discursive production, alongside, through, and around physical practices of experimentation. In other words, the contemporary dance field supports dance improvisation as an open-ended practice, as well as something which has a flexible relationship to theorization, in the sense that it is not only theorized *about*, but also itself produces and responds to theorization.

Even given this narrower focus, dance improvisation remains difficult to pin down. What is dance improvisation, exactly? Is it a practice with many

variations? Is it a mobilizing concept? Is it a set of events, or performances, or skills, or sensations, or stories? Is it a community of people who safeguard and transmit embodied knowledge? In my analysis, dance improvisation is all of these things: it is an assemblage. The notion of assemblage, which has been richly elaborated on by scholars working in dialogue with the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, works on the principle that individual entities (like a dance, a dancer, or dance improvisation) can be conceptualized as more-or-less flexible and heterogenous groupings of *things*, whose components are constrained and enabled in particular ways by virtue of their being-part. In an assemblage, neither discourse nor matter has priority, and neither habit nor potentiality dominates: an assemblage is “a co-functioning [...] a symbiosis, a ‘sympathy’” (Deleuze & Parnet 1987/1977:69), and what matters is not what something is but what something does or can do, given *all* of its properties and capacities.⁷ Thus, the notion of dance improvisation as an assemblage allows me to dodge the “mistrust of verbal language among improvisors” (Cvejić 2015:129) which sometimes casts dance improvisation as primarily corporeal and only secondarily discursive, here instead considering dance improvisation as a heterogenous assemblage of bodies *and* of words (as well as of many other things); indeed, as an entity wherein the distinction between discourse and matter starts to come apart at the seams.

Thinking about dance improvisation as an assemblage, something which is “continually produced by the day-to-day interactions between its parts”

⁷ Deleuze conceptualizes the assemblage as “a multiplicity which is made up of heterogenous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes, and reigns—different natures. The assemblage’s only unity is that of a co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a ‘sympathy’. It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind” (Deleuze & Parnet 1987/1977:69). An assemblage, then, is a collective *doing* which has certain properties. One of those properties is its simultaneous materiality and ‘incorporeality’: on the one hand, an assemblage is “a machinic assemblage of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another; on the other hand it is a collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987/1980: 88). Another of those properties is its (always relative) stability: “on a vertical axis, the assemblage has both territorial sides, or reterritorialized sides, which stabilize it, and cutting edges of deterritorialization, which carry it away” (88). Approaches to the assemblage since Deleuze and Guattari have emphasized the sense in which assemblage thinking helps us see beyond individualistic ascriptions of agency and essentialist approaches to the self or the body, describing both agency and the embodied self as things which emerges always collectively, in-relation-to (for example, in the context of a discussion of Islamophobia and homonationalism, Jasbir K. Puar proposes that thinking of the turbaned man as an assemblage rather than “thinking of the turbaned man as a man with an appendage [...] cuts through such easy delineations between body and thing [...] destabilizing the presumed organicity of the body” (Puar 2007:193). For more on assemblages, see Manuel DeLanda’s *Deleuze: History and Science* (2010) as well as Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* (2010).

(DeLanda 2010:9), reminds us that dance improvisation does not happen in a vacuum. Dancers leave the studio and are enmeshed in other kinds of networks, participate in other assemblages; the ideas, the images, and the discourse of dance improvisation are constantly folding in elements of the 'exterior', as well as reaching out to, encountering, and affecting things which are not dance. If this thesis spills almost as much ink on the subjects of coloniality, race, labor, therapy, politics, and philosophy as it does on the subject of dance improvisation *per se*, that is because I consider dance improvisation as an actual assemblage, rooted, located, and continuously emerging in the world, rather than as an abstract essence to be ruminated upon in terms of purely 'internal' dynamics. Thinking in terms of assemblage means that dance improvisation is both very specific and somewhat dispersed, a strange object without edges, without a clear inside and outside, affecting and affected by many other *things*. In other words, dance improvisation cannot help but be *in-relation-to*, in a process of encounter with the world, such that being specific about *which* dance improvisation we are discussing here also means that the discussion of dance—being not one thing but a collection, a set of bodies, practices, thoughts, images, concepts, locations, and so forth—also opens out onto all the manifold things dance comes into to contact with, materially or otherwise.

As I proceed over the course of this thesis to map the biopolitical critique of dance improvisation, and later to unfold an affirmative theory of dance improvisation which takes that map as a guide, the notion of assemblage helps us makes sense of the contradictions which appear, as well as the resonances. Dance improvisation does not look the same at every location, or from every angle; dance improvisors do not speak with a unified voice, any more than they dance with a unified body. The different aspects of the biopolitical critique, therefore, each zoom in on different zones of the assemblage, taking aim at one or a handful of specific and relatively local conceptual deconstestations and linkages. As Jane Bennett reminds us, "precisely because each member-actant maintains an energetic pulse slightly 'off' from that of the assemblage, an assemblage is never a stolid block but an open-ended collective" (2010:24): because of that open-endedness and energetic syncopation, the biopolitical critique does not deal with dance improvisation by levying one simple critical argument. Instead, the critique itself is a kind of assemblage, each argument dealing with a specific rather than a totalizing problematic.

Thinking in terms of assemblage is one way of dealing with the difficulty of assigning a stable identity or secure borders to dance improvisation when taken as a research object. While this instability and porosity calls for some acrobatic analytic strategies, it is also, in my reading, the site of an enormous potential: instability and porosity are the qualities which allow us to imagine dance improvisation as something which can be re-framed, re-oriented, and re-imagined, while still maintaining some kind of continuity and coherence. Nevertheless—and I hope to maintain this tension throughout my discussion below—dance improvisation is *not* everything. Indeed, it is the closure and fixture of dance improvisation, rather than its openness and flexibility, which the proponents of the biopolitical critique insist upon. By highlighting that which does *not* flow and change in dance improvisation, in particular on the level of discourse, these theorists show the ways that improvising bodies tend to be set into motion by certain meanings and not others. The biopolitical critique points at conceptual patterns within dance improvisation, at habits of thinking and doing. One of my claims in this thesis is that these critiques, when read together, stage dance improvisation as an *ideological* assemblage; that is, as an assemblage with a certain degree of inertia, and which exerts political effects. So while dance improvisation is on the one hand a relatively indistinct, various, and shifting object, it is also an object which can be read as 'stuck', which selects and excludes, and which styles its component parts (in particular, lived bodies) in particular ways.

By framing dance improvisation as an assemblage which is both sticky and flexible, I make it possible to position myself in a caring relation to my research object. In other words, I am able to echo and amplify critical voices from within dance studies, as well as adding my own critical two cents, without nullifying dance improvisation or disqualifying it in a totalizing way. Instead, the things that are problematic about dance improvisation become promising, loci for affirmative transformation and indices of dance improvisation's continued relevance and power as a partner for navigating lives lived without assurances. I choose to take up a caring relation to my research object in recognition that I am not separate from it, nor from the world in which it is embedded. While many academic disciplines disavow efforts at conscientious *intervention* outside of the academy, dance studies is in a different position: ours is an object which *reads back*, and as such, textual production in dance studies is always an

intervention which inscribes itself into its own object. That is to say, many dancers and choreographers read theory as part of their artistic practice. Moreover, just as shifts in dance practice call for new theorization, theoretical production often opens up space for new practices. Many of the dance studies theorists surveyed here also collaborate with choreographers as dramaturgs, such that their ideas participate directly in the creation of new dance performances. Given this strange enfolding, which is itself both destabilizing and generative, the question of the performativity of writing has remained central to my process of research and articulation. This thesis is therefore thought through in terms of affirmativity and shared ongoingness.

Methodology and theoretical framework

In this thesis, I'm interested in the relation between dance improvisation and contemporary forms of life. In particular, my question is about improvising lives which are materially and epistemologically precarious. This question emerged while reading the dance studies texts which I present here as the biopolitical critique. These texts are largely poststructuralist in orientation, insofar as they are critical of positivistic accounts of knowledge and truth. They are also, for the most part, critical of power and the ideologies which subtend it, described either generally as 'modernity' or more specifically as neoliberalism. In other words, the texts which make up the biopolitical critique recognize that the predictable assurances of truth, prosperity, and futurity which formerly shaped livable lives for some have today been largely revoked. Why, then, does improvisation, according to these theorists, not live up to the task of responding to these crises of certainty? Why does it not appear as a solution, but actually as part of the problem?

These critical texts are at the core of this thesis, as they point to the complexity of dance improvisation; in other words, they demonstrate that it is not enough to simply state that conditions of uncertainty call for improvisation. Biopolitics is the concept that I deploy in order to explain the nature of this complexity: it allows me to make a selection of dance studies texts which problematize improvisation by reading its ideological orientation in relation to the normative stylization and governance of lives. The first thing I do in this thesis, then, is to produce the biopolitical critique by gathering these texts

together and highlighting what they have in common. Read together, they allow me to map the ideological terrain of dance improvisation, drawing special attention to those aspects of dance improvisation which are not yet promising, which do not yet take the shape of something supportive of contemporary life, at least not when the notion of life is thought ecologically, through the lenses of diversity and collectivity.

Because the biopolitical critique is mainly concerned, I argue, with dance improvisation understood as an ideological assemblage, I am primarily occupied with dance as a *discursive* entity here, as a field which decontests and arranges *concepts* in a particular way, such that both speech and movement take on certain forms and not others. This has major methodological implications for my thesis: while embodiment is indeed what is at stake, my analysis will be an analysis of texts. The body is, of course, not *only* or even primarily a discursive entity, but when asking the question of improvisation in relation to lived lives, meaningfulness comes to the fore as an important area of investigation. Attending to the discourse of dance improvisation allows us to investigate how language and in particular concepts and stories make the dancing body meaningful in certain ways and not others: as Donna Haraway asserts, "It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories" (2016:12). To that end, this thesis highlights the way the body's discursive meaningfulness is not only a matter of interpreting what a body *is* or what a body's actions *mean*, but is also bound up with the question of what a body can hope for or attach to, the determination of a *why* of movement and the more-or-less-vague intimation of a futurity that that implies.

In order to complement my reading of the biopolitical critique, I do sometimes turn directly to the dance field for evidence. When I do so, I refer not to performances of improvisation I have witnessed or experienced, but rather to descriptions of improvisation practices which circulate as text, for example descriptions of improvisation workshops posted on the websites of studios and festivals, or scores published in the form of written instructions. These texts demonstrate that at least some dancers, choreographers, and dance institutions do indeed narrate improvisation more or less along the ideological lines described by the theorists of the biopolitical critique. This second textual corpus, placed beside the texts emerging from dance studies, puts the ideological decontestation of the body and of dance improvisation performed within the

discourse of dance improvisation directly on the page. These texts function, in other words, as illustrative examples of my reading of the biopolitical critique.

In addition to the texts from within dance studies and from the contemporary dance world, there is a third category of source which I draw upon here; namely, critical texts which emerge from *other* critical discourses, academic but also activist. These texts are broad-ranging, dealing with feminism, queerness, race, coloniality, affect, and radical politics more generally. While eclectic, this corpus was carefully selected for the way it dialogues with aspects of the biopolitical critique. Some of these texts allow me to be more specific when cashing out the stakes of the biopolitical critique, pointing to the sense in which the stylization of lives along ideological lines attested to within dance studies is related to hegemonic politics and neoliberal modes of governance. Others provide a counterpoint to dance studies, demonstrating that some of the concepts criticized within the biopolitical critique—such as essentialism, healing, self-care, space, freedom, movement, and flow—can be read in more than one way, even within a critical paradigm. In general, this third textual corpus elaborates and nuances the biopolitical critique, such that its claims are clarified but also qualified.

Argumentative structure

In the first three chapters of this thesis, I lay out the most important points of the biopolitical critique. This involves curating and explicating a corpus of dance studies writing, making explicit what each selection has in common with the others and how they all fit into a broader conceptual mapping. The notion of biopolitics unifies these different texts, and it allows me to highlight the claims made either explicitly or implicitly within these texts which link certain styles of embodiment to power. In particular, I draw attention, through my reading of a dance studies corpus, to the sense in which the bodies of dance improvisation are shaped by and shore up the ideology which also lends meaning to contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

Mapping the biopolitical critique, I propose three important critical strands—the critique of kinetics, the critique of essentialism, and the critique of therapy—and I dedicate one chapter to each. The first, the critique of kinetics, deals with *movement*. Reading André Lepecki's *Exhausting Dance* (2006),

Andrew Hewitt's *Social Choreography* (2005), and Bojana Kunst's *Artist at Work* (2015) using biopolitics as a lens, I identify a certain shared set of concerns, all of which revolve around the ideological performativity of the concept of movement and its relation to the dancer—and in particular, the improvising dancer—as a cultural figure. In modernity, the dancer comes to represent the ideal of the life lived in improvisation, the being free to move exactly as he or she pleases in any given moment, but preferably energetically and with great amplitude. But who actually gets to live with a sense of improvised ease, and at what (or whose) cost? If ceaseless, energetic, free, creative, spontaneous movement has been historically touted as an ideal to which the individual should aspire, the critique of kinetics examines the ways that this fantasy—the fantasy of the 'kinetic subject'—motivates and justifies a certain problematic erasure of the *cost* of movement, both in terms of energy expenditure and in terms of the numerous casualties of expansive styles of being in modernity, particularly of the capitalist/colonial variety. This strand of the biopolitical critique reminds us to think twice about the easy conflation of improvisation with freedom, creativity, boundlessness, and individuality, as well as the tendency to think of the space of improvisation as empty or flat.

In chapter two, I gather together and elaborate upon different critical approaches to the various claims made to truth, naturalness, and authenticity within the discourse of dance improvisation. Bojana Cvejić's *Choreographing Problems* (2015) complements a continued engagement with *Social Choreography* and *Artist at Work* as I move through what I propose to call the critique of essentialism. Reading these texts, the notions of self-expression, presence, energy, and the anatomical body each appear as tropes of the real within dance improvisation, as grounding concepts upon which certain stable meanings are constructed. But, as the theorists whom I identify as the proponents of the biopolitical critique suggest, the decontestation of these concepts conceals the play of power which assures their stabilization in the first place. By framing their practices as a way of getting at the truth of what the body wants, as an undoing of the cultural or the repressive in favor of the natural, dance improvisors shore up a metaphysics that is based on some combination of biology, individualism, and vitalism. But while the appeal to the transcendental, natural, embodied self is billed as resistance to an alienated society, the critique of essentialism proposes to understand this appeal in its

complicity with a long history of metaphysical fallacies which have tended, much like kinetics, to produce anti-democratic ripples, with disproportionately negative consequences for those who are not constructed as white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, or otherwise privileged.

The critique of therapy is presented here in chapter three. In this chapter, I follow up on the moments in the work of João da Silva, Kunst, and Cvejić, as well as aspects of Cvejić's collaborative writing with Ana Vujanović, which identify therapeutic tendencies within the field of dance improvisation. In this chapter, my own research into the points of intersection between dance improvisation and therapy, as well as the dangers of normalization and commodification inherent to therapeutic practice, lends credence my identification of the critique of therapy as a biopolitical critique. Narrated from the perspective of biopolitics, therapy is staged in this chapter as a particular style of biopolitical management: if the first two chapters dealt with the *what* of dance improvisation's ideology, chapter three is in large part concerned with *how* it is integrated into the body. Attending to discourse critical of the therapeutic also further reveals the tendency toward individualism in dance improvisation's ideological unconscious. By treating structural problems like mental and physical deterioration on the level of the individual, rather than on the level of politics, therapy makes conditions which are deleterious and violent for all, bearable for some.

Throughout the first three chapters of this thesis, I attend to the way that scholars critical of dance improvisation from the perspective of biopolitics point, in their texts, towards conceptual clusters which recur in the discourse of and about dance improvisation. These conceptual clusters often appear in my writing as lists of associated notions. These lists are always partial and incomplete, insofar as following a chain or a web of associations is a task which never reaches a definitive endpoint. Nevertheless, it is important to my argument to insist on these conceptual clusters, because it is the relative persistence and fixity of these clusters which makes dance improvisation, in my analysis, an ideological assemblage. Moreover, it is by thinking through the ways in which these concepts are *not* fundamentally fixed in their meaning and arrangement, but instead essentially polysemic and contestable, that I arrive, in chapter four, at an affirmative theory of improvisation.

In the fourth and final chapter, I ask the question of dance improvisation's ongoingness in the face of the biopolitical critique in order to reframe dance improvisation as a site of potentiality. I start by pointing out the sense in which essentialist approaches to dance improvisation also define the stakes of attachment to improvisation in a certain way. In my reading, attachment, understood as something which undergirds ongoingness, is fragilized—but not overdetermined or defeated—by the biopolitical critique. Then, I draw attention to two specific problematic conceptual formations within dance improvisation's ideological morphology—the notions of self-care/healing, and the notions of freedom/space—claiming that these notions are not, in fact, attached inextricably to one specific meaning and to each other, but rather dispose of a certain fundamental semantic flexibility. In order to demonstrate this, I point towards some of the ways these notions are decontested in other critical fields. Finally, I gesture towards the sense in which improvisation might be an important way of thinking the future beyond fixed ideological meanings: if the truth-effects of ideology are replaced instead with a shifting landscape of temporary beliefs and provisional conceptual arrangements, then improvisation could be one way of thinking about managing ongoingness in that disorienting context.

By mapping the biopolitical critique in detail, I carry forward the important concerns raised within dance studies about the relationship between dance improvisation and the stylization of life along normative and commodified lines, as well as the relationship between that stylization and neoliberal precarization. But this thesis is not only the catalogue of a critical position: delving into the spaces of potential revealed within the biopolitical critique lets me reframe it as an affirmative discourse, a set of texts which point towards the potential of improvisation when conceptualized as an ideological assemblage. This is a potential for re-signification, for re-arrangement, for alternative or queer use.⁸ While I point out one possible re-signification or re-arrangement of improvisation in this thesis, this is not intended to be definitive or authoritative; rather, it is a kind of rehearsal or demonstration of how critical re-signification can work, and an open invitation for further critical investigation. Re-framed thusly—as a notion itself up for continual redefinition—dance improvisation emerges as a

⁸ For more on queer use, see Sarah Ahmed's *What's the Use?* (2019).

flexible, critical category, a site of thought and practice, and a dialogue partner suited for dealing with the troubling complexities of the continually unfolding present.

1 The critique of kinetics

André Lepecki, Andrew Hewitt, and Bojana Kunst are dance studies scholars whose work problematizes notions of mobility and space as they appear in the discourse of dance improvisation. In particular, they point to the link between a certain way of thinking space and mobility in dance and modern regimes of labor and coloniality. Taken together, their work forms a subsection of the biopolitical critique which I propose to call the critique of kinetics. In this chapter, I map out the critique of kinetics in order to clarify the points which these scholars bring to bear. In the process, I begin to think dance improvisation as an ideological assemblage, pointing out the way the conceptual landscape of dance improvisation, when read through the critique of kinetics, is decontested and arranged in a contingent morphology.

This set of texts is a good place to begin because they are explicitly about dance improvisation as the representation of a life lived in a certain style: freely, expansively, creatively, energetically, ceaselessly, and in constant transformative motion. While there is obviously nothing wrong with dancing energetically *per se*, these writers show that the figure of the dancing subject in modernity comes to represent a fantasy of subjectivity which is both pervasive and unsustainable. Energy, after all, must come from somewhere; no movement space is truly 'empty'; and most lives are *not* lived within the temporality of autonomous leisure. The figure of the dancer, however, is often staged as beautiful in its unobstructed, spontaneous dynamism, needing no fuel, knowing no obstruction, responding to no duty except felt desire. It is easy to see what, through the ideological linkage of movement, spontaneity, open space, freedom, and energy, gets elided or becomes unthinkable: the ground of movement, both in terms of energetic resources and in terms of terrain. This erasure is what makes, in my analysis, the kinetic ideology of dance improvisation biopolitical: identities get bound up in the capacity to run around, to travel and to consume, as well as to reinvent the self through consumption and creative work, such that resisting against hypermobile capitalism and the misery it brings with it, or imposing restrictions on movement, production, or consumption in order to

mitigate any number of impending crises, means coming up against people's sense of self, the ideological basis of their (kinetic) subjectivity.

Lepecki, Hewitt, and Kunst propose no simple relation between dance improvisation and the kinetic mode of subjectivity they describe. It is not the case that this mode of subjectivity was necessarily invented in the dance studio or on stage. Nor do these theorists argue that dance improvisation was created as an expression of 'kineticism'. Rather, the critique of kinetics points at a kind of resonance or agreement between biopower and dance improvisation: dance improvisation is a form well-suited to carry a certain set of meanings, and takes on a certain character because of the force of these meanings, their relation to a certain organization of society around labor, leisure, resources, and space, as well as the ideological requirement to conceal and forget that which is consumed, cleared-out or spent-up in service of such an economy.

In other words, the critique of kinetics claims that dance improvisation is a field structured by a certain set of values for movement, which are problematic when understood as values to live by, and which continue to influence dance so strongly precisely because they *are* values to live by. Moreover, being an *artistic* form, dance improvisation aestheticizes these values, shoring up their hegemony by staging their beauty and desirability, inscribing them as features of a cohesive style rather than as components of a mobile assemblage of independently contestable concepts. Already, this should give a sense of what I mean when I claim that dance improvisation is a strange research object, embedded in complex relations of exteriority, affecting and affected by things which are not dance while still operating with a certain degree of difference with regard to them. It is not precisely the case that dance reflects the values of a society (there is a certain degree of freedom in artistic practice to diverge from the normative), or that it efficaciously challenges them (in that there is always a certain amount of repetition and citation going on), but these claims are not precisely *not* true, either. The conceptual moves I map in the following pages attest to the slightly blurry effect produced when tracking the intercourse between dance and life.

Of the three subsections of the biopolitical critique which I treat in this thesis, the critique of kinetics is perhaps the most focused on dance improvisation as a performance; that is to say, from the perspective of spectatorship. In the texts I analyze here, Lepecki, Hewitt, and Kunst are very

busy with the figure of the dancer and the work it does in society, both in the practices of dancers and choreographers and on the level of public discourse and imagination more generally. This is also the chapter which is the least specifically about *improvised* dancing: these theorists are mainly concerned with dance performance in general, choreographed or improvised. However, as I argue in section 1.2, this discourse forms an important part of the biopolitical critique of dance improvisation because it reveals the centrality of improvisation (or at least a fantasy of improvisation) within the ideological landscape of modern dance, an historical movement which continues to influence how we think dance today. In other words, these theorists argue that spontaneity and freedom of movement are aestheticized within modern dance, and in my analysis, this ideological linkage has important consequences for the project of locating dance improvisation in relation to biopolitics. Attending to kinetics is a first step towards building an affirmative theory of improvisation.

1.1 The kinetic project of modernity

In *Exhausting Dance* (Lepecki 2006) and *Social Choreography* (Hewitt 2005), André Lepecki and Andrew Hewitt read dance in relation to certain attitudes towards movement which, they claim, are characteristic of modernity. In my analysis, both Lepecki and Hewitt point towards an ideological formation according to which movement is bound to notions of freedom, individuality, self-actualization, energetic dynamism, and open or empty space. Through this particular decontestation of movement as a concept, fantasies of dance and of life are formed in particular problematic ways. Moreover, a certain organization of labor, leisure, resources, and space is justified within this ideological formation: because modernity is imagined as a 'kinetic project',⁹ and the modern

⁹ In order to construct this reading of modernity as kinetics, Lepecki is building on the work of theorists like Harvie Ferguson and Peter Sloterdijk; this latter claims, for example, that "modernity is a pure being-toward-movement" (in Lepecki 2006:7). In *Exhausting Dance*, the evidence which Lepecki gives that this is indeed the case is admittedly slim. On the other hand, without taking the assertion which equates modernity and movement at face value, the provocation it extends—to think the essence of modernity as movement, and then to try to grapple with what dance might represent in that context—is valuable as a 'what if' exercise. While I have my reservations about the grand scale of Lepecki's thesis, I choose to include his thinking in my discussion because of the insightful connections he does eventually describe between some specific modern problematics, particularly in the arenas of labor, coloniality, and subjectivity, and a certain aesthetic and system of values in dance. In my reading, the validity of these insights do not depend on whether or not movement and modernity are inextricably and fundamentally linked in the way Lepecki claims.

subject as a kinetic subject, being of this time means being in movement in just this way—that is, ‘freely’, without admitting of obstruction or limitation, and in function of the desires of the self.

In the introduction to *Exhausting Dance*, Lepecki gives two examples of the way kinetic ideology functions within modernity. The first deals with *work*, which in modernity is subject, according to Lepecki, to an ‘idiotic militarization’. The pace of work, the margins of profit, and the rate of production must constantly increase, necessitating “widespread kinetic performances of tayloristic efficacy, efficiency, and effectiveness” (2006:13).¹⁰ Work and workers in modernity are kinetic because they demand speed, innovation, improvement, and productivity, of themselves and of others: when it comes to labor, movement is linked to advancement, to growth, to progress which does not cease. Modern work agitates, not in order to come to a new place of rest, but in order to maintain a state of agitation, which is also ideally experienced as a process of continual self-actualization.¹¹ In my reading, Lepecki is pointing at the modern work ethic as an ethic of movement *for its own sake*, the faster, the more energetic, and the more expansive the better, and wondering: what does it mean that dance so frequently celebrates a similar kind of movement dynamic? Just as, in a modern dance paradigm, stillness, rest, and recovery are “*clearly not part of the dance*” (Heinrich von Kleist in Lepecki 2006:3; emphasis in the original), so too does the spirit of modernity, here exemplified by its culture of work, insist on ceaselessness: something, always, must be done. When it comes to work, the fantasy is that labor can always get better, more productive, more efficient; the fantasy is that there is no limiting factor, and that resources will never run out; indeed, that work is powered by the worker’s own endless drive to self-actualize and self-transcend. Lepecki suggests that the dancer, whose dynamic agility is often narrated as originating in private emotionality, shores up just this kind of view of movement as a natural outpouring which consumes nothing.

Lepecki’s second example has to do with race and with space: he claims that *coloniality* is both the enactment and the predicate of the ‘kinetic spectacle’

¹⁰ This formulation is a reference to Jon McKenzie’s *Perform or Else* (2001).

¹¹ Insofar as the creative worker, for example, is mobilized through the tireless actualization of her own creative potentials.

which he diagnoses. In other words, the fantasy of self-actualization of an individual at any scale (including at the level of a people or a nation-state) is, according to Lepecki, ideologically linked within modernity to an ease and expansiveness of movement which is both the justification of coloniality and only actualizable within the space cleared by—and given the resources pillaged through—colonization. In other words, coloniality literally flattens and bulldozes its terrain, producing a flat space—a kind of dance floor—upon which the settler, who promptly and necessarily forgets this colonial violence, can flow through movement with a sense of freedom:

What is the ground this kinetic subject moves about apparently without effort, apparently always energized, and never stumbling? This is where the inescapable topography fantasy of modernity informs its choreopolitical foundation: for modernity imagines its topography as already abstracted from its grounding on a land previously occupied by other human bodies, other life forms, filled with other dynamics, gestures, steps, and temporalities [...] Fundamental for the argument of this book is the fact that the ground of modernity is the colonized, flattened, bulldozed terrain where the fantasy of endless and self-sufficient motility takes place. (Lepecki 2006:14)

What emerges very quickly in *Exhausting Dance* is the sense in which a certain set of values embodied within Western modern and contemporary dance is also implicated in broader social and political dynamics. The notion of movement, in a modern paradigm, is ideologically decontested such that movement leads conceptually not towards negotiation, encounter, circularity, or exchange, but rather to the progressive unfolding of the decontextualized individual, leaping about according to his [*sic*] own desire in a flat and empty space.¹² It is in this sense which the critique of kinetics is, in my reading, an ideological critique. It is also a biopolitical critique, insofar as, for Lepecki, modernity is not simply a time period or a political movement, but rather something which stylizes being, perceiving, embodying, and enacting—in other words, life—in particular ways. Kinetic modernity is, according to Lepecki, a

¹² In this thesis, I use masculine pronouns to refer to the kinetic subject to emphasize the sexism inherent in the figure.

“mode or form of subjectification” (10): it affects bodies on the level of desire, such that being kinetic becomes essential to feeling fulfilled.

But for whom is a really kinetic experience of self attainable? A life lived as if autonomously is indeed a life of privilege, a life in which one passes through public spaces without being stopped by aggressors or inquisitors, state-sponsored, institutionally-appointed, or merely acting from a sense of born entitlement. In that sense, kinetic subjectivity is a normative aspiration accessible only to the few: in modernity, according to Lepecki, the notion and experience of “truth as (and within) a ceaseless drive for autonomous, self-motivated, endless, spectacular movement” is just as much a characteristic of “the privileged subject of discourse” as is being “gendered as the heteronormative male, raced as white” (13). It is an element of a subject position which few can actually inhabit, but which nevertheless operates as a kind of default in discourse, such that those who are neither white, nor male, nor heterosexual, nor kinetic, do not speak or represent as full subjects.¹³ For those denied the possibility of actualizing a kinetic fantasy, or indeed for those whose ability to move has been reduced because their space has been colonized or their resources plundered, the kinetic project of modernity can only be experienced as something cruel.

In *Social Choreography*, Hewitt makes a complementary analysis, focusing on the sense in which the figure of the dancer binds together notions of energy, labor, and freedom in modernity. While he does not specifically use the term ‘kinetic subjectivity’, his way of thinking resonates with Lepecki’s in that he also points out the strategic forgetting which is accomplished ideologically in modernity, such that the spectacle of self-actualization and self-transcendence through freedom of movement silences the question of what sets a body in motion and what resources it requires to remain moving, growing, desiring, and creating. What Hewitt points out is that the figure of the dancer resolves the contradiction between the “pure energy and progress” of capitalism and the

¹³ In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) for example, Franz Fanon claims that black bodily experience is not direct but instead provided “by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories” (1986/1952:84). White speech, in other words, is world-making because of its place within a power structure which is also a structure of truth and of being; in Fanon’s account, for racialized people, “ontology is made unattainable” (82). The non-neutrality of discourse, which is also what Lepecki points to when he adds kinetic subjectivity to the list of privileged qualifiers, ‘seals’ the racialized body—here the black male body—into “crushing objecthood” (82).

“autonomous play” of the modern subject, providing a model according to which these categories appear to align (Hewitt 2005:26). In other words, dance in modernity, and especially the dancer as the representation of a certain kind of subject, shores up an imaginary in which hard work, paradoxically, becomes a way of demonstrating one’s autonomy, a channel for self-expression as well as the key to emancipation. Read through the lens of biopolitics, the figure of the dancer which Hewitt discusses can be seen as a kind of ideological weapon, stylizing lives such that meaningfulness and a sense of freedom come bound up with a stake in the hegemony of capitalist modes of production, instead of, say, emerging from a resistance to being coerced into work.

I begin my mapping of the biopolitical critique here, with Hewitt’s and Lepecki’s analyses of kinetic modernity, because it places the notion of movement itself in an ideological context. The figure of the kinetic subject of modernity helps us see what is not innocent about dance’s identification with ceaseless, dynamic, energetic, boundless, flowing, and autonomous movement. Of course, dancers are not usually directly colonizing land through their dancing (the same cannot be said for unsavory labor practices, of which dancers do often directly partake; more on this later). Rather, the framing of modernity as a kinetic project forces us to think about the way a certain set of values—values often espoused in and represented by dancing—have historically had anti-democratic effects, or been qualified by their uneven application along raced, classed, and gendered lines. One could almost think of dance as a technology for the production of images, discourses, and practices which reinforce the dominance of the kinetic, which encourage us to take common-sense statements about dynamism, freedom, energy and flow at face value, rather than looking into that which must be hidden or erased in order for dynamic movement to appear innocent.

It bears mentioning that Lepecki’s argument, in *Exhausting Dance*, revolves around examples of contemporary dance and performance which do *not* indulge in such kinetic fantasies. By stuttering, stilling, and stumbling, the choreographers he surveys re-contest the notion of movement for dance. But these works appear as critical, according to Lepecki, only insofar as they strike a

contrast with a still-current public perception of what dance is and means.¹⁴ For many, both dancers and spectators, there is still a “fantasy of pure energy at play” in dance which, according to Hewitt, unconsciously “parallels a capitalist fantasy of pure profit, pure production” (2005:26), such that movement in dance—and in life—remains ideologically attached to growth and freedom from constraining obligations. Choreographers who choose for movements which are not expansive, agile, exciting, acrobatic, or linked in a flow, such as those featured in *Exhausting Dance*, are forced to contend with a public (and often with dancers) for whom this kind of movement is *not* movement, or not the right kind of movement.

Hewitt’s and Lepecki’s work suggests that such feelings are biopolitically produced, in the sense that they evidence a subjectification by which a certain political elision—that is, the erasure of the fact that production is always also consumption—grounds a demand for ceaseless energy which registers largely as common sense.¹⁵ “In a fully rationalized world,” Hewitt reminds us, “labor would be performed as a form of spontaneous bodily dance that generates rather than expends energy” (26). This dream of full rationalization, of the perfectibility of labor and indeed of capitalism as a system, is perhaps what makes the ugly facts of both labor and coloniality apparently so forgettable, or at least so easy to dismiss or ignore. Lepecki, on the other hand, enjoins the reader *not* to forget, asserting that “there is no such thing as a self-sufficient living system”, and so accordingly that “all mobilization, all subjectivity that finds itself as a total ‘being-towards-movement’ must draw its energy from some source” (2006:14). Herein lies the main thrust of the critique of kinetics: the cult of movement historically has had a hard time taking the cost of movement into account, preferring to revel in a fantasy of unlimited energy without expenditure. Given such a critique, modern accounts of the proud strength of

¹⁴ *Exhausting Dance* opens with an account of a famous Irish lawsuit about a Jerome Bel piece which, according to the plaintiff, “could not be properly classified as a dance performance” (Lepecki 2006: 2) due to a lack of rhythmic movement and emotion on stage.

¹⁵ Readers interested in this slippage between production and consumption, and especially notion of production as the “consumption of life force and its suffocation” (Jameson 2014:116) can follow the venerable trail laid by Karl Marx in *Capital* (1867). For example, in a chapter entitled ‘Branches of English Industry Without Legal Limits to Exploitation’, his account of the blacksmith: “He can strike so many blows per day, walk so many steps, breathe so many breaths, produce so much work, and live an average, say of fifty years; he is made to strike so many more blows, walk so many more steps, to breathe so many more breaths per day, and to increase altogether a fourth of his life. He meets the effort; the result is, that producing for a limited time a fourth more work, he dies at 37 for 50” (Marx 1906/1867:282).

labor, the self-affirming joys of creativity, the invigorating, 'empty' vistas of the Americas, and indeed the inspiring leaps and emotional agitation of the expressive dancer take on a decidedly different hue.

Our actions emerge out of uneven intertwinements and dependencies, take place in dense spaces, and have echoing consequences. An affirmative theory of improvisation, which performs a relay between improvised dancing and lives lived in conditions of uncertainty, is productively nuanced by taking this ecological insight into account. But according to the critique of dance from the point of view of kinetics, the ecological nature of movement is precisely what is hidden from view when movement is ideologically linked to autonomy, individuality, energy, ceaselessness, and self-realization, its origin located in itself rather than in the ecologies in which it is embedded. Dance, Lepecki and Hewitt argue, has historically been implicated in this fantasy, in the construction of a certain kind of subjectivity which finds its realization in the figure of the kinetic subject: the privileged beneficiary of lived experiences of autonomy and energy, gained at the expense of others who do live the kinetic firsthand, but who rather feel its dizzying effects. In the next section, I investigate the sense in which the particular decontestation of movement which is problematized by the critique of kinetics is specifically related to improvisation.

1.2 Kinetics and improvisation

What I would like to pick up on in the notion of kinetic subjectivity is the relation between the modern fantasy of movement and dance *improvisation* in particular. When André Lepecki discusses the privileged subject of discourse—white, heterosexual, male—who moves energetically and without effort in the space cleared by colonization, or when he discusses the worker who self-actualizes in a frenzy of creative productivity, we sense that the movement he draws attention to is not exactly choreography or 'dancing' in the strictest sense. Nor is it even really movement through physical space (or if it is, not only). Lepecki uses the rather capacious concept of kinetics (or elsewhere, 'mobilization') to link different processes that unfold across different timescales—a dance, a career, a life. So for example, in the case of the 'idiotic militarization' of work, movement appears as the *change in* or *development of* the process of work in the name of increased 'efficacy, efficiency, and

effectiveness'. More than just the workers themselves, it is the *process* of work that is mobilized: work is 'in movement' in the sense that the worker is charged with ceaselessly updating, adapting, and innovating. When, later, Lepecki refers to the movement of the privileged subject of coloniality, his notion of movement is equally broad. He refers, of course, to the freedom to move through public space without being stopped or harassed (i.e., the racialization, sexualization, and policing of public space), but also the freedom to move *through a life* with a sense of capaciousness, energy, and ease.

In that sense, the critique of kinetics is especially relevant to my research question, which looks to trace links between improvised dancing and improvised lives. We can only make sense of statements like "Modernity's subjectivity is its movement and modernity subjectivizes by interpellating bodies to a constant display of motion" (Lepecki 2006:9) if we understand 'movement' and 'motion' as broader notions that include the movements of thought, of political change, of capital flows, of values which shift and transform, and of creative manifestation and materialization more generally. The kinetic subject is not necessarily constantly running, leaping, and twirling: movement here is something that happens over the course of a day, a career, or a lifetime. Thinkers critical of the kinetic, therefore, approach movement not as bodily locomotion but as the opponent of stasis and fixity *tout court*. Within this discourse, movement signifies transformation, development, change, and creativity, not only physical displacement through a space. It also signifies autonomy, including—I argue—a real or represented freedom from the determining commands of a choreographer.

The ability to shift oneself, one's place, and one's fortunes is indeed by all accounts an element important to the structuring narrative of modernity. Lepecki (referring to Teresa Brennan) is "insistent on the centrality of this [modern] subject experiencing his or her being as *fully independent and ontologically severed from the world* as constitutive of the modern process of subjectification" (11; emphasis mine): rather than being fundamentally and non-negotiably embedded in a particular community, ecosystem, or cosmology, the modern subject dreams of being self-contained, unmoored from anything that would hinder their unlimited individual potential. This is the mark of the modern subject's modernity: their freedom from a pre-assigned lot or pre-choreographed trajectory and the opening-up of the world as the space of self-

determined movement possibilities. Movement is so important in modernity because it actualizes the modern struggle for liberation from pre-modern duties, roles, scripts, and non-negotiable social realities, demonstrating and performatively re-asserting liberation from fixity and stasis.¹⁶

It is this allergy to the fixed role, the imposed duty, and the script, lying at the heart of the modern propensity for movement, that makes this movement fantasy, in my analysis, *improvisational*. The kinetic fantasy of modernity refers to the desire to move in a way which is explicitly *not* choreographed in advance. While Lepecki does refer to performances which are not improvisational to support his thesis, he does so because he reads these performances in relation to the *representation* of a vital, spontaneous, dynamic body, living without limits. I claim that the fantastic body critiqued in writing that is critical of dance from the perspective of kinetics could be considered to be an *improvising* body; that is, a body whose movements are not determined in advance, whose pathway through a space (or through a life) is emerging at each moment.¹⁷ It is the body of an individual who, freed from the dictates of tribe, culture, religion, family, and so forth ('fully independent and ontologically severed from the world'), is able to move through the world in a fashion determined by himself [*sic*] alone. Formulating an affirmative theory of improvisation, if we heed the warnings extended within the critique of kinetics, means untangling the notion of movement which emerges moment-to-moment, the movement of someone or something which enjoys at least some margin of agency, from a fantasy of total autonomy.

To summarize: there is a critical strand within dance studies, here represented by Andrew Hewitt and André Lepecki, which approaches the issue of the relation between dance and the biopolitical stylization of lives from the standpoint of movement and the particular ways movement has an ideological role to play within modernity. These theorists point out the sense in which the spatial and energetic limitlessness at the heart of the modern fantasy of movement has had violent consequences, in the colonization of space (later

¹⁶ For more on modernity as deracination, see Charles Taylor's *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2003).

¹⁷ "Choreography demands a yielding to commanding voices of masters (living and dead), it demands submitting body and desire to disciplining regimes (anatomical, dietary, gender, racial), all for the perfect fulfillment of a transcendental and preordained set of steps, postures, and gestures that *nevertheless must appear 'spontaneous'*" (Lepecki 2006:9; emphasis mine).

claimed to have been 'unused' or 'empty') and the exhaustion of both workers and resources. "The fantasy of the modern kinetic subject is that the spectacle of modernity as movement happens in innocence" (Lepecki 2006:14): instead, Lepecki and Hewitt argue, movement has a cost, while the aestheticization of movement within dance functions to glorify movement for its own sake and to hide that cost. I choose to include these theories in my mapping of the biopolitical critique of dance improvisation because they highlight the sense in which non-determination, non-fixity, and autonomy are closely linked to the concept of movement itself. In other words, improvisation as a practice within dance might be especially appealing or resonant because it taps into a fantasy of a self-sufficient life unimpeded by a script, which is also, according to the critique of kinetics, imagined as a life unhindered by the messiness of the needful other or the complexities of place, a life unlimited by any shortage of energetic resources (or the possible consequences of their extraction and consumption). Moreover, dance as a genre of performance enables the propagation of this fantasy within culture by generating representations of spontaneous bodily dynamism that function as cultural pedagogy.

In addition to concerns about the erasures of kinetic subjectivity, the sense in which the fantasy of 'free' movement in modernity seems to play out also as a command—as the *imperative* to move—can further enrich an analysis of dance improvisation as a promising field. As Hewitt argues, there is a tension between the exigencies of productivity and the autonomy of the kinetic subject which is ideologically resolved through the operation of biopower; that is, by assigning the subject a desire for emancipation through labor. But this resolution falls apart under analysis. Labor, in capitalism, is not optional, and so seems a weak candidate as a site for the realization of autonomy. In Lepecki's *Exhausting Dance*, the actual unfreedom of movement in modernity, for all its symbolic value, is re-iterated: movement figures in that book as an 'impulse', a 'state of agitation', an 'interpellation', an "overwhelming and ontopolitical imperative to move" (9). Those who demur do so at risk of being left behind as the train of modernity pulls out of the station.¹⁸ Is the body who cannot stop inventing new

¹⁸ Lepecki refers to Homi K. Bhabha's notion of 'time lag' to point out the way modernity is also an organization of time and of agency, such that the modern is of the now and the pre-modern is somehow stuck

movements, who cannot still its 'improvisation', not in some sense *choreographed*, not in some sense precisely the opposite of free? Mobilization in modernity is the experience of freedom as the "imperative of the kinetic" (5), rather than the mere possibility of movement; it is a set of instructions posing as a space of open potentiality. In the next section, I turn to the work of Bojana Kunst in order to elaborate on autonomy, self-actualization, and freedom of movement under neoliberalism, where—as we shall see—the coercive nature of the kinetic imperative comes to the fore in new and urgent ways.

1.3 Leisure as the site of improvisation

In *Artist at Work* (2015), Bojana Kunst proffers an analysis that agrees with André Lepecki's and Andrew Hewitt's in many ways: she, too, is interested in the way dance is narrated as operating within, as, or as a representation of a kind of free zone, a clearing in which a kinetic subject can move continuously and without obstacles. But while Lepecki and Hewitt treat this opening abstractly, as a fantasy of *modernity* taken as a relatively diffuse and ubiquitous cultural and ideological process, Kunst is more precise in her diagnosis, not only locating the emergence of dance as an expression of kinetic subjectivity historically, but also tracking the ways our historical moment differs from the one in which the ideological arrangements described by Lepecki and Hewitt first arose in relation to dance. In particular, Kunst notes the link between fantasies of autonomous, expressive, aesthetic movement and the institution of leisure time, which she describes as an historically-specific organization of time, space, and subjectivity. She asks questions, moreover, about how kinetic ideology can be read differently in relation to the status of leisure under neoliberalism, a social formation which, in some cases (and particularly in the case of so-called 'immaterial' labor), blurs the line between work and play. Understanding Kunst's take allows us to be more precise about how fantasies of improvised mobility acquire new meaning in relation to specifically contemporary labor conditions.

Kunst emphasizes the sense in which, in the dance cultures emerging in the USA and Western Europe around the beginning of the 20th century, the

in the past and therefore unable to influence the future (2006:14). Modernity is not only a condition, but also an ideal. Part of the reason it works as a system of power is that it organizes the world in a hierarchical way. Getting ahead in modernity is demonstrating one's modernity, which is to say, one's mobility.

revindication of (bodily) autonomy, freedom, and individualistic subjectivity, as well as joyful and personal creativity, was actually originally a critical move. Kinetic subjectivity, she reminds us, was an ideal involved in *resistance* to the biopolitical subjections of the day, structured by discipline, a conformist work ethic, and the Fordist (that is to say, industrial) labor practices to which they corresponded. Movement within this Fordist paradigm was *not yet* primarily experienced or imagined as self-motivated, original, or free. Kunst claims, to the contrary, that a rationalized, standardized, and mechanical approach to movement was central to the operation of Fordism:

Scientific management (Taylorist) theories, for example, focused on the perfect synchronisation of the body with the machine, which demanded a radical and absolute interiorisation of movement in the body. Only in that way could the gestures of the body be separated from the experience and endlessly repeated; we could say that the working gesture can be separated from the experience of work [...] Only in that way can a spectral and efficient working gesture be created and the movement not experienced as a change. (2015:103)

So, movement figured in the field of Fordist labor as something repetitive, standardized, dictated by (un-natural) machinery, and alienated from personal experience. Movement was 'interiorized'; i.e., it moved from out (the machine, the foreman) to in (the body of the worker). Furthermore, it was 'not experienced as change': I read feelings of frustration, futility, and exploitation in this account, in which the laboring body's energy is harnessed to machines that steal its dynamic potential, holding the body in place and converting its movements into growth (change) for the capitalist. In that sense, the ideological formation which characterizes dance as the embodiment of movement narrated as the expression of a "singular subject, a desiring individual with his/her transversal and transgressive dynamic [...] and in a process of continuous creativity and autonomous aesthetic language, an individual who cannot but dance" (108) does indeed seem, in its original context, to herald resistance to the force of biopower.

In Kunst's account, modern dancers responded to aspects of Fordist work experienced by some as problematic by pioneering an aesthetic form in which those aspects could be subverted or resisted. Taking recourse to a series of

binary constructions—natural/unnatural, authentic/alienated, body/machine, creativity/repetition, autonomous/heteronomous, individual/mass—these artists built a genre, a discourse, and an ideology of movement “outside the factory gates”, which they positioned as an antidote to “the instrumental use of the working body and the rational organisation of society” (108). I read this as an important insight to add to Lepecki’s and Hewitt’s analyses of the kinetic subject of dance: although, from their perspective, the kinetic decontestation of movement shores up a hegemonic organization of power, there is also a sense in which the cult of movement, when narrated as originating in the context of Fordism, can be read as having its roots in resistance.

Kunst goes further, however, also theorizing about the process according to which this alternative ideology of movement took its specific form. Kunst asserts that the potential for the development of modern dance as an expression of the freedom, autonomy, and energy of the individual was actually contained *within* the organization of work itself. Namely, in the separation of work from non-work (Kunst’s ‘dividing line’), their discrete spatialization and temporalization. Fordist societies were the societies in which the experience of leisure time was both radically expanded beyond the scope of the most privileged classes and institutionalized through aesthetic and consumerist discourses. This was made possible through a particular organization of work, such that workers alternated between repetitive labor and time in which movement was not dictated or planned out in advance (i.e., such that production moments and consumption moments were strictly separated, at least ideologically speaking). Leisure time posed an improvisational counterpoint to the choreography of labor, an “unknown and dynamic transversal [...] opposed to the dull routine of movement at work” (105), providing a stage for movement not fully determined in advance and prefiguring an idyllic society of self-determination. Experiences of leisure, according to Kunst, therefore made the kind of subjectivity performed within modern dance—a kinetic subjectivity, but also a ‘free-time subjectivity’—thinkable.¹⁹

¹⁹ The term is Kunst’s: “I would like to argue that the appearance of dance reforms and modern dance provided a moving alternative to the kinaesthetic experience behind the factory door; subject to strict rationalisation and efficiency, which experience was completely different to the free relations between *free time subjects*” (2015:103; emphasis mine).

Kunst explains that leisure time was a particularly rich framework for the (artistic) imagination because leisure was understood as bound up both in self-discovery and in the aesthetic. How do I choose to move through my free time? Which experiences do I select for, which objects do I choose to surround myself with? Leisure “becomes a time for new aesthetic experiences” (105), through which the subject becomes someone who has not only duties and obligations but also idiosyncratic tastes, pleasures, interests, projects, and pursuits, which are expressive of the subject’s uniqueness and autonomy. This aesthetic dynamism is, in my reading, also part of the construction of the figure of the kinetic subject. Within the horizon of leisure as a cultural phenomenon, the essence of the self is yet again *not* expressed in a complex network of interdependencies but rather emerges primarily when the subject is involved in aesthetic pursuits, in the exercise of disinterested choice—when he has ‘nothing to do’, as it were, when he is not compelled but rather finds himself [*sic*] *improvising*.

Kunst’s insights into the connection between the dynamic, autonomous subject of dance and the temporality of leisure adds nuance to Lepecki’s and Hewitt’s discussion of kinetic ideology. On the one hand, it is interesting to notice that certain aspects of the kinetic *do* emerge out of critical consciousness and resistance; as I move towards a theory of improvisation in chapter four, I keep an eye out for the locations at which liberation from coercive labor, restrictive spatialities, and normative social duties remain relevant political demands. On the other hand, Kunst’s suggestion that we look to leisure as the site or the model for the development of the particular ideological formation which is problematized within the critique of kinetics reminds us to scrutinize with extra care the aspects of kinetic ideology, hinted at within Lepecki’s *Exhausting Dance* and Hewitt’s *Social Choreography*, that bind movement, freedom, and autonomy to personal uniqueness, a personal style, and self-expression. Within such an ideological arrangement, improvisation holds pride of place, insofar as one can read improvised dancing as movement authored by the mover. Improvised dancing, narrated in this sense, could be the ultimate expression of that ‘singularity’ fetishized as an alternative to regimented working lives: in my reading, improvisation is a particularly exemplary instance of that modern dance fantasy wherein “human subjectivity [becomes] the ultimate source of movement, a source so strong that it could abstract its own body into an autonomous aesthetic field” (109).

Of course, subjectivity is not an endless resource, either. What of the consumption of subjectivity in creative work, for example? The anxiety and exhaustion of the self exposed, constantly performing his or her value and uniqueness? When Hewitt criticizes the resolution of the tension between social modernity and aesthetic modernism in the figure of the dancer (the question of the tension between progress and labor, on the one hand, and subjective autonomy on the other), it is also, I suggest, this elision—the elision of the limits of the subject, or of the performance of the subject as the consumption of subjectivity—which he gestures towards (2005:26). Particularly in the contemporary moment, in which critiques of the alienating effects of mechanical labor have been largely absorbed by capital through a turn towards entrepreneurship and creative work, the problematic aspects of self-expression as a value and an ideal bear examining. The discussion of creative work and the limits and pitfalls of subjective hypermobilization is especially valuable given my research question, which is contextualized within the problematics of lives lived outside of dependable structures and forms (as opposed to too deeply within them). In the next section, I turn to Kunst's discussion of post-Fordist working conditions and the shift that post-Fordism implies when it comes to the relation between kinetic ideology and biopower.

1.4 Post-Fordism and the changing position of leisure

In *Artist at Work*, Bojana Kunst describes modern dance as resistance to a historically hegemonic mode of biopower, i.e., discipline and its coefficient, industrial labor. To the extent that we can understand dance as working *against* the power structures of its time, it can be described as a resistant biopolitical strategy. But we are no longer living in a society in which industrial labor is hegemonic, or at least not in the same form. Under post-Fordism, industrial production has shifted largely away from the so-called West and towards regions in which manual labor is cheaper and less well-protected. In its place has arisen a new mode of working which is “more service oriented”, a symbolic and expressive labor engaged primarily in “the production and exchange of affect” (Jackson 2012: 12). Instead of manufacturing objects, post-Fordist workers negotiate encounters, tell stories, orchestrate experiences, and manage information, often in a precarious framework (0-hours contracts, freelancing,

and so forth). In the course of this shift, the nature of leisure has been transformed, erased by an intensification of labor in industrial contexts and diffused by the instrumentalization of subjectivity itself in the context of creative and communicative work.²⁰ As such, the proximity of creativity, autonomy, self-expression, (individual) freedom, and movement within the ideological formation described by the critique of kinetics emerges in even starker relief as a kind of wishful thinking which is not innocent in its effects.

If modern dance emerges as the site and expression of a kind of subjectivity which is founded on a sharp division between work and play—work being regimented, repetitive and repressive, play being defined by subjective and corporeal autonomy, pleasure, self-discovery, self-expression and the aesthetic—it is instructive to reflect, along with Kunst, on the current status of this division. While it lives on ideologically within the discourse of contemporary dance, we are also “living at a time when the door between the factory and leisure is being erased” (Kunst 2015:110). This is happening due to the dematerialized and instantaneous nature of the digital as a working medium and a workplace—the internet’s workday is never over, and not confined to any particular space.²¹ It also has to do with the increasingly precarious nature of labor: a discourse of ‘risk-taking’ has worked hand-in-hand with a post-Fordist tendency to adapt production to a constantly shifting set of requirements, “rationalizing ‘just-in-time’ employment practices that privilege temporary, contract labor while rationalizing the dismantling of systems of social and economic security” (Jackson 2012:22). Workers are both under more pressure to produce, given the constant threat of unemployment, and actually able to work anywhere, anytime. This intensification of the work process has disastrous consequences for leisure.

While the time of leisure gets literally shorter, leisure also faces ontological threats in post-Fordist economies. Post-Fordism incorporates what Ève Chiapello and Luc Boltanski call the ‘artistic critique’ of capitalism into work itself (Boltanski & Chiapello 2018/1999). In Chiapello’s and Boltanski’s account, the demands of the counter-culture movements of the 60s for more fulfilling

²⁰ Not to mention made meaningless by unemployment everywhere.

²¹ According Eric Klinenberg and Claudio Benzecry, “the most fundamental effects of digitalization [...] involve the restructuring of time, space, and place in daily work processes” (2005:8). See also Jonathan Crary’s *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013).

work—work that engages one’s passionate interest—became, at the outset of post-Fordism, the inspiration for new management techniques taking advantage of passion, interest, and desire as tools for getting employees to work more for less.²² If the things we would chose to do in our leisure time become our work, what to do when we stop working? The very ontology of leisure becomes hard to formulate, merging with work such that the question of where one begins and the other ends is unanswerable.

Moreover, there is a sense in which *most* leisure in post-Fordism can be read as labor, even when one’s formal work is not one’s pleasure. Consumerism, which was once what one did in one’s free time, today actually participates directly in production by generating data and by building the hegemony of a brand. Transformative or educational experiences lived in the temporality of leisure are also moments in which subjective capital is generated in the form of communicative potentiality and ‘skilling up’. Indeed, because post-Fordist workers work with the whole of their beings—their emotional intelligence, their communicative apparatus, their capacity for mobilization, their very potentiality itself—every experience or expertise can be seen as an investment in the working self.²³ While artists have perhaps long been known as that special kind of person who has no hobbies (because everything becomes part of their ‘practice’),²⁴ the instrumentalization of leisure in post-Fordism seems to expand to the general public, whose leisure time increasingly transforms into time for strategic (read: no longer disinterested or ‘autonomous’) work on self-improvement. What is leisure when self-discovery through the cultivation of taste, personality, and aesthetics—as well as knowledges, formal and informal—becomes so important to the work process, as well as to one’s value as determined heteronomously, that is to say, in the eyes of powerful others?

Under this new regime of labor, conformity and obedience are no longer the traits of an excellent worker. Rather, employers select for ‘high-performance’ individuals whose charisma, communicativity, creativity, flexibility, spontaneity,

²² See also Frédéric Lordon’s *Willing Slaves of Capital* (2010).

²³ See Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi’s notion of ‘soul work’; Paolo Virno’s concern for the subsumption of intellectual difference in capitalism to an instrumentalized and standardized ‘general intellect’; Maurizio Lazzarato’s assertion that subjectivity itself has been included in the production process; and Pascal Gielen’s assertion that post-Fordist competence has to do with general and diffuse potentiality rather than specific knowledge or abilities (Berardi 2009; Virno 2004/2003; Lazzarato 1997; Gielen 2015/2009).

²⁴ “Today, the artist has no hobbies because their time is entirely devoted to art” (Kunst 2015:157).

and motivation give them a competitive advantage in a fast-moving world. All of this contextualizes Kunst's assertion that today, "the potentiality of the individual and autonomous creativity" are no longer figures of resistance to coercive labor practices, but stand rather "at the centre of production" (2015:110). If the demands of modern dance, hinging on the kinetic subject as a revolutionary figure of hope, were formulated in response to the problems of *Fordist* work and with reference to the line of flight sensed by the subject of leisure—the self at play—it seems important to acknowledge that the dynamic, energetic, improvising body in an unobstructed flow is no longer a utopian extension of what is hinted at by life outside the factory gates. Instead, "the autonomy of creativity and aesthetic experience, which was so important when the resistance to the rationalisation of labour first emerged, now represents the core of post-Fordism as the new organization of the production we live in" (114). On what ground, then, can dance continue to romanticize the spontaneously expressive body as a resistant ideal?

The notion of post-Fordism, and the relation that Kunst helps make clear between dance and the ideological formations which sustain it, is essential to the argument of this thesis because it clarifies the sense in which an ideological shift within dance would be necessary before dance improvisation can figure as a vector of support for precarious lives. For post-Fordist work and the destabilizations it brings with it—the undecidability of work and non-work, the instrumentalization of subjectivity and its concomitant alienation anxiety, as well as the very concrete vagaries and wanderings attendant to the constant coming and going of employment itself—are part of the reason a more robust support system seems necessary in the first place. 'The injuries of digital labor', to use McKenzie Wark's felicitous phrase,²⁵ seem to have more to do with anxiety, exhaustion, overwhelmedness, and hypermobility than confinement and repression: to what extent can dance improvisation, couched in kinetic ideology, respond to the ways that expressivity, communicativeness, intensification, mobilization, and individualism appear today to name problems sooner than solutions? As this thesis proceeds, I move towards some tentative responses to this question.

²⁵ In an interview on YouTube uploaded in 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBwRDJcgML4>. Accessed 11 June 2020.

1.5 Conclusion: Two figures of fantasy

My discussion so far has focused on arguments within dance studies which ask us to reflect on the figure of the dancer in the context of a broader ideological discourse. André Lepecki, Bojana Kunst, and Andrew Hewitt, each in their own way, show how the dancer comes to represent a certain kind of subject, which is aestheticized and idealized in dance. This subject—the kinetic subject—serves as a point of ideological condensation, a figure which makes a claim about the meaning of a certain set of concepts, as well as a claim about what it means to be a subject. Movement, space, freedom, autonomy, energy, self-expression, self-actualization, creativity, and so forth—within the ideology of modernity, as described within the critique of kinetics, these concepts are arranged in a tight knot, and characterize not only a set of values but also a way of living, a biopolitical style.

The critique of kinetics is largely about the representational work done by dance in culture. But the discourse and practice of dance proper is also strongly influenced by this cultural narrative about what dance is and what the dancer represents. In what follows, I propose some examples of improvisational practices which reflect just the sort of 'kineticism' critiqued above. Paying attention in particular to the discourse of dance improvisors—the language which is used in order to accord meaning to their practices, to motivate other dancers to join in and to reflect on what is produced through improvisation—we can see how the problematic ideological field of the kinetic is also part of dance improvisation, understood as a heterogenous assemblage. Below, I propose two distinct incarnations of the kinetic subject. Distinguishing between them allows us to be more precise in diagnosing the cultural phenomena the theorists surveyed so far can be read to address.

1.5.1 The free-time subject: the 'free-time subject'²⁶ is a variant of the figure of the kinetic subject I propose in order to discuss the kinetic subject incarnated specifically as the subject of privilege. This is the figure of a body who chooses between equally-available movement options according to personal preference.

²⁶ While the 'free-time subject' formulation comes from Kunst's *Artist at Work*, I put my own spin on it in what follows.

In this fantasy, neither time nor space throws up obstacles to the subject's exercise of free choice. Because whatever movement is equally valid—because of the disinterestedness of his [*sic*] choice-making—this is an aesthetic subject (as *opposed* to a political one or a laboring one).²⁷

Improvisational dance techniques which prioritize physical agility, quick decision-making, the expansion of bodily capacity, and the seizure of individual agency within complex group situations might be said to partake of this iteration of kinetic ideology. For example, in a description on his website, choreographer David Zambrano claims that “After taking part in the ‘passing through’²⁸ the student will learn to instantly connect with their environment and become more spontaneous in the making of choices as an improviser, choreographer or dancing in someone else’s work” (n.p.). Passing through “enables the student to make instantaneous creative choices as well as increases flexibility in both the mind and body” (n.p.). Although his workshops involve continuous movement in a large group, the emphasis is not on relinquishing individual agency. Rather, it is on learning to see the complex space of improvisation as a “room full of pathways—infinite pathways passing through the walls, the floor, even the bodies” (n.p.), which the individual dancer learns to ‘pass through’. Passing through helps the individual dancer attain the skills he or she needs to keep flow going, even when the other appears as a potential blockage or an obstacle. It prioritizes this constant movement, and the expansion of movement possibilities (increasing ‘flexibility in both the mind and the body’), over the jarring temporality of the difficult encounter, of sitting with problems and working through them deliberately. It treats the other as a problem or an impediment, something we must find a way around or ‘pass through’ in the interest of unobstructed movement.²⁹

Gaga, an improvisational technique authored by Ohad Naharin, extends similar promises: “Both amateur and professional dancers can use Gaga to

²⁷ C.f. Hannah Arendt's notion of freedom, wherein disinterested choicemaking is actually the essence of the political (Arendt 2000/1961). Arendt's figure of the free man of politics is an interesting counterpoint to the notion of the apolitical freedom embodied by the free-time subject. Her theory is also problematic insofar as she bases her model of political freedom on ancient Athens, a society in which the political freedom of men was guaranteed by the servitude of women and slaves.

²⁸ ‘Passing through’ is the name of Zambrano's improvisation technique.

²⁹ All quotes from David Zambrano's website, http://www.davidzambrano.org/?page_id=276. Accessed 29 January 2020.

connect to their bodies and imaginations, experience physical sensations, improve their flexibility and stamina, exercise their agility and explosive power, and enjoy the pleasure of movement in a welcoming, accepting atmosphere" (n.p.). The specifically improvisational nature of the work "enables each participant's deeply personal connection with Gaga" (n.p.)—personal because it is improvisational, because it is expressive of their personal freedom and idiosyncratic decision-making—"unlocking the endlessness of possibilities" (n.p.). Moreover, this practice is explicitly connected to a notion of leisure, which here is a mode in which both work and moral goodness occurs: "Dancers are guided *to connect their effort to pleasure* and to discover the *virtue of silliness*" (n.p.; emphasis mine).³⁰

One final example can be found in the language used to describe William Forsythe's 'Forsythe Improvisation Technologies'. In the description of a Forsythe improvisation workshop given by Tamas Geza Moricz in Berlin in 2011, it is claimed that the workshop will "will free you from repeating habitual movement patterns and will allow for greater freedom in your improvisation" (n.p.). This happens, again, through the mastery of physical skills and the acquisition of individual agency: "You will learn how to use velocity, how to use your body's weight and its impulses for your own benefit" (n.p.). Furthermore, "The resulting knowledge will be useful for years to come, in your dance or choreographic practice or simply to raise your body awareness" (n.p.): improvisation here is a life skill, such that the autonomy promised by the technique opens out onto a notion of instrumentality. Physical hypermobility and self-control is legitimized as being in the dancer's personal interest, both as a dancer and in life.³¹

In this moment of disinterested, aesthetic choice-making, the subject is—within the logic of this figure, the figure of the 'free-time subject'—most truly himself [*sic*]. Because this subject moves not out of obligation but out of pure desire, movement can be used within the opening of freedom as a tool for generating self-knowledge. This figure is also conceived of as a figure of naturalness, in the sense of being free of the distortions of obligation imposed by

³⁰ All quotes from the Gaga company website, <https://www.gagapeople.com/en/about-gaga/>. Accessed 29 January 2020.

³¹ All quotes from the Dock 11 website, http://www.dock11-berlin.de/index.php/cat/2_3/id/p158_FORSYTHE-IMPROVISATION-WORKSHOP.html. Accessed 29 January 2020.

others. In these examples, freedom means that movement flows continuously without encountering an obstacle. This subject is energized by desire, which, no longer requiring repression to accommodate the needs and prohibitions of others, has come unblocked.

The critique of kinetics, as mapped out above, can be brought to bear on the figure of the free-time subject from several angles. Lepecki's work teaches us to notice the sense in which the model of this free-time subject is produced within the experience of the most privileged—typically from a white, male, heterosexual, bourgeois position—and then projected on the rest of humanity as an ideal to which to aspire. Casting the free-time subject as a subject of leisure, as Kunst's work suggests we do, only reinforces the notion that the free-time subject is a fantasy born of a certain privilege. Because the figure of the free-time subject narrates the moment of free time not only as pleasurable or desirable but actually as the moment in which the truth of the subject is revealed, it also surreptitiously adjudicates on *who* is in a state of truth—and who is not. This is one of the senses in which figure of the free-time subject can be read as a strategy of biopower. Within the ideology of the kinetic, hypermobility in an autonomous field of desiring becomes the prerequisite for access to the truth. Those who cannot demonstrate this personal freedom also become less legitimate as knowing subjects.

The free-time subject also relates to biopower in another way: in the construction of this figure, the production of the opening of free time through the flattening of complex, inhabited spaces; the erasure of inconvenient others; and the exploitation of energetic and other resources is happily forgotten. The free-time subject is styled in a way which constructs the other in silence, through erasure; as such, it justifies the continued silencing of those who are *not* kinetic, who get in the way the expansiveness of capital. Furthermore, it institutes a certain spatial imaginary, in which space is primarily something which mutely acquiesces to the kinetic desires of the subject, actually a kind of absence or vacuum to be filled rather than a richly-textured, consequential, co-present entity. For the proponents of dance improvisation's biopolitical critique, these are all reasons to re-evaluate the values and claims of dance improvisors operating in the idiom of the free-time subject.

1.5.2 The integrated creative subject: In what follows, I propose the figure of the 'integrated creative subject'. This figure helps us notice the ways in which, within the discourse of kinetics, the dynamic traffic between the potential and the actual—the movement of creativity—is often confounded with the dynamic displacement of bodies in space. This is not to say that one is necessarily confused for the other, but rather that the same set of values, presuppositions, and images which vaunt and legitimate energetic corporeal movements animates discussions of creativity as an expression of improvised freedom. Here, again, the subject is cast as primarily aesthetic, rather than laboring or political, a conduit for the free flow of polymorphous inspiration rather than an entity located within labor relations or political struggles.

Like the figure of the free-time subject, the figure of the integrated creative subject appears frequently in descriptions of improvisation techniques and workshops. Jean Abreu's 2019 workshop at Impulstanz—entitled 'Thinking e-motion'—promises to "help participants to develop their ability to listen to their body's sensorial impulses, fully focused on the continuous process of making choices, on the spot decision making, as performers, dancers and social beings" (n.p.). Much of the continuousness, spontaneity, and reactive capacity touted in the examples given above is reiterated here, with the added layer of listening to the 'body's sensorial impulses'; that is to say, of shifting potential movements into the actual. While proponents of the free-time subject emphasize physical amplitude, awareness, and agility, Abreu's discussion in terms of a 'continuous process of making choices' and 'on the spot decision making' locates the kinetic not so much in the corporeal proper as in the creative process itself. It is the creative process, more than the body, that is attended to here through the lens of the kinetic. Moreover, Abreu's methodology encourages dancers "to search for movement impulses that are urgent and necessary and that are coming from a primal and necessary origin, moving away from pre-made movement structures, broadening the spectrum of possibilities that the body can offer" (n.p.): while the focus on individual expansion and improvement echo the offerings of Zambano, Naharin, and Forsythe, Abreu's discourse is different in that he is

concerned explicitly with the body as an origin point for the spontaneous generation of the new.³²

Sara Shelton Mann—whose 2018 workshop in Girona was billed as ‘The magic of improvisation: Fifteen days swimming in the spring of creativity’—likewise partakes heavily of the figure of the integrated creative subject in order to locate, ground, and publicize her improvisational practice. According to her own website...

... Sara teaches from the edge of the unknown and brings 50 years of research and practice in dance, healing and metaphysical arts to her workshop. Her working methods cultivate a seemingly impossible space of magic and aliveness where technical capacity and personal artistry thrive [...] You will be challenged [in this workshop] to work on the edge of form, to learn how to recognize the “what if’s” that appear in different aspects of the material and to boldly pursue your own specific interests. Working with Sara brings the singular magic of each performer, artist, facilitator, individual into shining power and clarity. (n.p.)³³

What Mann’s improvisation technique apparently allows to emerge is the dancer’s vital creative capacity, considered here as something essentially magic and alive. Movement is present not only in the dancing but in the ‘pursuit’ of each dancer’s ‘specific interests’ and ‘singular magic’. The metaphorical invocation of the dancer as a light—a source of ‘shining power and clarity’—confirms our suspicion that what is at stake here is still energy expenditure framed as the expression of an essentially vital and unlimited human force. However, again, this is not so much the power to literally move, but the power to create cast as a power of movement.³⁴

³² All quotes from the Impulstanz website, <https://www.impulstanz.com/en/archive/2019/workshops/id4019/>. Accessed 14 February 2020.

³³ Quote from the ‘retreats’ section of Sara Shelton Mann’s website, <https://www.sarasheltonmann.org/retreats>. Accessed 12 June 2020.

³⁴ In a YouTube video documenting this Girona workshop, Mann states further: “I’m looking for the secrets. I’m a treasure hunter and I look for the secrets. But I like to know what’s going on inside people. I like to bring out what they don’t know, or what potential is in there that they haven’t expressed. I find out all kinds of talents that people had that they had no idea that they would actually put in public [...] I aim to engage you energetically and physically and at an aetheric level, at a subtle level, and in relationship to the world, to the planet. We’re powerful, you are powerful! I’m interested in you being artists, not just performers, or dancers. And so in that way whatever your essential essence and ability to be the brilliance that you are on the planet—you have to be willing to be seen. Not as a body, but as a soul, as a spirit, as a being of light, as a person of wisdom, and information, and a person who’s funny and joyful, and willing to fail, and be a clown” (n.p.). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6-Et83_W7A. Accessed 12 June 2020.

One final example of the figure of the integrated creative subject comes from Jared Gradinger's and Angela Schubot's description of their 2013 improvisation workshop, 'On Becoming'. Their practice is "devoted to an extreme physicality that is in constant negotiation with a philosophical and often esoteric discourse", through which explorations of the physical, the organic, and the social are conducted. "This exploration will be used for creating material and encourage performative confidence" (n.p.): explicitly, the goal of exploration here is to establish and secure a creative and productive flow, which will lead the dancer to "a territory of no hierarchy and a presence where desire will become so numerous that only a mobile body and agile mind will be able to negotiate them in the immediate" (n.p.). What is expanded here is not so much the virtuosity of the body as its 'current comfort zone', seen as a barrier to creative flow. What is most kinetic is desire, which, once one's true presence to it is established, can only be managed with a 'mobile body and agile mind'.³⁵

In the logic of the figure of the integrated creative subject, creativity is a moving force—sometimes conflated with the force of desire—which can be managed or activated in various ways. Dance improvisation practices, through their proximity to spontaneity and to the unknown, are particularly good tools to get creativity moving. Moreover, to be a good dancer, one must know how to access this improvisational creative flow. Often, creativity is discussed in terms of impulses whose urgency and authenticity need only be attended to. The traffic between potentiality and actuality which characterizes creativity is treated as movement. In that way, the ideological judgments and presuppositions which qualify corporeal agility, hypermobility, and dynamic displacements as expressions of human freedom and aesthetic self-actualization apply equally—although with different accents and different consequences—to the creative act itself.

One could, of course, dismiss the inflated language around creativity present in these workshop announcements simply as a transparent advertising strategy, a way of promoting the workshops themselves. But this would be beside the point: the simple fact that the promise of becoming more creative is so appealing for prospective workshop attendees demonstrates that, within

³⁵ All quotes from the Impulstanz website, <https://www.impulstanz.com/en/archive/2013/workshops/id2391/>. Accessed 12 June 2020.

today's dance world, flowing creativity is at a premium. But at what cost? In *Exhausting Dance*, Lepecki is explicit in including the ever-accelerating movements of labor in his description of the emergence of the kinetic subject of modernity. Kunst's observations about the erasure of the dividing line between work and leisure—as well as other discussions of creative labor, such as Maurizio Lazzarato's comments about the blurring distinction between production and consumption in post-Fordism (1997)—help us understand why certain critical voices in dance studies might find such celebratory language problematic. The issue becomes bluntly apparent when these workshops are taken for what they are: not leisure activities, but professional training and development. In that sense, they participate in the professionalization of creativity, and thus its subsumption under the strictures of the market.

We should hesitate to cast the market as a monolithic entity here, or the professionalization of creativity as its wholesale 'corruption'. Nevertheless, it is important to take note of the mobilization of creativity as something often coupled with—but which is also distinct from—the mobilization of the body within the discourse of contemporary dance. Improvisation gets our bodies going and our creativity flowing. The critique of kinetics, as a strand of the biopolitical critique of dance improvisation, teaches us to attend to the sense in which these mobilizations resonate with (and maybe even further) a modernist world-view in which the costs of mobilizations are often erased, as well as their raced, gendered, and classed distributions. Furthermore, the critique of kinetics throws the association of improvisational movement with freedom, disinterestedness, enjoyment, aesthetics, the self, and truth into question, for if leisure can no longer be distinguished from work, then the model on which such an ideological gathering was based becomes incredible.

In this chapter, I began a mapping of the biopolitical critique of dance improvisation. Focusing especially on the work of André Lepecki, Andrew Hewitt, and Bojana Kunst, I highlighted a critical discourse which deals with the meaning of dance in culture. This discourse has special relevance for my analysis of dance improvisation because, as I demonstrate above, it revolves around an ideological bind between notions of movement, freedom, autonomy, self-expression, energy, and spontaneity which is embodied by the figure of the dancer. This particular ideological cluster, as I hope has become clear, narrates dance as the representation of a particular kind of improvised life, one which is lived

autonomously and in a kind of neutral, receptive, or mute space. Within the kinetic paradigm, movement is essentially an expression of the individual, moving from in to out in an expansive and creative flow. But is this the kind of improvisation which can really emerge as a vector or a site of support in the contemporary moment, given the specific problems we are facing as a society?

Each in their own way, the dance studies scholars whose thinking can be read as a critique of kinetics make arguments, in my reading, for kinetic subjectivity as a specifically biopolitical mode of subjection. That is to say, the kinetic names a certain style of being, feeling, and knowing which facilitates and shores up a particular organization of power and the strategic erasures and elisions it requires in order to maintain legitimacy. In other words, the critique of kinetics demonstrates that improvisation is embedded in an ideological landscape such that improvisation is not simply movement that is not choreographed. Instead, it comes packaged with a whole host of problematic fantasies—fantasies which, according to these critical scholars, produce and maintain inequality and precarity, rather than affirming the possibility of collective living-on within the horizon of a shared ecological consciousness.

In the next chapter, I will hone in on a different aspect of the biopolitical critique, which examines the relation between improvisational dancing and truth. What claims do improvisors make on truth? And in what sense might the claim that improvisation reveals the truth—through granting access to pure expression, pure presence, pure energy, or pure embodiment—be said to operate biopolitically? Although the critique of essentialism—the subject of this next chapter—operates in view of the kinetic ideology described above, it takes a different theoretical tack, which is slightly less concerned with materialism (in the classical sense of the term) and more interested in epistemology. Taking the critique of essentialism into account allows me to treat the aspect of my research question which has to do with improvisation as a support for epistemological, as well as material, uncertainty.

2 The critique of essentialism

In 'Spontaneous Combustion: Notes on Dance Improvisation from the Sixties to the Nineties' (2003), Sally Banes lists the following as terms dance improvisors have used to describe themselves, their values, and their practices:

spontaneity
self-expression
spiritual expression
freedom
accessibility
choice
community
authenticity
the natural
presence
resourcefulness
risk
political subversion
a sense of connectedness, of playfulness, child's play, leisure, and sports
(Banes 2003:77)

While in the last chapter I analyzed the dance studies discourses which pay critical attention to the ideological work done through the association of improvisation with freedom, choice, and leisure (and, of course, movement), in this chapter I turn to critiques of a different set of terms, namely: spontaneity, self-expression, authenticity, the natural, presence, and so forth. This chapter, in other words, looks at dance improvisation's various and manifold claims to function as a site of authenticity or truth, often framed as a pre-cultural or universal essence.

Whether this essence is located by improvisors in the definitive materiality of the anatomical body, in the vital energy accessed through the removal of cultural repressions, in the authenticity of their expressivity, or in the spontaneous generativity of pure presence, the theorists critical of dance

improvisation from the vantage point of a critique of essentialism point out the ways these appeals to a higher truth or deeper reality discursively link improvisational practices to a long history of Western metaphysical thinking. We could think of a Platonic cosmology, divided into the realm of the pure idea—whole, perfect, natural, godly—and its mere physical representation in the world, each actual object a badly-executed copy, material, imperfect, unoriginal, worldly. Or of Rousseau’s romanticism, decrying the corruptions of culture and vaunting the purity of nature. Without assigning Western metaphysics a stable origin or identity, we can turn our attention to one particular tendency within the metaphysical tradition, namely the tendency to think in a set of binary dyads: nature/culture, body/mind, substance/form, speech/writing, presence/absence, black/white, woman/man, primitive/civilized, and so forth. What is characteristic (and problematic) in this thinking is not the identification of differences as such, but rather the stabilization and reification of these differential categories, as well as the implicit hierarchies at work within each dyad.

The critique of essentialism in dance, therefore, is a critique of the “naturalisation of movement” (Kunst 2015: 108) performed in the discourse of dancers and choreographers. In dance studies, Bojana Cvejić’s *Choreographing Problems* (2015) and Andrew Hewitt’s *Social Choreography* (2005) provide cogent examples of the way a critique of essentialism might be brought to bear on the discourse of dance improvisors. They show how metaphysical traditions, which might on first glance seem to be abstract or immaterial entities, actually structure certain embodied practices: by pointing out the essentialism at work in dance, Cvejić and Hewitt demonstrate that essentialism is not only a habit of thought, but also a strategy for organizing and mobilizing bodies. In my thinking, this is why the critique of essentialism is a biopolitical critique. The essential truth of expression, of the body, of energy, or of presence: these are ‘universal’ and transcendental notions to which, paradoxically, some bodies can claim a closer relation. Others are cast as farther away from the ‘universal’ and in need of serious (dance) work: as with all grounding truths, these universalities end up more accessible to some than to others.

The critique of essentialism is important to the argument of this thesis because it demonstrates, yet again, the sense in which dance improvisation as it stands today is not yet able to provide adequate conceptual and practical support for those struggling to live lives which escape genre. Part of what

appears promising about improvisation is the sense in which it takes a loose approach to actualization, manifesting moment to moment, such that the path and the form a body takes on over time is not fully pre-determined. For beings for whom the meaning of certain normative categories has been fundamentally destabilized—the human, the good life, sexuality, gender, race, embodiment, ability, relationality, and so forth—improvisation appears, in my thinking, as an exciting site of possibility, a way of thinking ongoingness and structuring experimentation without needing to rely on deterministic genres of life for support. But the critique of essentialism in dance points out the sense in which the discourse of dance and especially dance improvisation is still ideologically burdened with positivistic commitments to truth. In what follows, I work through four of these commitments. Becoming clear about just how improvisation is not or not yet post-normative brings us closer to a nuanced description of dance improvisation which is affirmative about its possibilities but also acknowledges its problems.

2.1 *The universal language of dance*

Dance studies theorists who bring a critique of essentialism to bear on the discourse of dance improvisation frequently refer to John Martin's work. John Martin was an American dance critic whose commentary and theorization was important in the legitimation process of modern dance, and in particular in the ascendancy of Martha Graham as a monumental figure. Martin imagined dance as a kind of universal language, a direct body-to-body communication that evaded the torsions and regionalisms inherent—for him—to speech and writing.

Martin's term for this process of communication was 'metakinesis'. Referring to his *Introduction to the Dance* (1939), Bojana Cvejić explains that Martin posits a "causal relation between the performer's feeling, her movement, and the feeling it arouses in the recipient of the movement" (2015:163-164). In other words, metakinesis names the idea that there is a natural relationship between psychological or emotional feeling and movement, and indeed that witnessing this authentic expression will cause the spectator to directly experience the dancer's feeling. "This claim—that dance is born of self-expression based on a personal feeling that binds the spectator to it by way of empathy—[still] operates as an ideology in contemporary dance" (163): while

the science of Martin's claim has apparently been disproved, critical dance theorists argue that metakinesis lives on as ideology.³⁶

Of course, what remains unclear—or at least unspoken—in Martin's theory is the question of precisely *which* movements trigger this metakinetic process of direct communication, and which ones communicate 'falsely' or simply not at all. Martin's implication, of course, is that modern dance is a metakinetic practice, while ballet is merely the regurgitation of a frozen code. There is apparently a resonant sweet spot where movement lines up with feeling, and then a range of false, artful, or empty representational gestures which patently miss the mark. Metakinesis as a theory of dance is then an appeal to (return to?) authentic movement.³⁷ Indeed, the improvisational discipline of Authentic Movement, developed by Mary Starks Whitehouse (a disciple of Graham's) and Janet Adler, gets its name from the supposed naturalness of expressive movement. Adler: "When the movement was simple and inevitable, not to be changed no matter how limited or partial, it became what I called 'authentic'—it could be recognized as genuine, belonging to that person" (in Cvejić 2015:164). Authentic Movement as a discipline, then, is precisely the practice of perfecting the metakinetic traffic between feeling and movement, improbably posited as both a natural process and a technique to be learned. What the use of the word 'authentic' makes evident is the sense in which metakinesis, as a theory which naturalizes some dance practices, is also a theory which de-naturalizes others, or which can be used to adjudicate on where and how naturalness appears and is distributed.

Andrew Hewitt takes this line of argument further, pointing out the contradictions that metakinesis engenders in its bid for, in particular, a *nationless* universality. While Martin claims to discover a universal physical principle, Hewitt reminds us to pay attention to the locatedness (in the United States) of both his writing and the practices he refers to: in 'geopolitical terms', according to Hewitt, Martin wishes to "establish an authentic post-literate, nontranslated culture *in America*, the land of assimilation and cultural translation" (2005:120; emphasis mine). Hewitt sees Martin's metakinesis as an

³⁶ Cvejić: "The grounds for Martin's arguments such as metakinesis and inner muscular mimicry have been contested in contemporary neuroscience, cognitive science, and dance practice as well, yet his chief claim about the psychological and emotional nature of bodily movement still holds a place of firm belief among dancers and dance audiences" (2015:163).

³⁷ Andrew Hewitt emphasizes the sense in which metakinesis figures a return to origin: "Martin is attempting to resurrect a prelapsarian language in a postlapsarian body" (2005:120).

ideological attack on language and literacy—"Martin's mistrust in literacy is in fact a mistrust in the translations and mediations necessary to move from the body to text" (119)—and contextualizes this mistrust as a reaction to "prevailing nineteenth-century assumptions about national culture that privileged a literary heritage and a shared language as the precondition of nationhood" (120). An America that identified itself as a new land and a land of immigrants (strategically ignoring the indigenous peoples and cultures that settler colonialism had displaced) needed a new paradigm of national culture which depended neither on a long and hallowed literary history nor, indeed, even on a shared language. In this sense, Hewitt claims that "Martin's championing of the body against literacy is a championing of one conception of national culture over and against another" (120), an innovation that secures, through the adoption of dance as a national art form, the possibility of a specifically post-literate nationalism.

Metakinesis as a story about direct communication, body to body, by a route that evades the necessity of translation or the clichés of representation, matches well to a nation that imagines itself not as a transcendent unity but rather as the immanent manifestation of the will of the people. Both dance and America are direct, unmediated; both dance and America are "invoked or produced through performance" (121). They are nothing before they are willed into being, and—democratically—fundamentally fungible. They find their origin point not in a pre-existing, transcendent ideal, but in the (authentic) feelings of individual bodies.

Today, in 2020, Americans face the prospect of a second Trump administration with a mounting sense of both fear and fatalistic resignation. The blatant manipulation of the 'will of the people' by a disinformation dispositive designed to convince the working class (and not only the working class but indeed Americans at many different precarious locations) to vote against their own interests makes clear what any claim to pure political immanence strives to cover over: the fundamental failure of representational democracy, and the sense in which what is specific about America might be precisely this gap between the narrative of free-wheeling, inventive performativity on the one hand and the inertial force of a power-laden political landscape on the other. And so the dangers of metakinesis as a story about universality become clear. According to Hewitt, Martin positions dance as "*the American art*" in the sense

that both dance and America move, in their fundamental authenticity, freedom, and inclusiveness, “beyond historical specificity” (127; emphasis in the original). According to Martin, the body is both totally specific to each individual and “fundamentally the same everywhere” (Martin in Hewitt 2005:126). For this reason, the body is primed to become “the locus of humanity beyond national cultural limitations” (Hewitt 2005:127). But neither America nor modern dance is actually universalizable as an unmediated site of expression, despite the centrality of pure immanence to their foundational narratives. Indeed, any attempt to universalize a form, political or aesthetic, tends to cover over the specific relations of power at work—here, in the body and in the nation—making an effective critique or challenge more difficult to mount.

The conversion of affect into feeling and then into movement (the dancer’s process), and then the conversion of the affect of movement into feeling and finally into meaning (from the perspective of the spectator), is, according to the dance studies scholars writing from the perspective of a critique of essentialism, by no means a direct, biological, or universal process. It is simply not the case that we can read people’s minds by watching them move around in day to day life: metakinesis, by Martin’s account, requires a specific and (nationally, racially, politically) located technical training to be activated. Moreover, the dance practices, such as Authentic Movement, which train dance improvisation with an eye to the facilitation of metakinetic expression, provide no answer to the question of just how such a culturally and historically located practice might make claims to a transcultural, transhistorical universal ‘authenticity’.

Indeed, the dance studies scholars critical of improvisation from the perspective of a critique of essentialism argue, in my reading, that the open field of aesthetic potential promised by a notion of dance premised on movement as the physical manifestation of a felt state as often as not leads to a more intense, rather than less intense, policing of what counts as (good, authentic, heartfelt) dance. When Adler describes her Authentic Movement, she describes it from the perspective of one who witnesses the movement of others and discerns, through her own ineffable and ‘direct’ felt experience, its inarguable authenticity. The authentically expressive nature of movement can, apparently, be decided upon from the perspective of a spectator. Dance, in a metakinetic framework, is no longer about the reproduction and re-animation of an undead form (ballet),

which one can represent with more or less skill or accuracy; rather, it is an opening for the emergence of new movements which express the truth of the individual in the moment. The stakes, therefore, are high. As Hewitt concludes, “the danger of the new performative paradigm was that it might not simply mis-*represent*, but mis-*beget* the nation. The privileging of dance as a national cultural form brought with it the danger of a miscreant—or, more specifically, a miscegenated—culture” (121; emphasis in the original). With this in mind, the strand of the critique of essentialism that deals with metakinesis and dance as a universal language warns us that this kind of essentialism binds dance to the political forces which determine who or what is universalized as a subject of expression.

2.2 *Spontaneity: dancing the pure present*

In *Choreographing Problems*, Bojana Cvejić quotes choreographer Simone Forti: “I started speaking while moving, with word and movement springing spontaneously from a common source. This practice has been a way for me to know what’s on my mind. What’s on my mind before I think it through, while it is still a wild feeling in my bones” (2015:133). This formulation highlights the proximity of self-expression to spontaneity and to presence within the ideological formation of dance improvisation. Indeed, America’s postwar ‘culture of spontaneity’ is, according to Cvejić, intimately linked to ideas about direct expression through the body that John Martin espoused already in the interwar period, so much so that “freedom in spontaneous self-expression”—that is, freedom gleaned through a principled commitment to presence and a preference for the present over the past and the future—can be considered a recurring motif in the discourse of dance improvisation throughout the 20th century (2015:127).³⁸

Spontaneity, according to Cvejić, is an important component in the structuring story of dance improvisation because it helps make the link between the expressivity enshrined in the discourse of metakinesis and the exciting promise of the discovery of the new. “The ‘unknown’, ‘unexpected’, ‘surprise’, or ‘discovery’” are, in her thinking, “the terms of a doxa, a common-sense jargon of practitioners with which improvisation is negotiated” (128)—improvisation not

³⁸ Cvejić cites Daniel Belgrad’s 1998 book of the same title in her discussion of the ‘culture of spontaneity’.

only unleashes authentic expression, it is also a process of discovery, whereby the unknown of the self is revealed to the self and to the world in the same vibrating present moment. According to Cvejić, there is a sense in the discourse of many dance improvisors that the rational mind is a repressive agent, and that through spontaneity, dancers can access that which is normally repressed. A notion of improvisation...

... modeled after psychic automatism [...] presupposed a free flow of subjectivity which in dance manifests as a form of visceral thinking opposed to the rational control of mind and thought expressed in language [...] In escaping language, the body is regarded as a reservoir of the unconscious, whose unleashing is uncovering the unknown, the unselfconscious as a truer reality than the performance of intended and determined movement. (132-133)

This way of thinking contrasts the diachronic—a sense of self positioned or caught between a past rationalized in memory and a reasonably wished-for or extrapolated future—with the synchronic, the moment in which the body, freed from these projections and their attendant constrictions, can manifest its true creative potential. Being ‘in the present’ is a technique for unblocking the body’s capacity for producing what was unimaginable before, but which was nevertheless contained within the body all along.

This privileging of the present as the time in which the truth which cannot be repressed any longer is a trope not restricted to dance improvisors; instead, it taps into a much broader cultural habit. Cvejić quotes Mary Cline Richards, for example, a postwar American poet who asserts that “the squelching of the ‘person’ and his spontaneous intuitive response to experience is [...] at the root of our timidity, our falseness” (135). According to the critique of essentialism I am mapping here, this sort of statement—which betrays a belief in the natural, a conviction that our cultural subjectification represents a ‘fall’ and that the visceral can reveal a higher or deeper truth—taps into a set of “assumptions and ideas” (127) which are still deeply involved with dance improvisation, with the ways we imagine, talk about, and go about improvising dance.

What could be problematic about the cult of the present moment evidenced in the discourse of dance improvisors? Put simply, the desire to dwell entirely in the present—and to look for truth and authenticity primarily within

that temporality—could be read as a desire to deny one's locatedness, to efface one's past and disavow the determining effects of one's imagined future. Such an impulse in the name of emancipation, indeed, might produce the opposite effect: by believing oneself free of the shackles of diachronic time, one blinds oneself to the traces of the past and future which necessarily shape one's perception of the present.

In the discourse of dance improvisation which celebrates spontaneity, there exists a dichotomy in which "the terms 'mind' and 'body' stand in for the gap between the 'known' and the 'unknown'" (132), the 'rational' and the 'intuitive', the 'absent' and the 'present'. Dance studies perspectives like Cvejić's can dialogue productively with alternative approaches to something like intuition, which reads it *not* as a natural category but as a social and historical construction. For example, in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant adapts Henri Bergson's formulation of intuition in order to frame intuition as something which creates an *effect* of presence but which is actually "the work of history translated through personal memory" (2011:52). Rather than something purified of history, Berlant's intuition is "a trained thing, not just autonomic activity" (52), "a kind of archiving mechanism for the affects that are expressed in habituated or spontaneous behavior that appears to manage the ongoing present" (17). Berlant's diachronic approach to intuition is important because it reveals the ideological elision at work in essentialist notions of presence: the naturalization of presence prevents us from thinking critically about how our intuitive grasp of the present is contingently and culturally embodied, constructed through relations of power. It is in this sense that, for Berlant, "affect theory is another phase in the history of ideology theory" (53): a spontaneous, intuitive response might actually be the sort of digestion of events *least* equipped to produce a critical difference, as the habituation of intuition is precisely what allows the world to appear consistently realistic as opposed to continually surprising.

For Berlant, the present is not something we access in its absoluteness. Indeed, "the affective work of memory is just one among many forces that together constitute what gets *refracted as the present*" (52; emphasis mine). In her narration of the present as a refraction, I read echoes of Jacques Derrida, whose own critique of presence has been hugely influential. In *Speech and Phenomena* (1967), he writes:

... the presence of the perceived present can appear as such only inasmuch as it is *continuously compounded* with a nonpresence and nonperception, with primary memory and expectation (retention and protention). These nonperceptions are neither added to, nor do they *occasionally* accompany, the actually perceived now, they are essentially and indispensably involved in its possibility [...] As soon as we admit this continuity of the now and the not-now, perception and nonperception, in the zone of primordially common to primordial impression and primordial retention, we admit the other into the self-identity of the *Augenblick*; nonpresence and nonevidence are admitted into *the blink of the instant*. There is a duration to the blink and it closes the eye. This alterity is in fact the condition for presence, presentation, and thus for *Vorstellung*³⁹ in general....
(1973/1967:64-65; emphasis in the original)

Derrida's critique rests on the impossibility of imagining perception without the activity of a past and a future; there is a duration—that is, a historicity which is also a constructedness—to the blink. What would perception be without the soldering of memory, linking one moment to the next? Without the orientation provided by the projection of a futurity? Such an analysis would seem to render the injunction 'stay in the moment!', so often heard in dance improvisation classes, a demand imprecise to the point of meaninglessness.

Elsewhere, Derrida's critique of presence goes further. In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida examines the "the debasement of writing, and its repression outside 'full' speech" (1997/1967:3) which is, for him, typical of Western metaphysics. He points out the sense in which, in the West, there is a tendency to associate speech with presence, life, and authentic truth, and writing with absence, lifelessness, representation, and technicality. Speech, according to Derrida, is positioned as the 'original', while writing becomes a mere 'supplement'; moreover, "the supplement is nothing, it has no energy of its own, no spontaneous movement" (178). But what is behind this pervasive value judgement?

Derrida diagnoses in the speech/writing dyad an anxiety about reality versus representation and a desire to preserve their absolute distinctness from one another. According to the Western metaphysical model, there exist real

³⁹ 'Perception' or 'ideas'.

things and their (less real) representations. Each translation of an object—first as perception and mental experience, then as a spoken expression of that mental image, and finally as a written representation of that speech—brings one further from the origin of the thought, i.e., the object itself. This model allows us to conceive of knowledge as something that has a solid and real origin in the objective universe. It also underwrites our intuitions about authenticity and fakeness.

But in what sense is writing actually *exterior* to speech? Does it not haunt speech, in the same way that memory and expectation haunt perception? Derrida proposes that the logic of the supplement (i.e., that writing is the supplement of speech, absence the supplement of presence, choreography the supplement of improvisation and so forth) is actually a metaphysical trick which attempts to insure the totality, plenitude, and self-identity of an objective 'real world' that exists independently of representation, through an ordering of the world into origins and supplements:

... metaphysics consists of excluding non-presence by determining the supplement as *simple exteriority*, pure addition or pure absence. The work of exclusion operates within the structure of supplementarity. The paradox is that one annuls addition by considering it a pure addition. *What is added is nothing because it is added to a full presence to which it is exterior.* Speech comes to be added to intuitive presence (of the entity, of *essence*, of the *eidos*, of *ousia*, and so forth); writing comes to be added to living self-present speech; masturbation comes to be added to so-called normal sexual experience; culture to nature, evil to innocence, history to origin, and so on. (167; emphasis in the original)

The notion that something new and true will emerge in the spontaneous present, in the activation of an intuitive mode of being that eschews language and its representational logic, is not unique to the discourse of dance improvisation. Indeed, Derrida argues that presentism and a preference for the spontaneous underlie a formidably-positioned body of Western thinking about truth. What he points out in *Of Grammatology* is that our fetish for the present moment betrays an eagerness to imagine a solid ground for truth upon which the edifice of a universal knowledge could be based, an origin point to which language and representation, mere copies, refer. It is a fantasy, in fact, about

unmediated reality, and the revelations attendant on bypassing cultural mediations—this is what Lauren Berlant is writing about when she pointedly refers to *realism* as an aesthetic genre of experience rather than *the real* as ontology (2011:52).

The fantasy of a universalizable truth depends, moreover, on a specifically Western metaphysics and is located in the West (itself the apparent 'origin' of a 'supplementary' East). Indeed, the hierarchization of speech and writing that assumes writing to be an *ex post facto* representation of originary speech is obviously, Derrida points out, specific to cultures which write phonetically (pictograms, for example, imply no such clear posteriority). It is in this sense that Derrida calls our metaphysical preference for presence—for speech (or improvisation) over writing (or choreography)—“nothing but the most original and powerful ethnocentrism,” one which covers over its specificity with a story about generality (1997/1967:3).

The critique of the discourse of spontaneity in dance improvisation is a biopolitical critique because it shows one of the ways that, through an embodied practice, we learn to interpret historically-determined intuitions about movement and habituated modes of digesting experience into action as ahistorical and fully our own. Moreover, some schools of thinking about improvisation teach that it is actually best not to think too much about these modes and intuitions; indeed, that they wilt when subjected to rational examination, and especially when exposed to language: as Cvejić asserts, “The mistrust of verbal language among improvisors [...] hinders debate by regarding improvisors' statements and definitions as documents with truth-value, while these formulations may involve a considerable degree of mystification” (2015:129). What power-laden repetitions does this tendency to mystify enable? With which forces is the discourse of spontaneity in dance improvisation aligned, and what metaphysical commitments does it imply?

In this thesis, I am interested in dance improvisation insofar as living without the assurances of metaphysics—that is, without faith in an absolute real lurking behind cultural representations—might be re-imagined as an improvisational style of life; indeed, as a style which has no specific aesthetic content, instead consisting only of a mode of navigating a shifting set of principles, concepts, and procedures. Reading Cvejić's critique of spontaneity within the ideological arrangement of dance improvisation through Berlant and

Derrida, it becomes clear that dance improvisation as it stands today would have some work to do in readying itself for the task. For the ideological formation that binds truth, spontaneity, and presence in improvisation seems to decontest truth in an absolute sense, in relation to the real and to the natural, to that which stands behind the veil of appearances. Can improvisation accommodate a more flexible or 'weaker' approach to truth and to presence, which makes no claims to purity or absoluteness? In my analysis, an affirmative theory of improvisation would treat this as an urgent question.

2.3 Unleashing vital energy

What seems to unite all the different accounts of essentialism within the discourse of dance improvisation is the story of a natural truth covered over by a cultural repression: the truth of felt experience repressed by the translation into language, the truth of the moment covered over by the distractions of cultural life, and so forth. Through these stories, dance improvisation is figured as the return to a lost origin or the purification of a perversion. This turns out to be no less the case when we examine the ways the notions of energy and pleasure animate the discourse of dance. While the critique of energetic essentialism within dance studies hasn't yet, to my knowledge, been specifically applied to improvisation, I include it in this thesis as it makes an important bridge between the critique of essentialism and the critique of kinetics discussed in chapter one.

In *Social Choreography*, Andrew Hewitt reminds us again and again that modern dance—the movement within which the discourse of dance improvisation we know today was forged—must be understood within the broader context of a renewed interest in vitalism. According to Hewitt, “modern dance was from the outset imbued with the terminology of Lebensphilosophie—either explicitly or simply because the language of vitalism was so unavoidably ‘in the air’—a philosophy of life, in other words, which “saw nothing *but* energy [...] grounded in the ‘dance of life’ itself” (2005:4-5; emphasis in the original). In contrast to the mechanistic approaches to the body characteristic of early modernity, thinkers and dancers at the turn of the 20th century partook of a “newly vitalistic culture that stressed spontaneity, animal force, and the body as the conduit of the release of psychic energy into the phenomenal world” (223).

This concern with energy historically coincides, of course, with the identification of the drives within psychoanalysis. While many different specific formulations and theories of the drives arose in the wake of Freud (and even, taking a diachronic view of Freud, we see how his notion of the drive shifts over time), suffice it to say that the idea of 'drive'—of a kind of life-instinct or life-force that provides human beings with a natural source of energy, often related to pleasure and sex—resonates with the notion of vitalism which Hewitt discusses. This drive, whether called sex drive, the life instinct, libido, or psychic energy, tends to be figured as a dynamic flow which can be diverted or dammed up through repressions, or, alternately, liberated through therapeutic release. It also serves as a conceptual bridge between human aesthetic or meaning-making activity and the scientific discourses of biology, written in the behaviorist language of natural instinct.⁴⁰

Whether or not there does exist some connection between sexual desire, interest, and energy is not the issue here. Rather, it is (once again) the erasure of *conditionality*, in this case the conditions which produce libido or vital energy as an *effect*. Under what conditions does 'life force' flow, what is necessary to support it, and what is used up in its production? These are the questions which are not asked when dance (not to mention self-expression) is understood as simply the uncorking of a pressurized bottle, a gesture of release which treats "movement and bodily expression as a force coming from the inside of the body" (Kunst 2015:109), rather than as a fragile and contingent construction produced in complex interaction with a material-discursive milieu. The discourse of vitalism and the language of the drives, in other words, casts psychic energy as a primal cause, and in so doing obscures the processes which generate and secure it.

⁴⁰ From C.G. Jung's 'The Concept of Libido': libido "denotes a desire or impulse which is unchecked by any kind of authority, moral or otherwise. Libido is appetite in its natural state. From the genetic point of view it is bodily needs like hunger, thirst, sleep and sex, and emotional states or affects, which constitute the essence of libido [...] many complex functions, which today must be denied all trace of sexuality, were originally derived from the reproductive instinct. As we know, an important change occurred in the principles of propagation during the ascent through the animal kingdom: the vast numbers of gametes which chance fertilization made necessary were progressively reduced in favour of assured fertilization and effective protection of the young. The decreased production of ova and spermatozoa set free considerable quantities of energy which soon sought and found new outlets. Thus we find the first stirrings of the artistic impulse in animals" (1976/1952: paragraph 194).

According to Hewitt, the tendency to imagine the body as the site of a radically self-renewing or limitless energy made dance the object of fascination in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, at a time when questions about the limits of labor-power were coming to the fore. Hewitt, for example, discusses studies of 'primitive' dance within late 19th-century anthropology:

... [these] theorists turned to the example of dance in their writings to explicate their notions of a natural labor that might harness and regenerate labor power rather than simply use it up. In brief, they sought to harness the energy and enthusiasm that went into the 'playful' performance of dance—particularly in those primitive cultures that were becoming the objects of anthropological investigation in the age of imperialism—to the performance of more legitimate social and economic labor. In the energies both consumed and produced in the enthusiasm of dance they saw a sublime 'beyond'—a regeneration of entropic social forces through a vitalistic labor power that passes through and uses the individual. (2005:40)

In dance, a culture increasingly fearful of entropy and inertia—perhaps, even at the turn of the last century, they sensed today's ecological catastrophes looming?—found a reassuring figure of ceaselessness and enthusiasm. Here, Hewitt's remark bears repeating, to the effect that "There is a fantasy of pure energy at play here that parallels a capitalist fantasy of pure profit, pure production" (26).

It is this vitalistic imaginary which underwrites the discourse of kinetics and mobilization in modernity: modernity is characterized by a tendency towards movement, dynamism, and change because it discovers energy as the underlying truth of the biological. Culture, that which represses life's vitality, is in modernity constantly reworked, and this reworking is figured as the activity of vital energy struggling to liberate itself. Moreover, the proximity evidenced in psychoanalysis between this energy, sexuality, and pleasure—witness the capaciousness of the term 'libido'—facilitates a certain relay between the realms of dance, where pleasure seems to power bodies easily beyond the point of exhaustion, and globalizing labor markets, where, faced with increased competitiveness and accelerating consumer demand, the question of how to motivate just such extreme energetic investments—how to 'liberate' labor's potential energy, as quickly, cheaply, and completely as possible—was, at the

turn of the last century, quickly becoming a central point of concern for management.

Hewitt, in order to illustrate his point, cites Charles Féré's *Travail et Plaisir*, published in Paris in 1904. Féré was a physician interested in the sicknesses of the social body: criminality, perversion, mental illness, and so forth. For him, dance was an interesting object of study because it proved that an 'experience of automatization' (Hewitt's paraphrase) could be pleasurable. Surrendering to rhythm, the subject experiences "an enhanced capacity for action that is, in fact, very real" (Féré in Hewitt 2005:55). Very real, and very pleasurable—this 'rhythmic bodily pleasure' is, for Hewitt, attributable to the sense in which the subject's surrender to rhythm produces an experience of self in which the self is, indeed, surpassed, generating a "consciousness of a beyond or excess, of a *capacité*" (Hewitt 2005:44). This sublime experience of the beyond of the subject is, importantly, inseparable from the subjugation of will to rhythm: "Physical pleasure, in other words, derives from the experience of automatization" (44).

Such a description resonates with Bojana Cvejić's own analysis of William Forsythe's improvisation technologies. In *Choreographing Problems*, Cvejić explains that Forsythe's method takes Laban's model of the kinesphere as a starting point, but radically expands its geometry, operating not with only one center but with many possible centers, located both in the body and in space. This method structures improvisational scores: "Forsythe chooses to assign 'algorithms' to the dancers in order for them to create a choreography in real time" (Cvejić 2015:138). Such a complex and technical improvisation technique is a clear example of the sense in which improvisation is *not* a 'return' to an original or authentic body, but is itself emphatically technical, cultural, and constructed. It is also, however, an example of the way automatization, the coming into consciousness of an expanded capacity, and pleasure remain linked in the discourse of improvisation today: "Operating these programs, dancers are managing many tasks at once, the outcome of which is an unforeseen combination, always a new variation of movements that gives a dancer a gratifying sense of expanding her own capabilities to move" (140-141).

The ideological linkage between automatization, rhythm, and pleasure was not principally formulated as an apology for industrial labor. Rather, the rhythm of dance was imagined as an alternative rhythm to the rhythm of a

factory, an organic vibration rather than a mechanical crunch. This is an automatization that is anything but a repetition—rather than forcing the body to re-enact the same, it unleashes the creative production of difference in a dynamic flow. To discover what could be problematic about such a promising-sounding vision, I propose to return to Bojana Kunst's discussion of modern dance and its relation to labor and to leisure in Fordism.

An important detail in Kunst's analysis has to do with what precisely modern dance rejected about the movement of the factory, and by extension what those artistic pioneers implicitly *accepted* with regards to Fordism. In the factory, and by the dictates of Taylorist movement analysis, "any kind of false, expressive, slow, stationary, unexpected, wrong, clumsy, personal, lazy, ineffective, imaginative, additional movement was eliminated from the work performed by the body" (Kunst 2015:102). The modern dancing body's radical demand was the experience of fulfillment and pleasure through movement (the pleasure which Kunst claims was 'abolished' from the Fordist factory), movement which was not dictated from the outside or performed 'in order to-', but which came from within, emerging in and through the release of energetic potential inherent in the natural body. The pioneers of modern dance were apparently not particularly interested, however, in recuperating the false, the slow, the stationary, the wrong, the clumsy, the lazy, the ineffective, or the excessive body. Rather, their objection to the alienation of labor had to do with the sense in which the factory *imposed* movements on the body in an 'unnatural' fashion. They operated according to a binary rationale, pitting the 'unnatural' and repressive rhythms of the factory on the one hand against the 'natural' and energetic vibrations of dance on the other.

But what of these rejected movements—the slow, the stationary, the lazy, the ineffective, and the excessive? Vitalism, as part of the ideological formation of dance, seems to decide in advance what a 'liberated' body should look like, such that, in my analysis, no real liberation is possible. By putting vitalism in the context of concerns about labor power and efficiency, Hewitt's discussion makes the biopolitical stakes of this ideological erasure clear. While this critique could be read as a variation of the critique of kinetics, I claim that it is important to have a vocabulary for describing vitalism as a vector of essentialism in dance, separate but complementary to the analyses of the kinetic laid out in chapter one. Dance improvisation is, I claim, an ideological assemblage, and the

different elements of the assemblage have a certain flexibility with regard to each other, not always or not necessarily showing up in exactly the same arrangement. Picking vitalism out as an essentialism which is involved in, but also separable from, the notion of the kinetic subject allows for greater care and nuance in my analysis of dance improvisation.

2.4 *The reality of the body*

Perhaps the most persistent essentialism in the discourse of dance improvisation today remains the notion that the body is itself in some sense objective, 'realer' than culture and therefore the repository of essential truths. We see this, on the one hand, in the multiplication of improvisation methods that base themselves on the scientific discourse of anatomy, and which promise more economical and energy-efficient movement through the application of 'corrected' principles. On the other, we see it in the injunction, within some discourses of improvisation, to turn the mind off, to stop thinking, remove subjectivity from the equation and let the body do its thing. Improvisation, in this paradigm, "becomes the method of uncovering that which inheres in the body per se or is triggered by the situation the body finds itself in" (Cvejić 2015:137).

What ties body-essentialist discourses of dance improvisation together is the notion, which Andrew Hewitt calls "An entire tradition of modern dance thinking about the body—from François Delsarte through at least as far as Martha Graham [that] *the body cannot lie*" (2005:18; emphasis mine). This assumption, which posits the body as a kind of lost garden of delights or *terra incognita* waiting to be discovered, can be seen as a last-ditch attempt to secure a ground for objective truth in an increasingly globalized and therefore relativized world. In particular, the appeal to the 'real body' as the locus of truth can be seen as a move to universalize a secular and scientific (that is, Western and Eurocentric) worldview, a substitution of the truth-discourse of religion for the truth-discourse of science.

In *Choreographing Problems*, Bojana Cvejić posits Steve Paxton's *Small Dance* (1997) as an example of body essentialism in improvised action. Paxton calls *Small Dance* a method of 'detraining': "getting rid of the masks that we have, the social and formal masks, until the physical events occur as they will"

(in Cvejić 2015:136). *Small Dance* involves standing still until “the dancer begins to feel her skeletal muscles holding the body upright” (Cvejić 2015:136). It is a guided experience of the body as anatomy that proposes to undo cultural conditioning—that is, to return to the pre-cultural body, to the body as it was in a natural state. “An exercise of the emancipation of the physical self, detraining has the purpose to reach what improvisors deem the deepest hidden ground of the body—its automatic unconscious movements and sensations as its primal nature and essence” (137).

Cvejić’s critique of the explicit essentialism of such a return to the body reiterates the sense in which the nature/culture binary obscures the constructedness of what we perceive as nature (here: the body). A quick examination of the text of *Small Dance* (the score is led by a teacher or guide who talks throughout the work) makes the point clear:

The head in this work is a limb. It has mass. Mass may be the single most important sensation. The feeling of gravity. Continuing to perceive mass and gravity as you stand. Tension in the muscle masks the sensation of gravity...You’ve been swimming in gravity since the day you were born. Every cell knows where down is. Easily forgotten. Your mass and the earth’s mass calling to each other [...] Upright position... spine erect... Feel the bottom of the lung, the diaphragm, feel it massage the organs, down into the bowl of the pelvis, relax your genitals and anus... breathe deeply... exhale slowly... feel the pause at the exhalation... watch for the beginning of the inhalation... This thing, time... full of rush and pause... feel time go by through the breath... don’t initiate the breath... just watch that period... try to catch your mind, the exact moment when the inhalation starts again... (n.p.)⁴¹

While Paxton claims to offer an experience of biological being (the dancers “should just be there as animals, as bundles of nerves, as masses and bones”; in Cvejić 2015:137), the language which is the vehicle of this experience of detraining, of undoing culture and arriving at nature, is patently poetic, containing images pregnant with cultural meanings (“your mass and the earth’s mass calling to each other”) and contestable values judgments (“Mass may be the single most important sensation”). Moreover, the invocation of specific body

⁴¹ Quoted on EastCoastJam.com, <https://eastcoastjam.com/myr/contact-improvisation/contact-improv-as-a-way-of-moving/steve-paxton-s-1977-small-dance-guidance>. Accessed 12 June 2020.

parts is sure to prompt the critical dancer to reflect on the culturally-specific division of the body into distinct organs and their differential coding (for example, the *frisson* one might feel hearing an improvisation guide pronounce the words 'genitals and anus', as opposed to the dull familiarity attendant on the words 'head' or 'limb').

This is one interpretation of the claim that the body cannot lie: that the body, as an inarguable biological specificity, is something we can experience as absolutely true, and upon which a discourse of truth might be built. The other interpretation, which Andrew Hewitt examines at length in his analysis of Isadora Duncan, rests on the association of the body with *sensation*, and therefore *those sensations* as 'true'. In other words, according to this interpretation, 'the body cannot lie' means 'that which I sense or feel is true, my experience is real': in Hewitt's formulation, it instrumentalizes the trope of the body's persistent materiality (and subsequent 'realness') to then "ontologize the body itself as a minimal resting place of untrammelled, noncompromisable subjectivity" (2005:18).

Duncan, for example, famously levied a critique of ballet that revolved around the lived experience of the dancer: in Hewitt's paraphrase, "ballet is 'wrong' because it hurts" (17). For Hewitt, this is a legitimate critique: the body speaks back, showing that something has not been accounted for, has not been made visible or has been covered over by ideology, something which bears investigation. On the other hand, the notion that a body which feels pleasure in dancing might be the bearer of the true or the good in any absolute sense: this is itself an ideological position. As Hewitt writes, "Pain might serve as the embodiment of a critique of ideology, but its absence can never mark a position of non-ideological truth, for the reification of the body necessary to disentangle it from the social milieu it 'critiques' involves an ideological gesture" (18). It is this precise reification of the body, which narrates the body as something separate from and anterior to 'the social milieu it critiques', to which the dance studies scholars critical of body essentialism object.

What does it mean that the experience of pain might be a critique of ideology, but that the absence of pain does not indicate truth? Hewitt is not suggesting here that pain has some kind of priority over other sensations, or that sensation can only indicate what is wrong and not what is right. Rather, pain gives an indication that something is missing in the discourse of ballet,

insofar as nothing from within that discourse can account adequately for that pain. It does not mean that ballet is absolutely bad: that logic would again perform a reification of the body. Sensation that is inexplicable or unaccounted for can be understood as the embodiment of critique because it suggests that something is missing in the stories we tell about the things we do, but sensation in itself is not, according to Hewitt, sufficient: it does not replace, but simply signals the need for, analysis.

This point becomes clear when Hewitt discusses Duncan's separate claim that "America makes me sick—positively nauseates me. This is not a mere figure of speech. America produces in me a definite malady" (in Hewitt 2005:143). Is the feeling of nausea evidence that something is positively wrong with America? Or might that embodied experience itself be constructed on a set of assumptions that merit a second glance? Reading further in Duncan's own writings, Hewitt points out that Duncan is deeply entangled in the racist discourse of eugenics whose apogee was roughly contemporaneous to her pronouncements. For example, Duncan on African-American popular dances: "it seems to me monstrous for anyone to believe that the Jazz rhythm expresses America. Jazz rhythm expresses the South African savage. America's music will be something different. It has yet to be written" (from her essay 'I see America Dancing', in Hewitt 2005:136). Even if Duncan were to feel as viscerally disgusted by "the tottering ape-like convulsions of the Charleston" (136) as she apparently was by America itself, would that mean anything about the Charleston as such? Hewitt's point is that Duncan's feeling about the Charleston, Jazz and other African American popular dance forms says nothing ontological about either Duncan's body nor these 'savage' dances, and everything about the relation between them and that relation's political embeddedness. Disgust here is an embodied symptom calling for critical interpretation. But by claiming to feel disgust authentically, and by signifying that authenticity with reference to viscosity and embodied-ness—"This is not a mere figure of speech"—Duncan gives the heft of the literal to her judgements. In my analysis, the critique of body essentialism in dance asks us to notice this legitimation process and ask questions about what our tendency to accord lived experience with the status of truth reveals with regards to our assumptions about the ontological status of the (felt) body.

2.5 Conclusion: Essentialism in dance improvisation

In this chapter, I have drawn out four anti-essentialist critiques that, I argue, comprise part of a larger critical discourse: the biopolitical critique of dance improvisation. These four anti-essentialist critiques tackle the authenticity of expressive movement, the purity of the present, the primal abundance of life energy, and the truth of the body. Each one of these essentialisms functions through the construction of one or several hierarchical dyads—expression/representation, presence/absence, energy/repression, body/society—in which the second term is cast as the ‘supplement’ of the first, a dependent, prosthetic, alienating, or even wholly unnecessary addition to something primal, total, and self-sufficient. In each case, however, analysis reveals the supplementary term as essential to the construction of the original (for example, what is a body outside of its relation to others? What is a moment totally divorced from past and future?).⁴² Moreover, despite the apparently progressive agenda motivating calls, within the dance field, to return to the body, live in the present, express oneself, undo energetic repressions, and so forth, the discursive elision of the trace of the supplement within the ‘natural’ wholes to which these injunctions refer would appear to produce positivistic effects which make certain kinds of critical analysis difficult. In other words, essentialisms make the grounding assumptions of a certain culture—assumptions which enable all kinds of exploitations and inequalities, but particularly, in this case, Eurocentric ones—appear more solid, stable, and harder to change through critical work.

The link between a dance exercise that promises to put us in touch with the physical body, the present moment, or our repressed desires, and, for instance, the racist discourse of eugenics—also built on a set of assumptions

⁴² Derrida says that the logic of the supplement—as something which both adds to and substitutes for—reveals the undecidable meaning of these uneven dyads, that they function through and because of—not in spite of—their undecidability (“Through this sequence of supplements a necessity is announced: that of an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of originary perception. Immediacy is derived”; Derrida 1997/1967:157). So Derrida is not necessarily advocating a more ‘flat’ or non-hierarchical way of thinking about things; Derrida’s insight, in my reading, is more about the nature of meaning itself than about a call for re-evaluating hierarchies. Deleuze’s notion that the relation between thought and extension is predicated on belief, and that we have to constantly invent ways of coming into contact with things, perhaps comes closer to this ‘activist’ (rather than deconstructivist) position (“The link between man and the world is broken. Henceforth, this link must become an object of belief: it is the impossible which can only be restored within a faith”; Deleuze 1989/1985:171-172).

about the physical body as the repository of truth, an energetic social body cleared of blockages, the present as a radical break with past (a break which nevertheless, strangely, puts us in touch with a temporally anterior purity)—the link between these two instances of essentialism might admittedly, on first glance, seem difficult to parse. But, as Andrew Hewitt points out, the groundless essentialisms on which a political discourse like eugenics (or multiculturalism, or neoliberalism, or nationalism) rests are basically shared fantasies. And “precisely because the underpinning structure is a fantasy, it relies not only on political calculations but also on certain aesthetic norms for its narrative coherence” (2005:30). Dance studies scholars critical of dance improvisation from the point of view of the critique of essentialism do not claim that dancers sometimes have a direct hand in the exploitation of vulnerable others: their critique is both more indirect and more sweeping. Rather, the idea is that the essentialisms repeated by dancers—and which improvised dancing, as a figure within Western culture, has largely come to represent—are echoed and amplified in cultural ‘elsewheres’ in ways that many socially-conscious improvisors would probably rush to disavow. Making this link is critical in deconstructing the invisible work of ideology, both in dance and in culture at large.⁴³

In this chapter, I have also introduced a second sense in which the critique of dance improvisation I am mapping in this thesis here is biopolitical. Of course, these anti-essentialist critiques point out the ways essentialist discourses erase the power-laden constructedness of narratives which organize contemporary physical practices and embodied experiences of the world. But they also reveal a contemporary obsession with the physical and biological, matched with a consistent disavowal or elision of the political. Biopolitics—the strategy of domination that emerged when the state started to become interested in the physical body of the populace—has always justified itself by denying its political character, claiming to be instead a scientific or statistical

⁴³ The reasoning in this paragraph is largely paraphrased from *Social Choreography*: “Without trivializing the political by arguing that a dance is just as ‘fascist’ as, say, Nazi laws on racial hygiene, I do think it is possible to extrapolate an underpinning fantasy structure that would link the two phenomena. To speak of the ‘homologies’ of these elements of fantasy, however, is to speak in the language of fantasy itself, which serves to reify and quarantine as autonomous components the related and differentiated levels of the power structure it serves. And precisely because the underpinning structure is a fantasy, it relies not only on political calculations but also on certain aesthetic norms for narrative coherence. Fantasies only work as political and ideological forces if they have aesthetic coherence and appeal. This aesthetic component is primary rather than secondary” (Hewitt 2005:30).

initiative, based on the truths of biology and executed with objective rigor.⁴⁴ The critique of essentialism in dance studies reveals the way some of the grounding narratives of biopolitics itself are enshrined within the discourse of dance improvisors.

What does the critique of essentialism mean for the project of dance improvisation as it moves to deal with the conditions of the contemporary moment? In my analysis, the various essentialisms claimed within dance improvisation seek to deal with epistemological uncertainty by choosing *something*—the self, the present, vital energy, or the physical body—to narrate as ‘real’, as opposed to constructed. But in each case, this narration can be said to cover over or decontest certain contestable, socially-constructed meanings, such that other possible meanings are erased. A practice of thought which operates in terms of care, ecology, inclusivity, and diversity—not in the sense of multiculturalism, but rather in the sense of multiplicity; that is, a practice of thinking which is always in the process of opening out onto what is not yet thinkable, visible, or sayable—cannot afford to ignore the elisions produced by “movement naturalisation” (Kunst 2015:108). By ‘naturalizing’ dance along certain lines, the gendered, sexualized, racialized, and commodified body is secured as biological, and the body’s multiple material-discursive entanglements are rendered illegible. Moving towards an affirmative theory of improvisation, on the other hand, means thinking about improvisation as something which does not *re-instate* epistemological certainty, but rather which acts as a support for thinking and moving within a sustained space of uncertainty, a space in which meanings remain relatively flexible and up for re-definition and re-negotiation. In that sense, improvisation can accommodate inclusivity as a continuous process, as well as ecology as a complex way of thinking being both in terms of being-with and in terms of the transformations which being-with brings about.

In the next chapter, I produce a third and final strand of the biopolitical critique of dance improvisation: the critique of therapy. According to this critique, dance improvisation often straddles the border between art and therapy. But if an affirmative theory of improvisation casts improvisation as a site for experimenting in the realm of the aesthetic in an attempt to highlight the

⁴⁴ See Thomas Lemke’s discussion of ‘life as the basis for politics’, in chapter one of *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* (2011:9-21).

unthought, the unseen, and the unfelt in the social—‘queering’ the distribution of the sensible—therapy is emphatically, according to the theorists surveyed in the next chapter, a process of straightening-out.⁴⁵ In what ways does dance improvisation become therapy? What makes some improvisation practices therapeutic? And why do critical dance studies scholars find the therapeutic aspects of dance improvisation so problematic?

⁴⁵ The ‘distribution of the sensible’ is a Rancièrian concept which theorizes differential social positions in terms of differential access to sensory experience; that is to say, the “distribution of what is visible and what is not, of what can be said and what cannot” (Rancière 2010/2001:36). An intervention, therefore, in the distribution of the sensible—making something visible or sayable where usually it is invisible or unspeakable—is, in Jacques Rancière’s view, a political intervention.

3 The critique of therapy

The third and final subsection of my mapping of the biopolitical critique has to do with the relationship between dance improvisation and therapy. In this chapter, I build on the work of Bojana Cvejić, Ana Vujanović, Bojana Kunst, and João da Silva, all of whom problematize therapeutic tendencies within the performing arts. In order to elaborate on the stakes of their arguments, I bring these theorists into conversation with social and political theorists working outside of dance studies, who are sometimes more explicit about the problematic role of therapy in contemporary society. In general, I draw attention to a discourse which is critical of therapy insofar as it frames normative propositions about the body and the self in terms of health, smuggling in biopolitical normalization and commodification under the banner of well-being while at the same time staging the self, rather than society, as the origin point of the problems of contemporary life. So far, so familiar: in many respects, the critique of therapy repeats the claims made in the first two chapters of this thesis, insofar as the normative biopolitical content expressed in therapeutic approaches to dance improvisation tends, as I demonstrate below, to do its work along kinetic and essentialist lines. The critique of therapy, however, is an important addition to my mapping of the biopolitical critique because it draws attention to the specific way ideology is bound to the body in dance improvisation. It evokes a particular affective atmosphere, as well as a particular way of relating to the effort it takes to stick to kinetic and essentialist approaches to embodiment and to dance. By attending to the therapeutic, ideological arrangements which by now should be familiar—such that the meanings of dance improvisation are both closely related to the meanings of contemporary capitalism and simultaneously held distant from the question of collective ongoingness—appear in finer detail.

Before continuing with my argument, it is worth clarifying the sense in which dance improvisation can be understood as therapeutic. The dance studies scholars whose contributions laid the groundwork for this chapter are, in general, not direct in their problematization of the therapy itself. There is,

nevertheless, a persistent identification of dance improvisation with therapy,⁴⁶ as well as a sense in which the mere invocation of the therapeutic is enough to problematize dance improvisation without necessitating further explanation. When Cvejić and Vujanović insist that “dance provides a set of vitalist techniques of embodiment in which the self is performed at the boundary between individualistic artistic work and psychotherapy” (2015:152), later in the same chapter calling improvisation in particular a “widespread *technology of the self* in dance” (153; emphasis mine), the critique is evident in their tone but their argument is not really explicit. What does it mean, precisely, to claim that dance improvisation is therapeutic? How can we understand the relation between the fields of improvisation and of therapy?

Cvejić’s and Vujanović’s comment about improvisation as a ‘technology of the self’ can be read as pointing to the ways improvisational techniques often seek to intervene holistically, re-shaping the dancer as a person. In my analysis, this intervention is specifically a therapeutic intervention insofar as it is couched in the language and affects of healing. The description of Fernando Belfiore’s ‘Collective Chaos’ workshop at Impulstanz (2018), for example, implores the reader to ...

... Find the flame, transformative and subversive power, curiosity towards the world we live through others. Materialising an experience from a chaotic and intimate exchange. Making mess. Liberating Spaces. Physical currency. The unknown of our hidden potentials. Expand your elements. Build your alchemic artistic table. Activate yourself. Articulate your Imagination. Pick your emotion. Heal. (n.p.)⁴⁷

Belfiore does not discuss his workshop in terms of learning how to dance. Rather, he addresses himself and the practice he teaches to the dancer personally. Through submitting to the ‘task-based practices’ that Belfiore proposes, the dancer herself, over and above the dance, will be expanded, activated, and healed. In that sense, whatever propositions Belfiore makes about transformation, power, growth, space, energy, and imagination are

⁴⁶ As in, for example, Da Silva’s claim that “improvisation in the early 20th century became increasingly important as an educational and therapeutic tool” (2016:65).

⁴⁷ Quote from the Impulstanz website. <https://www.impulstanz.com/en/archive/2015/workshops/id2701/>. Accessed March 20, 2020.

grounded in a claim about health and motivated by an appeal to the dancer's sense of self.

There is also something therapeutic about many of the essentialist discourses surveyed in the previous chapter of this thesis. Essentialism is a type of claim about the real and the true, but in dance improvisation, these claims are not only descriptive: they are also *prescriptive*. There is not only an 'is' at work here but also a 'should', if not a 'must'. Moreover, that prescription—that a body should or must return to a prior state, a state of natural energetic dynamism unburdened of cultural repressions—is narrated as a journey during which the wounds of alienated life are healed. Of course, there are some dance practices and therapeutic traditions which are exceptions, describing themselves as modes of experimentation rather than methodologies of return.⁴⁸ But the influence of stories about shedding the distortions of the social, and the sense of naturalness attendant on the bodies revealed (produced?) by essentialist improvisation practices, attests to the rootedness of certain approaches to dance improvisation within a therapeutic scene.

In Magdalena Chowaniec and Valerie Oberleithner's description of their 2019 workshop 'Ichoreography', for example, they position their practice within a society in which people have lost their capacity for something: "autonomy, trust, and active participation in the world" (n.p.). They attribute this loss to the rise of mobile digital technology ("Not sure how to sense the 'Here and Now' after a long WhatsApp session? Feeling disembodied? Is your phone becoming your rescue jacket for the 'chaos' of a daily life?"; n.p.). Through the physical practices they teach, Chowaniec and Oberleithner guide participants back into a kind of full presence or immediacy. Moreover, they write this *return* to a pre-digital being-in-the-world as an *improvement*: society's 'flow' is 'enhanced', and the body of the individual is emancipated. "Through these physical practices, we can find *new forms of healing*, we *increase our sensory scale of awareness* lost in the course of body's virtual visits and *improve our life* within the virtual and the analogue community" (n.p.; emphasis mine): the language of novelty,

⁴⁸ Frequently, both dancers and therapists speak and write about their practices in a way that actually *oscillates between or freely combines* notions of experimentation with notions of return (see the analysis of 'Ichoreography' below). I hope that the conceptual distinction I make here helps this 'both-and' positioning emerge as such when the reader turns her own analytical eye on the dance field.

improvement, enhancement, and increase is overlaid with a story about loss and return.⁴⁹

Before continuing on to a more detailed mapping of critical approaches to dance improvisation emerging within dance studies, I want to provide additional context by proposing some connections between dance improvisation and particular therapeutic traditions, namely clinical psychoanalysis and somatics. Psychoanalysis revolves around a set of assumptions about repression, self-knowledge, and expressivity which also animates many therapeutically-inflected dance improvisation practices. The notion that the truth of the analysand or the dancer will be revealed in a stream of spontaneous expressivity, for example, bridges both analysis and dance improvisation. While the place of language in dance is not the same as it is in analysis, dance improvisation also “facilitates a free flow of expression in the first person” (Cvejić & Vujanović 2015:154) wherein intimate knowledge of the (dancing) subject can be gleaned. Often, the therapeutic aspects of dance improvisation hinge on the sense in which the combination of automatism and introspection which characterizes improvisation provides for an “intimate and personal experience of oneself” (154), just as psychoanalysis assumes that the analysand’s extended experience of herself, sharpened and focused by the scenography of the analyst’s office, will eventually bear the fruit of some kind of well-being. Moreover, by locating the source of the information revealed through analysis or improvisation in some deep, hidden part of the self—the unconscious or, in some improvisatory practices, the ‘body’, understood here as the container of repressed desires and expressions—both dance improvisation and psychoanalysis cultivate the privacy of the self, its fundamental singularity and mystery.⁵⁰ I suggest, therefore, that if we continue to associate spontaneous first-person monologuing with a process of therapeutic liberation, that might have something to do with the persistence of psychoanalysis as a way of thinking the form of psychological and emotional healing. It is at least partially in this optic that dance improvisation is lauded as

⁴⁹ All quotes from the Impustanz website. <https://www.impulstanz.com/en/archive/2019/workshops/id4001/>. Accessed 20 March 2020.

⁵⁰ Cvejić and Vujanović assert that dance improvisation “favors the inner life of the self in the body, whose privacy is cultivated through imagination and metaphors in which movements, sensations, and emotional states are described” (2015:154). I suggest that clinical psychoanalysis operates within a similar dispositive, in which a hidden bodily interiority is revealed through expression. This process shores up the existence of the very thing it claims to reveal—an irreducible bodily interiority.

“a very contemporary way to get in touch with oneself” (Janice Ross in Cvejić 2015:134).

While psychoanalysis helps us understand the link between dance improvisation and therapy thought of in terms of the psychological and emotional self, a comparison to the field of somatics reminds us to take the specifically embodied emphasis of dance as therapy into account. Somatic practices are physical practices which deal with breath, sensation, and movement so that “we, as humans, can learn newly, become pain free, move more easily, do our life work more efficiently, and perform with greater vitality and expressiveness” (Eddy 2009:6). Emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—the heyday of vitalist humanism⁵¹—the field of somatics owes its development to innovative practitioners such as Gerda and F.M. Alexander, Elsa Gindler, Moshe Feldenkrais, and Ida Rolf.⁵² Working *outside* the field of dance, these thinker-movers developed physical practices dealing with movement and awareness which were explicitly therapeutic.⁵³ Early cross-disciplinary figures like Rudolf Laban and Imgard Bartenieff, as well as later ones like Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, ensured the cross-pollination of somatics and dance. And today, the traffic of influence also goes in the opposite direction: “The therapeutic dimension of improvisation has developed into a widespread variety of somatic practices—also popularly known as ‘bodywork’—that emphasize the aim of self-realization and operate both inside and outside of dance” (Cvejić 2015:136). Indeed, the line separating somatics from the dance field is a thin and porous one, for if the two disciplines professedly operate with distinct semantic frames—therapeutic and artistic—the embodied knowledge they produce crosses easily from one to the other. In practice, somatics and dance improvisation cycle in and through one another, so that the distinctness of their semantic frames becomes, in some instances, impossible to maintain.

⁵¹ Practitioner and scholar of somatics Martha Eddy narrates it as a moment in which “the possibility of experiencing the body newly came with such diverse movements as ‘free love’ and ‘gymnastik’” (2009:6).

⁵² Eddy claims that “The field of ‘somatics’ is barely a field. If necessarily seen as one, I liken it to a field of wildflowers with unique species randomly popping up across wide expanses” (2009:6).

⁵³ Many of the early somatic pioneers were motivated not by artistic concerns but by the promise of healing: “Illnesses, physical limitations, and exposure to unfamiliar physical and/or spiritual practices through travel and transmigrations, led numerous men and women, separately but in a common period of time, to discover the potency of deeply listening to the body” (Eddy 2009:6).

If somatic practices emphasize the aim of self-realization, they do so in a slightly different way than clinical psychoanalysis does: within somatics, the discourse of health, healthiness, and healing is closely linked to ideological claims about embodiment, wherein the narrative of healing is subtended by an appeal to the truth of the material body. In psychoanalysis, on the other hand, a logic of repression and expression is used to explain behavior on the basis of the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious—a relationship which can be therapeutically worked upon in order to smooth out the distortions which plague the self in its attempt to express. In my analysis, dance improvisation might be said to incorporate influences from both psychoanalysis and somatics, constituting a holistic, mind-body healing program, in which the physical, the psychological, and the emotional are each constructed as sites of a potential improvement—improvement, of course, imagined in certain ideological terms.

Below, I elaborate on some claims about dance improvisation, therapy, and healing which appear in certain dance studies texts. To do so, I incorporate some of my own research, in order to clarify why I consider the critique of therapy in dance studies a biopolitical critique. First, I attend to perspectives on normativity in therapy. Then, I discuss the relationship between therapeutic approaches to dance improvisation and certain particular normative ideals: self-awareness, self-control, and productivity. I close out the chapter with a discussion of the depoliticizing effects of therapeutic discourse. What emerges from this discussion is a critical approach to therapy which warns against confusing the appeals to well-being enshrined within therapeutic discourse for a concern with collective ongoingness.

3.1 Therapy as biopolitical normalization

To many, the critique of therapy is somewhat counterintuitive. What could possibly be problematic about practices that make dancers (or patients) feel better, cope better, live better, or express better? The critique of therapy that appears in dance studies is, in my reading, indebted to an older critique of therapy more generally which emerged in the middle of the 20th century. This strand of critique took aim at the *norms* embedded in therapeutic discourse, as well as the *position of authority* assumed by the teacher or therapist.

The anti-psychiatry movement, a broad-ranging movement combining theoretical production with activism, is credited with providing momentum to a critique of therapy in the 1960s (Kotowicz 1997; Szasz 2009). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari were some of the movement's more polemic figures. Although anti-psychiatry dealt broadly with the treatment of the mentally ill in Europe and North America, Deleuze and Guattari focused their attention more specifically on psychoanalysis. In *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), Deleuze and Guattari ask the question: how is it possible that, within Freudian psychoanalysis, *everything* is explicable with reference to childhood, to sexuality, and more specifically to the Oedipus complex? While Freud claims to have discovered something 'real' in the human psyche, Deleuze and Guattari re-frame Freudianism as a forceful and normalizing act of reading: "The psychoanalyst no longer says to the patient: 'Tell me a bit about your desiring-machines, won't you?' Instead he screams: 'Answer daddy-and-mommy when I speak to you!'" (1983/1972:45). By insisting on a single frame of reference which is decided in advance, "the entire process of desiring-production is trampled underfoot and reduced to (*rabbatu sur*) parental images" (45). Dramatizing the psychoanalytic scene to comic effect, Deleuze and Guattari narrate the psychoanalyst as a forceful figure whose interpretative violence *produces* (and *reproduces*) the dynamics he claims to find, as well as the power structures within which those dynamics makes sense.⁵⁴

Within dance studies, a similar critique is levied. To what extent are the therapeutic aspects of dance improvisation producing and reproducing the very problematic power structures whose negative effects they claim to alleviate? Which normative narratives do improvisors use uncritically as interpretive lenses, taking them to describe natural facts? Referring to Daniel Belgrad, Bojana Cvejić compares the contact improvisation jam to "the activity of 'encounter group' therapy with which it shares many characteristics: self-expression in a group situation, a continuum of mind and body, and a process of risk-taking, reality-testing, and trust" (2015:136). Encounter group therapy operates on the principle that social adaptation is key for mental health. Frank Johnson, a proponent of the therapy, puts it this way: "our psychological health depends upon our group membership—our ability to interact with others in a

⁵⁴ For example, homophobia (Sedgwick 2003:126).

communicative and effective manner” (1988:115). Encounter group therapy is therefore a kind of integration exercise in which the norms which structure ‘healthy’ group interactions are practiced. In the discourse of encounter group therapy, however, the normative violence involved in training an asocial person to conform to social mores is erased. Rather, the group is narrated as a neutral structure arising organically in nature which exists to the benefit of its members (and indeed, only insofar as its members benefit): in this vein, Johnson’s 1980s tract on encounter group therapy asks the reader to “picture group life as beginning the first time a wandering male begged to be allowed to share the shelter, fire, and protection of the female” (116). Comparing contact improvisation to encounter group therapy, Cvejić implies that contact improvisation trains dancers to see the social in the terms that encounter group therapy proposes: as a set of spontaneous relationships which emerge between people as they “voluntarily form into groups for mutual benefit” (Johnson 1988:116). From this viewpoint, the coercive power of the social is erased. Rather than turning a critical eye to socialization as normalization, contact improvisation reproduces the dominant values of the social and trains dancers to internalize them, all while claiming to provide participants with useful, practical skills.

Dance improvisation as “an approach that deals with dancers as people” therefore suggests itself, according to Cvejić, as “a model for the physical treatment of social illnesses” (2015:135-136). Just what qualifies as a ‘social illness’—and who gets to decide—is what is at stake here. Indeed, to the extent that improvisation accommodates the notion of healing,⁵⁵ it opens itself to the same critical gaze that other depoliticized uses of the notion of healing accrue in the context of neoliberalism. Philosopher Byung-Chul Han, for instance, argues that ‘healing’ is a ‘magic word’ in contemporary American self-help literature: “The term refers to self-optimization that is supposed to *therapeutically eliminate* any and all functional weakness or mental obstacle in the name of efficiency and performance” (Han 2017:ebook; emphasis in the original). Han’s

⁵⁵ Cvejić cites Libby Worth and Helen Poyner when she claims: “Since it was introduced as an approach that deals with dancers as people, ‘well-trained holistic dancer-performers’ who integrate physical exploration and emotional life, or anyone, also non-trained dancers, interested in exploring their feelings, sensations and images [...] improvisation accommodates another idea developed in body-mind holism—healing—and therefore suggests itself as a model for the physical treatment of social illnesses” (2015:135-136).

statement emphasizes the sense in which the vectors of healing and the vectors of the social, understood as a power-laden field, are aligned in favor of maximizing productivity and minimizing costs. Healing also means re-aligning, correcting, and straightening-out, and thus referring to some kind of normative measure or ruler. Indeed, the etymology of the word 'heal' suggests precisely this kind of normative content: heal comes from *heilen* (German), "which can mean not only 'healthy', 'whole' and 'uninjured', but also had the connotation, beginning in the fifteenth century, of 'to castrate', 'tame' and 'make usable', 'to remove the wildness'" (Lorey 2015/2012:57).

In his account of disciplinary power (*Discipline and Punish*, 1995/1975), Michel Foucault describes at length the normalizing institutions, architectures, and techniques which were put in place over the course of the long 19th century in order to channel and produce something new: the subject of discipline. While the lens of discipline is certainly a fruitful one for analyzing dance, it is particularly relevant when discussing ballet or other such strict choreographic forms. When it comes to improvisation—and specifically, the aspects of improvisation that are styled as healing practices—Foucault's model needs an update. In the period Foucault describes, normative power shaped the body of the subject orthopedically: to a large extent, power was something which was perceived as coming from *outside* the subject. But in the contemporary moment, various authors have described a 20th-century shift, whereby the exteriority of power to the subject is annulled, erased, or made invisible (Deleuze 1992/1990; Han 2017; McKenzie 2001; Preciado 2013/2008). Rather, normativities (in a broad sense) are perceived as *belonging to* or *emanating from* the subject, who experiences the drive to 'optimal' performance as essential to his or her own self. In other words, within this new arrangement, "individuals act on themselves so that power relations are interiorized—and then interpreted as freedom" (Han 2017:ebook). This novel form of power—whether controlling (Deleuze), psychopolitical (Han), performative (McKenzie), pharmacopornographic (Preciado), or simply neoliberal—is particularly efficacious, insofar as the very *desires* of the subject, and not only his or her actions, statements, and appearances, become subject to the strictures of power. In my analysis, these approaches to contemporary power, in which power doesn't necessarily feel like coercion, can serve as lenses through which

the lines of force which produce dance improvisation's healing promise become legible.

In the previous two chapters of this thesis, I sought to enumerate the ways certain dance scholars have lain bare dance improvisation's ideological underpinnings. According to the map of the biopolitical critique of dance improvisation I am constructing in this thesis, the discourse and practice of 'healing' through dance operates as the mechanism by which these ideological underpinnings are actually bound to the body of the dancer. The normative proposals that many dance improvisors make concerning both values (the kinetic) and ontology (grounded in presence, in biology, in energy, and in interiority) are, through the soft lure of the therapeutic, matched with an affect of well-being. They are framed as components of a cosmology that is in the dancer's own best interest to adopt.

In *Public Sphere by Performance* (2015), Cvejić and Ana Vujanović take the example of Efva Lilja's *100 Exercises for a Choreographer and Other Survivors* (2012) to illustrate a discussion of how the narrative of healing within dance improvisation, and its attendant ambiance of health and well-being, covers over (or at least sits strangely with) the authority position that the choreographer, the teacher, the improvisation guide, or the written score takes within improvisational practices. Many improvisational practices depend on some kind of leader who speaks throughout the session, drawing the dancers' awareness to particular tasks and sensations. Alternately, improvisors follow instructions written in a book or manual. To a large extent, it is these spoken or written components which, enunciated from a position of learned authority, produce and reproduce dance improvisation's discursive and ideological frameworks. Lilja's collection of written scores locates itself within the sphere of healing and well-being: "These exercises are written down to remind me," writes Lilja, "of what we need to stay alive, vivid and strong" (Lilja in Cvejić & Vujanović 2015:155). What Cvejić and Vujanović notice, however, is the authoritarianism which underlies Lilja's authorial voice: "The mantra-like repetition of the imperative 'do it'"—an injunction which recurs throughout Lilja's book, appearing between each exercise—"indicates submission to the task, an advice to refrain from any further thought and judgment, which is presented as necessary to attain the state or experience that the exercises promise" (Cvejić & Vujanović 2015:155).

Emphasizing this authoritarian power transfer at the heart of the therapeutic, Cvejić and Vujanović compare Lilja's practice to early psychotherapeutic practices, such as those pioneered in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by Emile Coué and Johannes Heinrich Schultz:

While the Coué method centers on the routine repetition of an expression by eliminating the resistance of willpower and independent judgment, [Schultz's] autogenic training involves exercises practiced daily in which a set of visualizations is repeated to induce a state of relaxation caused by its influence on the autonomic nervous system. The exercises read like a score in a manual or how-to of self-mastery. The tasks are to be executed in the imagination rather than in movement, yet the very form of writing in the imperative, in the direct address, and the call to occupy oneself with one's own body and consciousness makes any comparison with dance scores quite striking. (154)

Coué's and Schultz' techniques (and, Cvejić and Vujanović imply, Lilja's improvisational practices)—couched in an ethic of self-mastery—by which the patient or the dancer internalizes the values and assumptions of the choreographer, teacher, improvisation guide, or therapist—in the discourse and affects of healing. In this sense, therapy and therapeutic practices in dance improvisation provide a paradigmatic example of the neoliberal dynamic described above, whereby power appears not as a forceful orthopedic corrective but rather as a benign set of suggestions that appeal to the subject's own desires. If we take seriously the critiques laid out in the previous two chapters of this thesis, which tackled the ideology of the kinetic that appears within dance improvisation, as well as the essentialist approaches to expression, presence, energy, and the body which subtend the discourse of dance improvisation, then the posture of healing within dance improvisation might be less innocent than it appears. Therapy, then, would be one means by which the ideological positions taken within the discourse of dance improvisation are subtly and seamlessly integrated in the dancer's body.

3.2 Privileging awareness within the therapeutic discourse

In *Choreographing Problems* (2015), Bojana Cvejić takes a critical eye to practices of dance improvisation which take the expansion or sharpening of the dancer's own awareness as a therapeutic goal. The ideal of spontaneity in

dance improvisation, she says, “revels in a unitary view on the relationship between the unconscious and the consciousness, in search of a whole self [...yet] the process of making conscious the unconscious by way of bodily movement affirms self-consciousness in the logocentric, Kantian sense” (2015:133). What Cvejić implies here is that the process of becoming self-aware which many dance improvisors experience as therapeutic also calls a particular kind of *subject* into existence, or provides a discursive support for a particular kind of subjective experience (it ‘affirms’ self-consciousness in a specific sense, i.e., logocentric and Kantian). In other words, self-consciousness in the discourse of improvisation appears to be a transcendental faculty of the mind, given naturally, rather than a power-laden social construction with significant historical variability.

The notion that certain dance practices are narrated in relation to the expansion of self-awareness and the production of self-knowledge is gestured towards in the writing of both Cvejić and Bojana Kunst, but neither of these scholars elaborate in detail upon what precisely is problematic about dance improvisation as self-discovery. Following the thread suggested in *Choreographing Problems*, then, and incorporating some of Kunst’s insights, in this section I ask: what would it mean to understand the kind of self-consciousness promoted in therapeutic approaches to dance improvisation not as a given, but rather as something which emerges in relation to power?

There are a couple of different approaches available here, all of which revolve around the tight relationship between knowledge projects and power projects. What precisely does the improvisor become aware of? And to what extent does that (self)awareness translate into knowledge—knowledge which secures governance over the subject by the subject herself? From a certain standpoint, governance over the subject by the subject herself sounds positive: it smacks of self-determination and autonomy. But if we understand the subject *not* as the bearer of given transcendental faculties, but rather as a porous and relational formation which internalizes various intersecting normativities, then governance over the subject by the subject herself has quite a different ring. For theorists who assert, even as strategic hyperbole, that “subjectivity is capitalism’s biggest output” (Lazzarato in Cvejić & Vujanović 2015:139), the sense in which an expanded self-awareness would seem to hand precisely that

subject ever-more efficient managerial and supervisory powers over the body indeed calls for some critical thinking.

If we take, for instance, the anatomical awareness that somatically-informed improvisation techniques train, it behooves us to remember that the history of anatomy is tied up with a culturally-specific notion of the body as pre-cultural “brute matter” (Federici 2004:139). Recounting an early 20th-century conversation between the ethnographer Maurice Leenhardt and an elderly philosopher of the Canaques people of New Caledonia, Maaïke Bleeker reminds us that for the Canaques, the very notion of the body was itself a European import: “the concept of the body as matter distinguished from spirit is an invention of European civilization” (2008:12). Meanwhile in Europe, the construction of the body as separate from spirit and the production of anatomical knowledge was related, according to Silvia Federici, to the campaign to “produce a disciplined work-force” (2004:136). In the early days of capitalism, “expropriated peasants and artisans did not peacefully agree to work for a wage” (136). “It was in the course of this vast process of social engineering that a new concept of the body and a new policy toward it began to be shaped” (137): Federici’s research demonstrates that the scientific advances in anatomy in early modern Europe, which “disclosed to the public eye a disenchanting, desecrated body” (138), were a means not only of gathering knowledge, but also of accruing political power. By disenchanting the body, and by casting the body as the other of the mind, anatomical investigations made new forms of power—here, the power of the mind over the body, and the notion of self-discipline in the context of labor—possible.

Of course, within dance improvisation, the discourse of self-awareness has a therapeutic, rather than disciplinary, tone. Dancers are avowedly *not* in the business of controlling the body, but rather of listening to, and becoming aware of, the body and “one’s own intimate patterns of relating and being in the world” (Needler in Cvejić 2015:136). Nevertheless, as Federici’s account underlines, increased bodily awareness brings with it the possibility of increased bodily control—or if not actually control, at least ‘good’ management. As she states in reference to mechanical philosophy, the 16th- and 17th-century philosophical movement whose mechanical approach to the body was enabled by the cultural shift of which anatomical exploration was emblematic:

Once its devices were deconstructed and it was itself reduced to a tool, the body could be opened to an infinite manipulation of its powers and possibilities. One could investigate the vices and limits of imagination, the virtues of habit, the uses of fear, how certain passions can be avoided or neutralized, and how they can be more rationally utilized. (2004:139-140)

Exploration of the body, here from an emotional and psychological perspective and not simply an anatomical one, opens up to the potential of *rational use*. Moreover, it would seem to be exactly in this sense that exercising self-awareness can be understood as therapeutic: as a practice which increases one's ability to be self-consciously precise, in dancing as in life.

Here, we approach the question of the subject of dance improvisation. In Cvejić's view, the subject is *not* simply that which unifies given sensory perceptions. She quotes Ann Cooper Albright, who writes that, in improvisation, "the skin is no longer the boundary between world and myself, but rather the sensing organ that brings the world into my awareness" (2015: 135): who then is this 'me', who centralizes herself and her own sensations? How is this 'me' shaped by its embeddedness in the specific discourse of awareness that coalesces around dance improvisation? It seems that dance improvisors, who value "the discovery and surprising experience of new movement and presence" (Cvejić 2015:128), would have little interest in minutely controlling the actions of the body, as Federici's proletariat were required to do. Rather, the improvisor *manages* the body, putting herself in situations or before tasks consciously, and with the baggage of a conscious awareness of her own patterns, tendencies, and anatomy, such that something unknown and interesting can emerge.

In *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2004), Michel Foucault gives a name to just such a managerial subject: *homo oeconomicus*. *Homo oeconomicus*, according to Foucault, is a construction of liberal economic theory: the subject conceptualized as 'partner of exchange', whose conduct is governed by "the theory of utility based on the problematic of needs" (2008/2004:225). *Homo oeconomicus* is a rational subject, and here rationality is defined by the strategic management of emotional, intellectual, and energetic (not to mention financial) investments and returns. Could the dance improvisor be read as some version of *homo oeconomicus*, fleshing out her self-awareness in order to perfect her strategies for coping with the world along rational lines? Actually, according to

my own analysis, it is really only in this framework—the framework of well-being through rationalized self-management—that working on self-awareness might be considered therapeutic at all. For what is the relation between self-awareness and well-being, if not seen from the perspective of the subject who seeks to rationally manage the world as it appears to her to her own benefit?

We can also understand the specifically emotional and psychological kinds of self-awareness that dance improvisation generates in this optic. The insights that dance improvisors have into their own desires, feelings, and (subconscious) thoughts while improvising—in the sense that improvisation can be a way to “know what’s on my mind before I think it through, while it’s still a wild feeling in my bones” (Simone Forti in Cvejić 2015:133)—also represent a kind of knowledge that is not without its relation to power. While we tend to experience self-expression as a “deep intimate need” (Kunst 2015:29), Cvejić reminds us that self-expression is actually an “ideological operation” which secures the apparent necessity of set of contingent practices (2015:19). “Truth will out, and if it fails to reveal itself, one needs to get rid of the limitations that prevent this from happening” (Kunst 2015:29): while an identificatory relation to this statement sustains much expressing and confessing today, and not only in the arts, Bojana Kunst emphasizes that the urge to seek and speak the truth of the self is a social construction with an institutional history.⁵⁶ Moreover, it is a technique of the self which produces thoughts, emotions, and desires as something which the subject must learn to manage wisely: Kunst, following Foucault, insists on the sense in which the urge to self-express operates as a means for establishing “the governance over the subject’s inside by the subject themselves” (29). In other words, once the subject becomes aware of her desires and ‘natural’ tendencies—once she becomes conscious of that which the body produces ‘on its own’, its habits, urges, and relational patterns—then these uncontrolled bodily productions can be intentionally managed *from within*. In this framework, the aspect of the regime of self-awareness in dance improvisation that has to do with emotional and psychological self-knowledge appears in a no more innocent light than does the gathering of strictly anatomical or locomotive information.

⁵⁶ With reference to Foucault’s analysis of confession in *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (1976).

At its core, this critique has to do with the mode of subjection which the discourse of dance improvisation both cites and performs.⁵⁷ Today, it is hard to imagine any other way to live than as rational managers of ourselves. Given the contemporary, neoliberal transformation of *homo oeconomicus* from simple consumer or trade partner into “the man of enterprise and production” (Foucault 2008/2004:147)—the subject as entrepreneur of herself—it seems only logical to run one’s life as a project, maximizing pleasure, enjoyment, equanimity, experience, status, and success. As a technique of self-consciousness, as a means of knowledge production that points towards the self, dance improvisation is deeply implicated in a mode of subjection to which an alternative today seems hardly conceivable. Given the precarizing effects of the neoliberal managerialisation of everything, however, and from the perspective of care and collective ongoingness, there is certainly cause to mount a serious effort of resistance against the hegemony of this particular form of subjectivity—Foucault’s *homo oeconomicus*, the subject of rational economy. For, as Foucault points out, our rational self-management “allows them [neoliberals] to apply economic analyses to completely new fields and domains” (277); for example, to desire (in the form of marketing) or to subjective potential (in the form of ‘human resources’). Neoliberalism, indeed, relies on the internalization of economic principles, such that individuals continue to behave according to an economic logic even in the apparent ‘absence’ of government.⁵⁸ In a society of managerial, entrepreneurial subjects, economic principles become “the grid of intelligibility that one will adopt on the behavior of the new individual” (252), constructing an ever-tighter unity between the individual and the economy and incorporating the subject into relatively predictable economic dynamics.⁵⁹ In that case, no matter how spontaneous our dances, our lives remain in an important sense analyzable, predictable, and manipulable.

⁵⁷ How does the individual understand his relation to the normative obligation to produce self-knowledge? To the rule that “I must incessantly utter what is hardest to say” (Kunst 2015:29)? And to the command to manage herself rationally, minimizing investiture and maximizing return, given that information?

⁵⁸ In this way, ‘small governments’—political systems engaged in deregulation, privatization, and liberalizations of all stripes—can remove their costly support structures without giving up any effective power.

⁵⁹ It is in this sense that Foucault calls *homo oeconomicus* “a certain type of subject who precisely enabled an art of government to be determined according to the principle of economy, both in the sense of political economy and in the sense of the restriction, self-limitation, and frugality of government” (2008/2004:271).

Moreover, while certain dance improvisors would seem to subscribe to beliefs which fly in the face of science, these instances of magical thinking don't necessarily detract from the sense in which the dancer tends manage herself according to a process of rational calculation.⁶⁰ Silvia Federici puts it memorably:

The revival of magical beliefs is possible today because it no longer represents a social threat. The mechanization of the body is so constitutive of the individual that, at least in industrialized countries, giving space to the belief in occult forces does not jeopardize the regularity of social behavior. Astrology too can be allowed to return, with the certainty that even the most devoted consumer of astral charts will automatically consult the watch before going to work. (2004:143)

It is not the scientific verifiability of that which is brought into awareness by dance improvisation that makes certain improvisatory practices logocentric or rationally managerial. Nor is it the cosmological framework within which those practices are narrated. Rather, it is a certain position towards the knowledge that is generated in improvisation. Despite celebrating the body for its very irrationality—dance improvisors often speak and write about bodily movement in a language which places it “close to the Romantic transcendent notion of the ineffable, that which eludes the mind’s rational grasp” (Cvejić 2015:132)—the therapeutic discourse of self-awareness seems to operate a persistent *rationalizing* dynamic within improvisation, wherein improvising often means coming to know the body in ever more intimate detail. My proposal in this section has been that, within the framework of a sufficiently complex and critical understanding of subjectivity and its relation to power, that project of knowledge production emerges as decidedly problematic.

⁶⁰ I am thinking here of the recent resurgence of practices like tarot, astrology, and dream interpretation within dance improvisation; the influence of practices which operate around non-Western body systems like yoga and chi-gong; as well as anatomical fantasies like Body-Mind Centering®, which is “founded on a dual claim: firstly, that movement can be initiated in places in the body, such as bodily organs and fluids, that elude any scientific verification of their host’s ability to be aware of them; secondly, the nature of the place in which movement is initiated will be reflected in the quality of movement” (Cvejić & Vujanović 2015:154).

3.3 *Therapeutic improvisation and/as work*

In the time period that Silvia Federici describes in *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), rationalization and the application of techniques of self-management and self-control, along with a cosmological discourse which portrayed the body as a machine operated by the mind, were put in place as an “essential condition for the regularity of the work-process” (2004:143). “To pose the body as mechanical matter, void of any intrinsic teleology,” asserts Federici, “was to make intelligible the possibility of subordinating it to a work process that increasingly relied on uniform and predictable forms of behavior” (139). But what relation do *contemporary* work processes have to uniformity and predictability? In chapter one of this thesis, I referred to Bojana Kunst in order to elaborate on the notion of post-Fordism, which replaces the obedient repetitiveness of the factory with entrepreneurship, creativity, pleasure, self-actualization, and above all the “imperative to improvise” (Da Silva 2016:8). Many of the subjective qualities which post-Fordist economies capitalize upon are also constructed as essential to the subject’s health, freedom, and vitality. The alignment of notions of personal well-being and notions of professionalism therefore complicate any assessment of therapeutic practices. In this section, I follow the path laid by dance studies scholars critical of therapeutic improvisation practices who make their arguments in terms of therapy’s entanglement with contemporary work.

In his 2016 dissertation at Utrecht University, João da Silva examines the discourse of risk-taking in dance improvisation. Framing the glorification of risk-taking as an element of neoliberal ideology, Da Silva arrives at a more general critique: in ‘advanced capitalism’, “the very attributes celebrated in improvisation actually fuel a flow of production that does not strengthen the position of the artist and her work” (Da Silva 2016:2). In other words, while dance improvisors celebrate “spontaneity, freedom, flexibility, autonomy, and immediacy” (1) in their dancing, these very attributes could also describe their working conditions as artists: freelance, precarious, opportunist, moment-to-moment and hand-to-mouth.

Bojana Kunst states the case more bluntly:

If we wish to work successfully, we must come across as relaxed as possible, babble as much as possible, be as shameful, flexible, and creative as possible,

enjoy and show all our potentiality and be critical to boot. Furthermore, we must do all this publicly because contemporary work increasingly takes place before the eyes of another. In this sense, the performer becomes the ideal virtuoso worker of contemporary capitalism. (2015:31)

What does Kunst imply when she claims that the performer becomes the 'ideal virtuoso worker of contemporary capitalism?' As Da Silva points out, it is certainly not the case that dancers have escaped the processes of attrition which characterize the crisis-prone iteration of capitalism in which we are living. Their own spontaneity, freedom, flexibility, autonomy, and immediacy, in other words, have not necessarily translated into either power or status. Rather, dance is, on the one hand, an example of a work field in which certain characteristically problematic aspects of contemporary work are on display in an exaggerated manner. On the other, as both a site of representation and an explicitly aestheticized practice, dance improvisation serves as an aesthetic component of contemporary ideology, "the utopian lure that enables that ideology to operate in a hegemonic rather than simply coercive fashion" (Hewitt 2005:6).⁶¹ Improvisation aestheticizes certain aspects of contemporary work, and through this process of aestheticization, these concepts come to be thought of as good and beautiful in and of themselves, wiped clean of their association with work and the biopolitical project of securing labor power. By emphasizing the link between the values aestheticized in dance improvisation and certain key characteristics of the post-Fordist work process, dance scholars draw our attention to the non-innocence of notions that many improvisors take for granted.

One of those notions is actually the continuity of dance improvisation and life, understood in this context *not* as the way dancing and living can be brought into affirmative dialogue, but rather as the expansion of what gets to count as dance, a kind of aesthetic democratization. In the contemporary dance improvisation field, many genre- or convention-bound definitions of dance have been left behind. To that effect, Bojana Kunst notes the increasing use of the word 'performer' in the place of 'dancer'; a gesture, in her analysis, to the

⁶¹ Hewitt's formulation here is not specifically in reference to dance improvisation; it is an explanation of 'the aesthetic component' of ideology in a more general sense.

supposed *a priori* indetermination and genre-less-ness of what can emerge in contemporary performance. As a performer as opposed to a dancer, the artist is supposedly in a more 'open' position. However, as Kunst teaches us, "the performer is also skilled at a specific technique—the self-performing or radical consumption of their own powers for the processes of the constant transformation of bodily states and affective powers" (2015:32). The movement from dancer to performer entails a shift whereby the totality of the subject's potentiality comes to be called upon to nourish the creative process. Nothing, in other words, is off limits anymore.

By exploding disciplinary boundaries, the performer also collapses the difference between herself and her work. In a freelance economy, in which workers quickly shift between roles and capacities, this collapse of skill into pure subjective potentiality is also at play. Indeed, subjective potentiality has become, according to some commentators, *the* source of contemporary labor-power: "Today, our surplus lies primarily in the fact that we are subjects about whom something new can always be discovered; we constantly need to reveal and topicalise our potential abilities" (Kunst 2015:30). Post-Fordist work aims to capitalize "not just on working time but on the person him- or herself: all the attention the individual commands and, indeed, his or her very life" (Han 2017:ebook). In this context, the relationship between therapy and contemporary work is clarified: if the self is the source of value—if, as Foucault claims, the value of labor in neoliberalism "cannot be separated from the human individual who is its bearer" (2008/2004:226)—then therapy becomes a kind of investment in the individual, bearing the promise of a productive return. In this sense, the radically democratic demands of the 1960s, when the avant-garde called for the erasure of the distinction between art and life, have returned in the form of a new normal, wherein lives are subject to aesthetic criticism and therapeutic correction. Dance improvisation, according to dance scholars critical of dance improvisation from the perspective of biopolitics, serves to construct those aesthetic criteria. Moreover, when considered as cultural work itself, dance provides a hyperbolic example of the extreme efficiency, economy, and energetic cost-effectiveness with which therapeutic discourse extracts labor from the body of the worker.

As Eva Illouz writes, "The ideal of self-realization is a very powerful institution and cultural force [...which] posits the self as a perpetually moving

target, as something in need of discovery and accomplishment” (2012:99-100). Therapeutic discourses and practices find their point of articulation with the subject through this fantasy of self-realization, conceptualized as an ongoing process that includes pleasure as well as discipline and which often requires an expert guide, like a therapist or a choreographer. By tapping into the fantasy of self-realization, improvisational dance practices situated within a therapeutic discourse posit self-knowledge and self-satisfaction as their own narcissistic rewards, therefore skirting around the question of adequate working conditions or payment for dancers. Indeed, we can understand artistic passion and “fantasy about self-actualization in work” (Cvejić & Vujanović 2015:152) as the resources which keep the dance field running, despite a chronic lack of financial means.

This economic logic, whereby remunerative shortfalls or inadequate working conditions are supplemented or excused by the “intensified experience of one’s own vitality” (155) provided by the work process itself, is not limited to the dance field. Works like Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello’s *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999) and Frédéric Lordon’s *Willing Slaves of Capital* (2014) attest to the emergence of managerial styles across fields and disciplines which hinge on the mobilization of the worker’s pleasure, desire, and sense of self-worth. Kunst even writes about the “imperative of ‘professional’ enjoyment” (2015:31), which she contrasts to the professional asceticism Max Weber diagnoses in the early days of capitalism. Clearly, the critique of alienation levied against work in the mid-twentieth century has since been smoothly incorporated into the very functioning of contemporary capitalism.⁶² The emphasis within therapeutic improvisation practices on desire as a motor and self-knowledge as its own rewards sits uncomfortably (or perhaps too comfortably) with these developments.

“Contemporary society places great emphasis on creativity, imagination, and dynamism, but these human powers have never before been as

⁶² *The New Spirit of Capitalism* provides an especially in-depth account of this process of incorporation. Referring to corporate management discourse in the 1990s, Boltanski and Chiapello concur that “Securing the collaboration of wage-earners in the realization of capitalist profits remained the issue. But whereas in the previous period, notably under pressure from the worker’s movement, this had been sought through the collective, political integration of workers into the social order, and by a form of the spirit of capitalism that yoked economic and technological progress to the aim of social justice, it could now be achieved by developing a project of self-realization, linking the cult of individual performance and extolment of mobility to reticular conceptions of the social bond” (2018/1999:217).

standardized and intertwined with what Foucault terms self-governance” (Kunst 2015:19). The discussion of post-Fordism led by dance studies scholars such as Kunst, Da Silva, Cvejić, and Vujanović lends specificity to the analyses of dance improvisation and/as therapy laid out in sections 3.1 and 3.2 of this thesis. If dance improvisation as therapy both normalizes and rationalizes, it does so—at least to some degree—in the name of creative work, and with the narcissistic energy of pleasure in self-actualization. Indeed, the dispositive outlined here hints at the “emergence of power based on the imperative of pleasure” (48), arising from “our need for liberation and transformation—from the imperative that we should be as shameless as possible in all of this” (25-26). Such an analysis puts therapy at the center of a movement towards “the standardisation of the social, affective and common aspects of the contemporary human being” (19). In a therapeutic paradigm, these aspects arguably no longer function as open potentialities but rather as aesthetically-regulated ideals. Such a diagnosis suggests a re-evaluation of the ideological commitments that dance improvisation makes to spontaneity, freedom, flexibility, autonomy, and immediacy, not to mention individuality, authenticity, originality, creativity—and even well-being. My proposal is that, by paying attention to the way therapy and appeals to health and self-actualization relate to labor and the production of a streamlined and efficient labor force, the nuanced problematics of dance improvisation as an actual ideological assemblage start to become clear.

3.4 The bodily experience of the self, alone

In *Choreographing Problems*, Bojana Cvejić notices that the discourse of dance improvisation tends to fixate on and even reify the dancer as a phenomenologically-oriented individual. The holistic approach to the body which positions dance improvisation as a kind of total therapy, dealing with the cognitive, the emotional, and the physical aspects of the self, “conflates improvised dance movement with a necessarily, if not also exclusively, bodily experience of a self alone or a sensation shared by individuals in contact” (2015:132). Even when narrated as dialogical, “The ‘dialogue’ of improvisation”—with a space or a partner, for example—is “coupled with the centering of the self” (135). According to dance studies scholars critical of dance improvisation from a biopolitical perspective, this centering of the self poses a

major political problem. In this section, I move towards an understanding of why this might be so.

Writing and thinking together with Ana Vujanović, Cvejić detects an individualistic bias in the shift in artistic discourse whereby artistic *practices* become more important than artistic *objects* (2015:151). Putting the focus on practices rather than artworks opens art up to interventions which are performative, processual, and, indeed, improvisational. The discourse of practice also tends towards emphasizing the practicing body of the artist, which unifies the disparate works that she produces. In the regime of art as practice, particular artworks are seen as partial expressions of a larger practice and are interpreted in relation to this practice, which is mapped onto the artist as a physical individual. The line, therefore, between artistic process and personal development becomes difficult to parse.

Cvejić and Vujanović worry that the centrality of the individual artist's body and personality within practice-based paradigms threatens to depoliticize art. They propose to problematize dance practices in particular by asking, in each case, "whether there is an aim to such a practice that could be tested, a problem that the practice poses, revolves around, and tries to solve; and what this practice enables or achieves, or if it is an end in itself" (151). For Cvejić and Vujanović, the "vague sense of purification to be reached" and "intensified experience of one's own vitality" that are attendant on therapeutic approaches to dance improvisation threaten to write dance practice "out of history, geography, social and political context, relations with disturbing others, as well as away from any thought which problematizes itself" (155). According to this line of thinking, the therapeutic aim of self-actualization undermines dance's capacity to address problems and act as a critical force.

Dance improvisation's therapeutic aspects, therefore, might also be understood as its depoliticizing and privatizing aspects. Cvejić and Vujanović conceptualize this depoliticization and privatization in terms of the 'eclipse of the public',⁶³ a generalized process of expropriation by which public discourse becomes less and less effective as a means of keeping power in check in

⁶³ Cvejić's and Vujanović's formulation (2015).

Western liberal democracies.⁶⁴ For them, “the centralization of the self in society” (156)—a process which is “bolstered by a practice of techniques that intertwine or inhabit the border between art and therapy” (156)—is one of the major contributing factors to the eclipse of the public that they diagnose. As the public “turns towards the individual, stimulating the individual’s self-expression and auto-affection [as well as] its preoccupation with its own well-being” (156), the political dimension of social life becomes increasingly obscured. The preoccupation with feeling good, and being free to do what feels good, pits spontaneous pleasure-seeking and the hoarding of personal comforts against the possibility of political change. In the discourse of dance improvisation, the value placed on individual freedom “liberates one from responsibility or obligation towards the other” (Da Silva 2016:4): it is this self-absorbed dynamic which Cvejić and Vujanović detect, causing them to wonder, in the context of dance studies, “how self-absorption stands as an obstacle to the social imagination of group formations, collectivities, or movements that would reclaim the public sphere” (2015:156).

If dance improvisation as a practice of self-design and therapeutic transformation can be said to be apolitical, I understand that claim in the context of the contemporary depoliticization of radical individuality. Contrary to earlier social formations, in which the radical individual stood as a challenge to socially sanctioned conformity, we are living in a time in which an unusual appearance or behavior can be a fantastic social (and economic) asset. It is in this sense that Bojana Kunst, troubled by practices which take the self of the performing artist as raw material, can conclude that “The work that drives us to ‘go into ourselves fully and completely’, both socially and artistically, actually produces nothing of value” (2015:32). According to Kunst, political transformation today cannot take place through the adoption of a radical personal aesthetic. Instead, she asserts, such an effort “results in a radically

⁶⁴ Cvejić and Vujanović attribute this expropriation to three main processes: “The changed configuration between the state and the private in neoliberal capitalism” (i.e., that the state tends to ally itself with private corporate interests more often than with the public good); “The ‘depoliticization’ of civil society, whose citizens are politically dispossessed and handicapped”; and “The paradox of freedom of speech [whereby] anything can be said because it won’t have any consequences” (2015:21). Interestingly, Cvejić and Vujanović point out that the public sphere has *never* been fully inclusive or democratic, citing the gendered and racialized exclusions that characterized the historical public sphere even at its most robust (25). To that end, the analysis they tender offers insights into the specific ways the public sphere fails to be public today, not in order to facilitate a return but in order to help construct something which has never before been achieved.

failed subjectivisation, powerlessness and intimate promises that are never realized" (32). According to this line of criticism, improvisational practices which, conceptualized therapeutically, take subjectivity as the terrain of artistic intervention, simply contribute to the "brutal intensification of the individualization process" (21).

Indeed, the narrative of self-realization and self-design which animates dance improvisation as a therapeutic practice can produce an experience of the self in which the self is never yet ready to make political commitments. There is always more therapeutic work to do. As Eva Illouz reminds us in her discussion of romantic commitment phobia in *Why Love Hurts* (2012), "To self-realize means not committing to any fixed identity and especially not to a single project of the self. In other words, the ideal of self-realization affects the very capacity and desire to project the self along a continuous straight line" (2012:100). What is true here of the personal is, in my reading, also true of the political: if the dancer is in a constant state of therapeutic transformation, what space is there for long-term political convictions, not to mention planning or action? Again, the point here is not that dancers should be activists, but rather that the mode of subjection which is aestheticized in dance and particularly in dance improvisation is a potentially depoliticized mode, in which the subject trains her focus on the proper digestion of affects, instead of questioning their structural provenance. It is the self which is staged as 'not-yet': not yet ready to face the world, not yet efficient in its affective metabolism, not yet economical in its movements, not yet healed—while the structural problems which wear people down themselves go unchallenged. As Byung-Chul Han reminds us, "People who fail in the neoliberal achievement-society see themselves as responsible for their lot and feel shame instead of questioning society or the system" (Han 2017: ebook). But what effect will continuous self-examination and self-management have against the forms of living and working which have us so in need of healing in the first place?

In a therapeutic paradigm, the subject is treated as the subject of interests: each individual has her own irreducible, non-transferrable 'best interests', and therapy can help her live in a way such that those interests are fulfilled. By implication, the social world is simply what emerges as a sum of individual interests. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault historicizes this notion and places it in the context of economic liberalism, where the pursuit of the

interest of each is supposed to feed into the interest of all. But the subject of interest—by which Foucault means “a subject as the source of interest, the starting point of an interest, or the site of a mechanism of interests” (2008/2004:273)—is not simply a natural given. It is a historically conditioned mode of subjection and interpretative framework, “something which absolutely did not exist before [the 18th century]” (273). The subject of interest, “whose action has a multiplying and beneficial value through the intensification of interest” (276), is, according to Foucault, the conceptual forefather of the neoliberal, entrepreneurial iteration of *homo oeconomicus*. And it is this subject of interest who emerges as the subject of therapy. If we follow the critique of therapy to its logical conclusion, therapy might only be considered political if we accept the (unacceptable) notion that “the common interest requires that each knows how to interpret his own interest and is able to pursue it without obstruction” (280). In other words, therapy only reads in affirmative relation to the common good within a free market ideology, in which self-interest and collective interest magically coincide, guided by the beneficent touch of Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’. If so many therapeutic approaches to dance improvisation frame themselves as radical, such a framing is only made possible, in my analysis, by the location of the frame *within* the semantic horizon of neoliberalism, which emphasizes individual subjectivity and individual interests as the irreducible building blocks upon which society, politics, and freedom are built.

3.5 Conclusion: Dance improvisation as therapy

In the mid-1950s, Félix Guattari worked at La Borde, an experimental psychiatric clinic in France. As Brian Massumi explains, “The aim at La Borde was to abolish the doctor-patient hierarchy in favor of an interactive group dynamic that would bring the experiences of all to full expression in a such a way as to produce a collective critique of the power relations in society as a whole” (1992:2). At La Borde, therapeutic practices were shaped by, and fed into, a complimentary practice of political critique. In this way, individual experience and structural analysis were treated as inseparable. The idea at La Borde was not only to open up space for new subjectifications, but also necessarily and explicitly to “channel them into revolutionary practice” (1992:2-3).

In this chapter, I mapped a critical discourse within dance studies which suggests the sense in which many therapeutic practices of improvisation are rendered problematic in their failure to deal, from within the practice, with the political and the structural. Following through on some of the claims made within dance studies by referring to other critical texts, I laid out some arguments against taking the therapeutic claims of dance improvisation at face value. Whether focused on the ideological content which subtends these practices, the set of normative claims and appeals to authority smuggled in with recourse to the affective atmosphere of well-being; whether challenging the logocentric mode of subjection which therapeutic schools of dance improvisation (re)produce; whether calling attention to the fraught relationship between dance improvisation and post-Fordist work; or whether decrying the central position that the individual dancer and her personal experience hold in many therapeutic approaches, these arguments each ask the reader to wonder: what does therapy *do* in society? From what ideological terrain does it emerge, historically? And how do the values, assumptions, and projects which animated this historical period continue to resonate today, problematically or otherwise?

To imagine that, given the problematics I outlined in this chapter, every dancer should complement her practice with political activism is to oversimplify—and indeed, to misunderstand—the claims made within the body of critical work surveyed here.⁶⁵ On the one hand, dance improvisation is staged within this discourse as an aesthetic laboratory in which the images which subtend certain therapeutic norms are manufactured and sustained: as representation, dance improvisation reproduces the narrative of the individual who frees herself from externally-posed limitations and internalized repressions through personal work. On the other hand, in the dance studio, those aestheticized ideals are concretely put into practice, “softening or therapeutically handling the latent negative side effects of free-market processes without broaching the true structural and political causes” (Gielen 2015/2009:212).⁶⁶ While the negative effects/affects of the social might or might not be

⁶⁵ To make such a prescription would be to reproduce the pattern by which the individual is made responsible for structural problems, i.e., the structural problems of the discourse of dance improvisation. For these theorists, I do not think that the responsibility to consider the political falls to the dancer as an individual.

⁶⁶ In this citation, Pascal Gielen is talking about the “actual, concrete activities of architects and artists” (2015/2009:212), rather than about dance improvisation specifically. Nevertheless, I feel that his assessment resonates with the critiques tendered by voices emerging in dance studies.

transformed, through the therapeutic aspects of dance improvisation, into something livable for the individual—and this obviously varies on a case-by-case basis, dancer to dancer—the strategy of learning to cope with effects/affects rather than tackling political and structural causes does indeed seem a worthy of critique, especially as I move towards theorizing dance improvisation as a possible vector of support for precarious lives, considered not only individually but collectively, indeed, conceptualized within a complex web of living and non-living agents. As João da Silva asks, “is this the (sole) role of art today, to heal in order to survive being inside the box, inside the institutions of life” (2016:130)? Giving full credence to the arguments rehearsed above, the answer would be a resounding ‘no’. In the next chapter, however, I formulate some possible responses to the critique of therapy, and indeed to the biopolitical critique as a whole, such that improvisation *does* emerge as site of affirmative potentiality, a mode of thinking and doing as well as an object of thought apt for contemporary conditions of material and epistemological uncertainty.

4 Towards an affirmative theory of improvisation

In the previous chapters of this thesis, I drew out a critique of dance improvisation coming from within dance studies. This critique is concerned with reading dance improvisation through the lens of biopolitics. That is to say, proponents of what I am calling the biopolitical critique of dance improvisation seek to understand what is going on in dance improvisation by contextualizing it as a practice which emerges within a particular political paradigm: that in which governance is secured through the stylization of individual lives. The notion of modernity, and later neoliberalism, as a *mode of subjection*—or a way of understanding oneself in relation to a rule—invites these scholars to wonder how such subordinations intersect with dance improvisation, conceptualized as *itself* a way of understanding oneself in relation to a rule (or a score). In this chapter, I build upon the insights of the biopolitical critique in order to formulate an affirmative theory of improvisation.

Above, I highlighted three main strands of critique. One tackled movement and its relation to notions of individual freedom and empty space. Another dealt with figures of the natural in dance improvisation: essentialist approaches to expressivity, presence, energy, and the body. The last discussed therapeutic aspects of improvisation. What emerged in the preceding pages was an image of dance improvisation as field in which multiple discourses and practices are active at once. The biopolitical critique, as I propose to map it, does not have one unified and central point of concern, but rather tackles multiple aspects of a diverse field. This is necessary, because dance improvisation is not just one thing—it is a territory, a zone that traffics with the outside in manifold ways. Within the biopolitical critique, the notion of biopolitics serves as a sieve, a filter, or a lens through which certain elements of this territory are selected and compared.

Although the elements that the biopolitical critique treats are conceptually separable—for example, the image of creativity as flow, invocations to remain in the present, a sharp focus on anatomical correctness, and a managerial model of the subject—they remain, despite not necessarily implying one another, inextricably linked within the territory of dance improvisation. We could also say

that this linkage is what dance improvisation *does*. It is in this sense that dance improvisation is an *ideological* territory: it is a co-functioning that naturalizes a particular arrangement and definition of concepts, linking them to spaces and to practices. In the preceding pages, I show that the biopolitical critique is an ideological critique: the theories surveyed here demonstrate that the concepts that structure dance improvisation are assigned a *particular* meaning and are placed in relation to each other in a *particular* way.

My reading of the biopolitical critique argues that dance improvisation, as an ideological territory, covers over or disavows a series of deleterious political effects, particularly effects related to exclusion, inequality, atomized community, and political disenfranchisement. But an understanding of dance improvisation as an ideological territory also suggests that certain aspects of improvisation might be recoverable, even in the wake of such a strong and convincing critique. Because dance improvisation emerges as a territory within which a whole series of concepts, practices, spaces, energies, affects, and so forth cluster in a contingent arrangement, the biopolitical critique does not succeed in negating improvisation *tout court*. Rather, I argue that it implies a re-arrangement, a loosening of the territory (*detritorialization*) and a re-evaluation of how it works. The suggestion, therefore, is not to throw the baby out with the bathwater.⁶⁷

In this chapter, I open up space for dance improvisation without negating the validity of the biopolitical critique. The biopolitical critique represents an important critical development which forces us to challenge the way that dance improvisation revolves around particular definitions and arrangements of its key concepts. From the perspective of care, however—of care for the assemblage in which research is located as a principle, or thinking with care as a methodology—there is a need to also ask some questions of the biopolitical critique, especially insofar as it poses problems to affective attachment and ongoingness for the dance field.⁶⁸ I begin this chapter, therefore, by diving into the felt effects of the biopolitical critique, and particularly the critique of essentialism, wondering: how can optimism, attachment, and commitment to

⁶⁷ I link this gesture to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's practice of 'reparative reading' (Sedgwick 2003). More on reparative reading below (section 4.1).

⁶⁸ For more on thinking with care, see De la Bellacasa 2017.

dance improvisation be constructed in lieu of ideological claims about its relation to 'truth'?

While reframing essentialist claims about mobility, self-expression, energy, presence, healing, and the body as just so many narratives—rather than as objectively 'true'—does weaken their hold in a certain sense, it also opens the door to reframing these concepts in an affirmative way. While at certain moments the biopolitical critique would seem to seek to problematize these concepts definitively, I argue that such a move would go too far: these concepts are problematic because of their ideological decontestation and arrangement, *not* because of an inherent or essential corruption. In the second and third sections of this chapter, therefore, I give some examples of the flexibility held within these concepts, comparing the way they are conceptualized within dance and dance studies to meanings and uses emerging in other critical discourses, here in particular in queer, feminist, and critical race or decolonial studies, as well as within critical theory more generally. The conceptual formations I choose to look at here are self-care/healing and space/freedom, but these are only examples of an inherent semantic flexibility within dance improvisation understood as an ideological assemblage (and indeed within ideological assemblages in general) which extends far beyond just these two instances.

In the final section of this chapter, I draw some tentative conclusions about the ongoingness of dance improvisation in light of the biopolitical critique and the ideological status of dance improvisation which it implies. The biopolitical critique shows us how a set of conceptual connections and discursive erasures within dance improvisation makes it problematic from a biopolitical perspective: it participates in the stylization of lives such that certain forms of power are reproduced. It also reveals dance improvisation as a flexible assemblage, prone to critique, re-arrangement, and re-signification. My idea is that improvisation might actually be a good way of thinking about as well as training and re-training the activity of navigating such a shifting epistemological and sensorial landscape, especially as located within a context of material precarization.

4.1 *What do we give up when we give up essentialisms?*

Much of the biopolitical critique is devoted to problematizing essentialist discourses within dance improvisation. Indeed, insofar as the critique of kinetics is a critique of an essentialist approach to mobility, within which unhindered movement is the most authentic sort, and the critique of therapy revolves around an essentialist approach to health and wellness, we could say that *all* of the critical positions surveyed in the first three chapters of this thesis are anti-essentialist. By framing certain concepts in close relation to an unironic or absolute version of authenticity and/or truth, they argue, the political *constructedness* of that which appears direct, unmediated, authentic, or true is made unavailable to critical analysis. The writers of the biopolitical critique, on the other hand, attempt to elucidate the ways in which the truth-effects of dance improvisation are ideological, produced not by nature but by the contingencies of biopower. In this section, I argue that this critical development is not only a boon for the dance field. While it does prepare dance improvisation for a more reflective, critical, and responsible relationship to society and to the political, it also poses a major problem to dance improvisation's ongoingness. That is because, as I argue, essentialist discourses also power personal and collective *attachment* to dance improvisation, cast in and through this attachment as a hopeful project. Insofar as essentialisms posit a return to a state of nature, promise a passage into authenticity, or presage an improved quality of life in whatever fashion, they serve as narratives which bind dancers to dance in a continuous and future-looking sense, and which ground the project of dance improvisation in meaningfulness. Writing from the perspective of care, with an acknowledgement of the intractable entanglement of knowledge and its 'object'—particularly in a field like dance studies—implies taking the performativity of the critique of essentialism, and not only the claims it makes explicitly, into account. Below, I elaborate on the problem of attachment and ongoingness in dance improvisation by investigating some dance practices which try to build attachment in a non-essentialist paradigm, as well as by delving into theories of attachment which can help us conceptualize what is going on in such approaches and the challenges they face.

Following Lauren Berlant's terminology, then, I propose to understand essentialist discourses within dance improvisation as the buttresses of *optimism*,

reading optimism as “a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way” (Berlant 2011:2; emphasis in the original). Keying into the notions of sustain and return as they appear in Berlant’s definition, we might do well to wonder: in lieu of these promising, optimistic narratives, what does an embodied attachment or even a commitment to dance improvisation look like, in just one moment or over the time of a life? Because what is under scrutiny here is affective attachment, the literature surveyed in this section also has a lot to say about love and care. I turn to these theories not because dance improvisation is like love or requires love, but rather because romantic discourse and practice is rich with analyses describing how essentialist narratives underlie certain kinds of attachment. Moreover, contemporary theorists of love are also often invested not only in pointing out what is problematic about certain essentialist narratives, but also in describing in just what ways attachment suffers and weakens without their support. At their best, these theories also try to describe what forms attachment *does nevertheless take*, once cultures have become suffused with irony and critical doubt.

Before diving into this theoretical terrain, however, I want to put forward some examples from within the dance field of practices which, in my estimation, are themselves doing interesting conceptual work with regards to the question of building non- or post-essentialist attachments to improvisation. In *A lot of moving parts* (2018), for example, this is how dancer and choreographer Eleanor Bauer describes an Alice Chauchat improvisation score:

The agreement that supports *Telepathic Dance* is that an observer mentally ‘sends’ a dance to a receiving person who performs the dance. The not-knowing is such an explicit given [...] both parties are granted the status of subject-who-assumes or pretends. Here ‘do what you think it means’ is more or less what a dancer always does as the interpreter of an instruction. ‘Make it mean something to you’ is even more active, and maybe more appropriate way to describe the experience of generating a dance from an instruction in language. (2018:7-8)⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Bauer attributes the formulations ‘do what you think it means’ and ‘make it mean something to you’ as strategies for dealing with non-knowing in dance to dancer and choreographer Ellen Söderhult.

Here, curiosity about what is generated through feigning or pretending replaces a drive to know or experience the ‘truth’ of the body in an absolute sense. This is a very different approach from that of Authentic Movement, for example, which aims for the authentic expression of the reality of the dancing subject and claims that self-expression is possible in a real sense through movement. *Telepathic Dance*, by contrast, calls upon dancers who are both knowingly ‘in on the joke’ and who make a sincere effort to commit to the practice, even actively seeking to *project* a personal meaningfulness on it (‘make it mean something to you’). In that sense, telepathy is adopted here as a powerful temporary belief, with all of the contradictions that phrase implies.

In the description of his 2020 workshop at Studio 303 in Montréal, Keith Hennessy says:

We will dance more than talk supported by ritual technologies of divination, ancestors, elements, care, and prayer. We’ll consider the symbolic and metaphoric aspects of dancing together as well as the real intimacy of what is happening right here and now. Engaging decolonial and queer-feminist practices of consent and collaboration this will be a futurist laboratory that knows that another world is possible and it will be improvised. Magic involves poetic and embodied action in a ritualized context to influence both consciousness and material realities. The pretend influences the real [...] The class will draw on Keith’s ongoing work including dancing objects, fake healing, negotiating power, while prioritizing intuitive and embodied responses to political crises.⁷⁰

Here again, an ironic or double position is assumed and made evident. Rather than making claims about the reality of the body, expression, energy, or presence, Hennessy bases his practice on the notion that ‘the pretend influences the real’. This dance magic is ‘fake’ in the sense that it does not need to refer to ‘real’ mechanisms in order to operate—it produces real effects, regardless of the truth of the narrative frameworks within which it operates, and that is enough to qualify it as a worthwhile object of faith, however ironic or temporary. With Hennessy as with Chauchat, attachment to a score is an *active gift* (more on this

⁷⁰ From the announcement of Keith Hennessy’s workshop ‘Dancing Magic Together’, which took place at Studio 303 in Montréal in February 2020, https://www.studio303.ca/en/_trashed-40/. Accessed 22 April 2020.

term below) which involves both the suspension of disbelief and a certain amount of conscientious projection. In that sense, an affirmative response to the critique of essentialism in dance improvisation might be investing in new stories or ‘temporary beliefs’ which, while not claiming to refer to the true or the natural, nevertheless produce effects, inside and outside the dance studio. In a post-organicist paradigm,⁷¹ adopting a temporary belief would seem to allow for some measure of committed attachment to a score or a dance project, while still retaining the distance necessary for critical agency and, if necessary, for *withdrawing* one’s commitment or consent, for saying ‘no’ or ‘yes, but’.

In his 2011 walk-and talk in Brussels, Daniel Linehan compared the temporary belief to that more definitive artistic position statement, the manifesto:⁷²

I thought this walk+talk would be like an opportunity maybe to develop a manifesto of sorts. But I don’t really have one. But I think the problem is, I have these like temporary beliefs, but they don’t actually stick. And I think for a manifesto you need like something that can have a duration for like more than a year or something. But I want to try on just like a couple of temporary declarations for tonight. (22:10-22:38)⁷³

Qualifying his mobilizing beliefs as temporary, as something to ‘try on’, Linehan moves away from an essentialist position, while nevertheless allowing himself to be moved. The fact that these ‘beliefs don’t actually stick’ doesn’t prevent them from being mobilizing.⁷⁴ But is this a realistic position? Can we really attach or commit to something—a person, a dance, a project, a possible future—in this semi-ironic sense, placing the object of our belief between quotation marks, however heavily or lightly sketched?

In order to begin to reflect on that question, I want to first clarify what I mean by attachment, and precisely which attachment I am proposing to

⁷¹ Bojana Cvejić uses the notion of the ‘organic regime’ to describe the knowledge paradigm of essentialism in dance. Essentialism is ‘organicist’ because it presupposes the existence of an organic, rather than constructed, relationship between the body and movement.

⁷² The walk-and-talk is a lecture-performance format proposed by Phillip Gehmacher.

⁷³ From a video on Sarma.be, http://olga0.oralsite.be/oralsite/pages/Daniel_Linehan/. Accessed 22 April 2020.

⁷⁴ Eleanor Bauer taught me to see *all* choreography as predicated on the adoption of temporary beliefs. Thanks to the Circus Dialogues research group at KASK School of Arts Ghent for the work we did together on temporary beliefs between 2018 and 2020.

consider here. I concur with Lauren Berlant when she claims that “all attachment is optimistic” (2011:1), meaning it bears some sort of promise. Attachment is “the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying *something* that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene” (1-2; emphasis in the original). In that sense, attachment names a relational pattern, a relationship that lasts or a proximity that repeats over time, and so is a concept thought in proximity to commitment, insofar as it frames the things in our environment which are not random, which we care about, things to which we will return again and again. Attachment, therefore, is a key ingredient for building sustainable communities of practice. When discussing attachment to dance improvisation, this is what we discuss: the question of what makes dance improvisation something promising enough to invest in, to return to, to stick with. Historically, essentialist discourses grounded the attachments which kept dancers close to and involved with the project of dance improvisation over the course of years or lifetimes. These discourses framed dance improvisation as a project with a clear promise. They also diagnosed its historical present as a time with a problem: alienation from the self, from the body, from the moment, and from vital energy, if not from nature or truth itself. Without those narrative buttresses to optimism, what keeps dancers caring about dance improvisation? In what sense can dance improvisation still function as an optimistic object, something which points to an attractive possibility or even a reparative mission?

One way of attaching to dance improvisation in the wake of the critique of essentialism would be to attach to the project of critique itself. One might find one’s righteous motivation in the unveiling everywhere of problematic elisions, erasures, assumptions, and ideological importations, ‘placing one’s faith in exposure’, to use Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s phrase (2003:138). This is the critical position that Sedgwick terms ‘paranoid’, and it comes with its own political energy. There is certainly *some* of this going on in practices like Chauchat’s, Hennessy’s, and Linehan’s, in the sense that the ironic or knowing position they take functions implicitly as a critique of those still naïve enough to subscribe to the essentialist dreams of yesteryear. But this is not all that is going on: there is also a sense of making do with what is left in the wake of critique, of getting by and getting on with dancing. As Bauer writes in relation to her own practice:

As a functioning and interacting subject, there is no absolute erasure of bias. As long as we exist within sociality and in relationship to a context, there is no neutral body and no free mind. The improvisatory assumption of avoiding habits just forms habits of avoidance. There is no such thing as deskilling to the point of not having skills. Every undoing leaves fertile ground for another doing to seed. Compost is the richest soil as decay and entropy offers invitation for new orders. (Bauer 2018:20)

While the spirit of critique is certainly alive and well here (particularly in the statement about 'the improvisatory assumption of avoiding habits'), Bauer also makes a kind of transversal move by placing her thinking and dancing within a cyclical temporality of structuration and decay—the time of compost.⁷⁵ As opposed to essentialist narratives, which position dancers somewhat heroically—as the subjects of truth, whose dancing will move the body and the social closer to some kind of naturally-given historical destiny—there is no beginning and end here, no clean slate, and no transcendence of the distortions of culture.

When Sedgwick proposes reparative reading as an alternative to paranoid critique, this is perhaps something like what she has in mind. *Touching Feeling* (2003) can teach us something about living and dancing on after essentialism. Sedgwick uses Melanie Klein's psychoanalysis to propose a vocabulary for relating to, interpreting, and yes, even attaching to the world which is attentive to the difference between attachments grounded in idealization/vilification and attachments built on a sensitivity to the irreducible ambivalence of things. A reparative reading, for Sedgwick, is one which refuses the black-and-white evaluations of paranoid critique, beginning rather from the "authentically difficult understanding that good and bad tend to be inseparable at every level" (2006:2). Given that understanding, the question for Sedgwick is how to "to begin using one's own resources to assemble or 'repair' the part-objects"—i.e., the good and the bad 'parts' of something—"into something like a whole, albeit a compromised one" (2). Could knowing practices of 'magic' or 'telepathy'—always between quotation marks—be understood as performances of repair in Sedgwick's sense, stitching dance improvisation back together to form a compromised, contradictory whole? And if that is the case, do such practices

⁷⁵ For more on compost in relation to heroic narratives, see Haraway 2016. For more on soil in relation to time, see De la Bellacasa 2017.

succeed in constructing dance improvisation in way that is “more realistic, durable, and in that sense satisfying” (2), as Sedgwick’s theory would lead us to expect?

Adjudicating on such a question in a satisfying way would require a scientific effort which falls beyond the scope of this thesis. But it does clarify the stakes here, suggesting a theoretical territory for consideration. What needs to be addressed is the specific quality of such a reparative attachment to dance improvisation. Is this an attachment of moderate, tempered optimism? Is it playful? Is it disappointing, or weak, or depressing: an attachment turned sour, an attachment to be broken? Sedgwick herself warns us of the ambivalent and unstable character of reparative projects, which are, for her, founded on a depressive realization: the knowledge of the inseparability of the good and the bad is depressing for those whose good mood was predicated on vaunting some things as faultless. Once objects cease to appear only good or only bad, those things upon which a glow of ideality was once attendant (for example, dance improvisation as haloed by the aura and promise of the natural) can appear contaminated or even dead. The reparative position is an achievement, a way of moving on from the melancholic, but “the pressures of that founding, depressive realization can also continually impel the ego back toward depression” (2).

In his discussion of care, Jan Verwoert makes a related point. While the attachments animating the improvising dancer might not amount to love in the romantic or erotic sense, they do certainly position dance improvisation as an object or a strategy of care, understood as that face of love that channels energy towards the interpretation of needs and the movements of maintenance or repair (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Verwoert 2009). But, in lieu of essentialist stories about the truth and nature of things, “how do we know what the other wants, what his need might be?” (Verwoert 2009:169). And moreover, how can we be sure that the call to care really was specifically meant for *us*, that we should be the ones to heed it, or that we are qualified to do so? Verwoert frames this problem of undecidability at the heart of care in theological terms: secular lives are unlike those of Christian saints, who receive their ‘brief’ in moments of divine presence—for example, when Saint Francis receives his stigmata, “God shoots rays of laser-like beams through his hands and feet, so he can prove

afterwards that he has the right to care" (170).⁷⁶ This sense of certainty and direct appellation, of being personally called upon to care for or about something and in a specific way, suggests theological vocation as another way of thinking about essentialist attachments to dance, which erase ambiguity or uncertainty by telling a clear story about what must be done and why, as if decreed from on high. Sedgwick's paranoid critic, who is sure of her positioning and simply looks for (and finds everywhere) what she has already decided is problematic, sweeping through the cultural field and disqualifying whole swathes of it, is also in some way endowed with such theological clarity of mission (although, to be fair, few are actually spared from the questions which Verwoert raises—even saints have their moments of doubt). In lieu of divine intervention, and without recourse to essentialist narratives or paranoid, black-and-white judgements, care is a difficult thing, problematic to navigate and to maintain. As Verwoert puts it, "it feels like you inevitably fake you own mandate" (170). Verwoert's analysis of caring attachment in a faithless world re-iterates the depressivity which Sedgwick detects in reparative reading: deprived of the comforts of worship, idolization, or idealization in a strong sense, our relationships of care are necessarily doubt-filled, halting, less than fully committed, or simply prone to periodic breakage.

A strategy of playful irony, temporary belief, and experimentation suggests one way to build attachments to the project of dance improvisation for dancers convinced by the sort of anti-essentialist critiques which I gather together in chapter two of this thesis. But theorists of attachment like Berlant, Sedgwick, and Verwoert teach us to pay attention to the way opening dance improvisation up to multiple meanings and challenging its teleology transforms mobilizing certainty into a more fragile, if more 'realistic' set of shifting attachments. As Bauer's analysis of Chauchat's *Telepathic Dance* suggests, dance improvisation in this paradigm requires an act of appropriation, an effort to 'make it mean something to you', since the meaning of a dance is not stable or given in advance. Thinking attachment this way does indeed pose some problems for the robust ongoingness of a relational field: what does it mean to care for something, knowing that the call of that thing is largely constructed by

⁷⁶ Vervoert refers here to Giotto's painting, *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (1297-1300).

our own efforts of projection, that its optimistic glow is produced in the eye of the beholder?

On the other hand, this variety of attachment, which takes the irreducible alterity and unknowability of the object of attachment into account, does appear positively salutary from certain angles. Kaja Silverman's *Threshold of the Visible World* (1996), for example, is a feminist theoretical project built around precisely this sort of active, non-totalizing idealization, which Silverman terms the 'active gift of love'. In Silverman, the aura of optimism or 'ideality' conferred upon the object of attachment—here a human other, although we could just as well read an non-human object, a project, or a scene in its place—...

...is described as fitting the other more like a draped toga than a luminous skin. Thus, whereas the subject classically prostrates him- or herself before the ego-ideal or its human substitute, to give someone the active gift of love implies assuming a productive relation to him or her. It means not only to 'crystallize' the other, as Stendhal would say—to encrust the other with the diamonds of ideality—but to do so knowingly [...] The active gift of love consequently implies both idealizing beyond the parameters of the 'self,' and doing so with a full understanding of one's own creative participation with respect to the end result. It means to confer ideality, not to find it. (1996:78)

For Silverman, acknowledging the performativity of attachment—that this is something one *does*, rather than something one simply experiences or suffers—is promising in the sense that it allows us to construct relationships which are *not* experienced as all-consuming, inarguable, or inescapable, relationships which are *not* felt as if they were dictated by divine mandate. It also reveals the possibility of thinking politically about attachment: if attachment is as much about the activity of the subject as about the qualities of the object, then perhaps we can be more critical or strategic in our object choices, or at least freer to refuse their call.

Of course, as Silverman admits, it is not as simple as *deciding* to love someone or something: the gift of love has a complicated temporality. For Silverman, "we come to be in an active relation to [love] only after the fact; at a conscious level, in other words, we can only affirm our productivity with respect to what we unconsciously idealize, and thereby desubstantialize the latter in our

waking, if not our sleeping life" (80). After all, the distribution of lovability, of promise, or of optimistic affect is deeply entangled with the cultural production of desire: "the subject more often than not libidinally affirms what is culturally valorized" (80). Nevertheless, the sense in which attachment is always already active—insofar as 'make it mean something for you' is, for Bauer, a good description for the experience of generating dance in general, not only in the cases in which temporary belief is explicitly called for—opens up an important space of potential for the arts. For if individual experiences of loving attachment cannot be fully mastered by the conscious subject, they *can* be manipulated through what Silverman terms 'textual intervention'; i.e., the production of cultural objects which stage new forms, projects, bodies, and scenes as optimistic. Perhaps dance improvisation could be imagined as a technology suited for just this kind of intervention, whereby dancers alternate between staging optimistic objects for themselves (through scoring) and attaching to them (in improvisation).

Throughout this section, I have drawn attention to the many ambiguities and difficulties the critique of essentialism represents for dance improvisation. In lieu of the unambiguous promises and clear articulations of need made possible by various essentialisms, dance improvisation is less readily available as an object of optimistic attachment. The above should not be read as an argument for *rehabilitating* essentialisms within dance improvisation: I firmly believe that the critiques of essentialism levied within the discourse of the biopolitical critique of dance improvisation cannot be ignored. Insofar as Cvejić, Andrew Hewitt, and others have suggested the link between the essentialist claims often made within dance improvisation and a Western metaphysical tradition whose hierarchical dyadic pairings (substance/form, body/idea, writing/speech, woman/man, black/white) have been definitively implicated in the power-laden organization of knowledge and of bodies, the critique of essentialism cannot be simply written off or ignored. Especially in the globalized 'post'-colonial period, politically-conscious approaches to dance improvisation *must* take the non-innocence of notions of the anatomical body, self-expression, living energy, and pure presence, as well as mobility and healing, into account. Given all that, however, it is important not to forget that these narratives, however damaging, also provide dancers with a certain ideological dynamism or ideological energy, which can only be partially substituted by disenchanted or ironic approaches

towards attachment, however much more 'realistic' these attachments might be. After essentialism, dance improvisation exchanges the serious mission of modernization through re-naturalization for a more ambiguous, playful, and experimental approach, a composting more than a sculpting. With that comes a certain potential, but also a certain vulnerability: within dance studies, it is important to keep attachment trouble in mind, especially when championing anti-essentialist critiques in the field. For essentialist narratives have an ordering function, and dismantling them also disorganizes, throwing attachment and signification into crisis: in that sense, an "art of dosages" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987/1980:160) might be required, as well as a thorough consideration of what it means to keep on building attachments to dance improvisation nevertheless.

4.2 Who experiences neoliberalism as therapeutic?

While the biopolitical critique poses a definitive challenge for dance improvisation, it also opens up some important possibilities. Insofar as it destabilizes the meanings habitually accorded to several of the concepts which hold pride of place within the discourse of dance improvisation, it suggests a certain semantic (and by extension material) flexibility, which can also be digested as something promising. In each of the following two sections, I give an example of the way a looser ideological grip can free up a particular subset of concepts for productive re-imagining. In that sense, I rehearse what the production and embodiment of temporary beliefs within dance improvisation might look like from a critical, rather than only speculative or imaginative, perspective.

When researching the critique of therapy, I became interested in the politicized discourses of self-care/healing coming from critical race perspectives. Within the discourse of the biopolitical critique in dance studies, the notions of therapy, self-knowledge, individual autonomy, and self-actualization are basically criticized as depoliticizing. Reading Bojana Cvejić and Ana Vujanović, for example, one imagines the subject of therapy as a contemporary Narcissus, too captivated by the mysteries of their own reflection—and too invested in maintaining their illusion of self-containment and monadic 'depth'—to notice either the plight of the other or their own participation in the reproduction of exploitative processes. But does depoliticization follow necessarily from self-care

as a concept? Or—and I propose this latter to be the case—is the apolitical version of self-care criticized within the discourse of dance studies a particular and contingent decontestation of the term within an ideological arrangement?

Visions of self-care emerging within critical race discourses, which emphasize the importance of personal healing within the context of collective activist struggles, belie any attempt to disqualify therapeutic impulses as necessarily depoliticizing, opening up space for a re-evaluation of therapy, self-care, and healing within dance improvisation and dance studies. In this section, then, I will try to respond to the discussion of therapy and its imbrication in biopolitics which emerged in chapter three of this thesis by asking: who precisely experiences neoliberalism as therapeutic? This question is, of course, rhetorical and in that sense only half-serious, as there would be no need to debate the niceties of neoliberalism if its subjects were, on the whole, feeling good. It serves, however, as a way of getting at some alternative arrangements of the notions of therapy, the individual, and well-being in relation to neoliberalism, which in turn open the door to new understandings of what it might mean to heal through improvisation.

In a 2018 video interview on Afropunk.com, Angela Davis makes the following comments about self-care and political activism:

Anyone who's interested in making change in the world also has to learn how to take care of herself, himself, themselves. For a long time, activists did not necessarily think that it mattered to take care of themselves in terms of what they eat, in terms of mental self-care, corporal self-care, spiritual self-care [...] I think [the Black Panther] movement would have been very different had we understood the importance of that kind of self-care. Personally, I started practicing yoga and meditation when I was in jail, but it was more of an individual practice. Later I had to recognize the importance of emphasizing the collective character of that work on the self [...] it means that we incorporate into our work as activists ways of acknowledging and hopefully also moving beyond trauma [...] It's very dangerous not to recognize that as we struggle, we're attempting to presage the world to come, and the world to come should be one in which we acknowledge collectivity and connections and relations and joy. If we don't start

practicing collective self-care now, there's no way to imagine, much less reach, a time of freedom.⁷⁷

The notions of the physical, emotional, and energetic toll of both oppression and political work itself, and the question of how to recuperate these losses— notions and questions which are central to Davis' thinking here—do not feature within the discourse of dance improvisation, at least as represented within the biopolitical critique. Nor does the 'collective character of that work on the self', which I understand as the sense in which self-care can be a response to collectively-lived experience and a practice which opens up onto a collectively-imagined future. The different meaning of self-care within Davis' semantic horizon suggests that therapeutic practices need not be primarily understood in relation to the self as the leisure-time subject or the integrated creative subject—that is, the self free from political responsibility, given over to a masturbatory expressivity or a consumerist process of self-design. Moreover, the important question of prefiguration which serves as Davis' sign-off here prompts us to think about what sort of affective atmosphere we can hope for in the world and in dance improvisation, warning against a too-quick condemnation of what feels good in the name of political seriousness.⁷⁸

Davis' 2018 comments resonate with the words of Audre Lorde, writing 30 years earlier. Fighting terminal illness as well as gendered and racialized oppression, Lorde wrote: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare [...] Learning to fight that despair in all its manifestations is not only therapeutic. It is vital. Underlining what is joyful and life-affirming in my living becomes crucial" (2017/1988: ebook). Again, there is a connection between an affective state (joy and indeed

⁷⁷ On Afropunk.com, <https://afropunk.com/2018/12/radical-self-care-angela-davis/>. Accessed 25 April 2020.

⁷⁸ It is hard not to think about Emma Goldman, the early 20th-century anarchist who may or may not have once issued the famous challenge: "If I can't dance, it's not my revolution". From *Living My Life* (1931), Goldman's memoir: "At the dances I was one of the most untiring and gayest. One evening a cousin of Sasha, a young boy, took me aside. With a grave face, as if he were about to announce the death of a dear comrade, he whispered to me that it did not behoove an agitator to dance. Certainly not with such reckless abandon, anyway. It was undignified for one who was on the way to become a force in the anarchist movement. My frivolity would only hurt the Cause. I grew furious at the impudent interference of the boy. I told him to mind his own business, I was tired of having the Cause constantly thrown into my face. I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from conventions and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy. I insisted that our Cause could not expect me to become [*sic*] a nun and that the movement should not be turned into a cloister. If it meant that, I did not want it" (Goldman 2008/1931:56).

self-affirmation), a technique of introspective self-monitoring, and 'political warfare'.⁷⁹ In a sense, for Lorde as for Davis, therapeutic care for the self emerges as a strategy for establishing a 'solid base' (Lorde)—psychologically, physically, energetically—for the doubly-taxing performance of political activism and *survival* from a position of structural oppression.

It is probably true that many dancers approach their healing journeys without a sense of political context in mind, and even maybe that some of these healing journeys diffuse energy away from the political in the sense of agitation or resistance for political change. But while the biopolitical stylization of lives and the discourse of therapy is certainly part of how society functions and reproduces itself today—i.e., part of how a change does *not* come—it would be wrong to imagine that the delicate balance that João da Silva discusses (whereby therapy lets us *survive* living "inside the institutions of life"; 2016:130) is indeed being struck evenly and across the board. Frequently, the 'institutions of life' today are just not livable; sometimes, they are even deadly, such that survival, even with recourse to therapy, could itself be understood as resistance.

This is the distinction Achille Mbembe makes in his landmark 2003 article, 'Necropolitics'. Mbembe's term flips Foucault's 'biopolitics' on its head in order to draw attention to an other(ed) experience of the biopolitical. The necropolitical perspective seeks to draw political-philosophical attention away from the "twofold process of *self-institution* and *self-limitation*," suggesting instead that the concepts essential for understanding the contemporary moment—and modern politics more generally—might better emerge by keying into "*the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations*" (2003:13-14; emphasis in the original); that is to say, the sense in which the management and distribution of *death*, and not only the stylization of life, is central to our political culture, particularly insofar as the power of the state extends beyond the geographical nation (warfare and

⁷⁹ The self-monitoring aspect emerges elsewhere in Lorde's text: "Overextending myself is not stretching myself. I had to accept how difficult it is to monitor the difference [... A] kind of power is growing, tempered and enduring, grounded within the realities of what I am in fact doing. An open-eyed assessment and appreciation of what I can and do accomplish, using who I am and who I most wish myself to be" (2017/1988:ebook). Here, introspective self-surveillance and even a sort of economic subjectivity (hinted towards in the question of overextension) serve as the ground for a struggle coded as political (and indeed, in Lorde's case, anti-capitalist and decolonial) such that any clear characterization of either self-awareness or economic subjectivity along ideological lines is foiled.

neo-colonialism), but also with reference to the management of othered bodies living within national borders. Like Davis and Lorde, the notion of race is essential to Mbembe's thinking: referring to Foucault, Mbembe analyzes racism as a technology whose function is "regulate the distribution of death and make possible the murderous function of the state" (7). Here, Mbembe's analysis needs no example: the ones he provides—from the plantation, to the concentration camp, to the more flexible and mobile spaces of death collectively named the 'war on terror'—merely gesture towards the immensity of racist necropolitical violence, past, present, and continuous, whose role in the contemporary geopolitical distribution of power should come as news to no-one.

By invoking race, I do not mean to suggest that the question of self-care as either political warfare *or* depoliticizing narcissism must necessarily be decided with reference to identity categories. Race, class, gender, ability, and other axes of structural oppression *should* be taken into account when we tell stories about embodiment, hurt, and healing, and when we try to locate therapeutic practices politically, but they can never be used to decide definitively on the political valence of such practices (if, indeed, we could ever definitively adjudicate on political goodness). Instead, I want to nuance the critique of therapy that emerges in dance studies by emphasizing the deadly nature of neoliberalism and the necro/biopolitical nexus on which it turns, such that the meaning of self-care is revealed in its ambivalence and polysemy. Forces which shape the subject biopolitically share space with processes that consume life-force at various speeds (ranging from the quick snap of police brutality to the more diffuse wearing-out of what Lauren Berlant terms 'slow death').⁸⁰ For some people, then, techniques of self-care and healing are necessary for survival within an oppressive system. For some people, even ordinary good feeling is an achievement. Within dance studies, we should be critical of those practices which tend to escape scrutiny due to their feel-good factor, but we should also, along with Theodor Adorno, think twice about the "ease with which intellectuals shit on people who hold onto a dream" (Berlant 2011:123), even (and maybe especially) when those dreams reveal ideologically-orthodox 'ordinary attachments' to things like self-expression, self-discovery, self-actualization,

⁸⁰ "The phrase slow death refers to the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence" (Berlant 2011:95).

increased mobility, and a feeling of inhabiting a creative position. Of course, therapeutic practices do paper over what is emotionally, physically, and energetically unsustainable in our societies, providing the possibility of ongoingness in a system which would otherwise run people into the ground. But the rather ordinary desire to *not* be run into the ground, to be able to continue and even thrive within the conditions we find ourselves in, cannot be discounted without implicitly demanding martyrdom for the sake of a political principle (another kind of necropolitics).

To bring the discussion back around to dance improvisation: if dancers feel the need to heal, from whence the injury? A description such as Aneta Stojnić's is productive in this regard:

The consequences of neoliberalism are the labor conditions of permanent precariousness. These are conditions where the majority of subjects exist in the grey zone of being constantly 'in and out of work' and in this way are being pushed into a perpetual system of exploitation (including perverse forms of imposed self-exploitation), expropriation, segregation, racialization and marginalization. (Gržnić and Stojnić 2018:36)

In this characterization, the specific oppressions of racism and other 'marginalizations' are placed in the context of a generalized 'permanent precariousness', a living-in-a-state-of-threat which underlies and unites diverse experiences of neoliberalism.⁸¹ What is important to acknowledge is that dancers come from diverse backgrounds, which means they have diverse experiences of neoliberalism as structurally traumatic, and yet that at the same time they together inhabit that precarious position of artistic worker, which comes with its own traumas. Perhaps by analyzing the nature and economy (again, physical, emotional, and energetic) of dance as work—re-arranging dance improvisation's conceptual furniture so that neoliberalism and work sit closer to therapy, in other words—the therapeutic proclivity within dance improvisation could be re-politicized. For, as Bojana Kunst reminds us, "The more the pleasure of capital is projected into the artist's way of life—in other words, the more artistic life

⁸¹ See Judith Butler's articulation of corporeal vulnerability as a possible basis for a community beyond identity in *Prearious Life* (2004).

represents an obscene excess of economy—the more the artist is excluded from this economy (and thus from life)” (Kunst 2015:150). Surely, this dynamic is at least partially responsible for the continued closeness of dance improvisation and the discourse of healing.

What I am attempting to describe here is an alternative viewpoint, within which dance improvisation as therapy is figured as *resistance* to a system which everywhere and at all times is more a wearing-down than a building-up. It is true that, as Da Silva and other critics so assiduously point out, the qualities trained in dance improvisation can be read as identical to the qualities of a good post-Fordist worker, and dance improvisation aestheticizes these qualities, participating in the shoring-up of their cultural hegemony. But it would be a mistake to think of dance improvisation like a factory for success, either because of the specific qualities it trains, or because it provides the bolstering necessary to continue despite hardship. For if the biopolitical is a characterized by the stylization of life such that lives are both harmonious and productive, today it plays out simultaneously with precarization: that is, the structurally-induced spread of unemployment, partial employment, and job insecurity; the stratification of access to things like housing and health care; and even the dissolution of the illusion of corporeal invincibility for people living in the so-called ‘developed world’ (what Judith Butler calls the loss of ‘First Worldism’; 2004:39). In that sense, precarity, once the province of those excluded from the liberal democratic ‘we’, has been “shifted to the middle of society and normalized” (Lorey 2015/2012:39).⁸² Moreover, with the generalization of precarity (which still does not erase its differential raced, classed, and gendered application) comes a sense of affective disorientation, anxiety, energetic leach, and even despair, linked to both worsening material conditions and the deterritorializing effect of ‘fantasies that are fraying’:

...fantasies that are fraying include, particularly, upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy. The set of dissolving assurances also includes meritocracy, the sense that liberal-capitalist society will

⁸² More and more people, even the privileged, experience precarity as kind of ‘crisis ordinary’ (Lauren Berlant), so much so that a sociologist like Isabell Lorey can now characterize precarization not as an exceptional process or an accidental and unfortunate byproduct of a system which is not yet perfectly inclusive but rather as itself a “fundamental instrument of governing” (2015/2012:63).

reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and that foster life as a project of adding up to something and constructing cushions for enjoyment. (Berlant 2011:3)

In the context of these material and affective environments, it seems unsurprising that people—not just dancers—would be interested in techniques for rhetorically and literally getting one’s feet back on the ground. It is of course true that therapeutic intervention does not get at the root cause of the problem, i.e., neoliberal governance itself (if not capitalism and the ideological blind spots of modernity more broadly). But as Berlant points out, “the structural pressures of crisis and loss [...] are wearing out the power of the good life’s traditional fantasy bribe *without wearing out the need for a good life*” (7; emphasis mine); perhaps it is to this question of living-with or living-on-despite that the therapeutic aspects of dance improvisation speak.

“For me”—Audre Lorde—“living fully means living with maximum access to my experience and power” (2017/1988:ebook). Lorde’s resilience and resolve to thrive in the face of the multiple intersecting oppressions she faced does indeed, on some level, render livable what must be always represented as unlivable: racism, sexism, and class oppression. Perhaps, though, these two elements—the unlivability of life, and the spaces of joy which can open up in the interstices, however temporarily—can be felt, known, and represented simultaneously. Perhaps this can be part of what self-care can come to mean in dance improvisation, too. In the dance field, therapeutic practices could come to be understood as (or could become) techniques through which dancers re-gain the ground to act politically in the first place. In particular, I want to tentatively suggest precarity and precarization as narrative lenses through which practices of self-care in dance improvisation might be linked to collective struggle.

Is discursive contextualization of personal healing within a shared political horizon enough to redeem dance improvisation from the critiques gathered here in chapter three? Perhaps. I think, however, it would be important to avoid casting the assumption of a politicized position as a moral *imperative* for individual dance improvisors, insofar as imagining becoming-political in the genre of the personal decision, and a-political dancing as some kind of weakness of mind or of character, once again saddles the individual subject with responsibility for relieving structural pressures. What if we understood the

therapeutic *neither* as biopolitical stylization *nor* as a moment within a political struggle—or not *only* as these things? What would it mean to narrate therapeutic dance improvisation simply as an “activity directed towards making a less-bad experience” (Berlant 2011:117)? A “relief, a reprieve, not a repair” (177)? To conclude this section, I want to introduce Lauren Berlant’s notion of ‘lateral agency’, which suggests yet another alternative vision for dance improvisation as therapy, this time one which refuses to translate anxieties about the depoliticizing and normative tendencies of therapeutic discourses into prescriptions for what dance improvisation *should* be.

In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Berlant suggestively posits eating—even eating badly—as the scene of ‘lateral agency’ within the context of being worked or worried to death in the 21st-century United States: “Eating can be seen as a form of ballast against wearing out, but also as a counter-dissipation, in that, like other small pleasures, it can produce an experience of self-abeyance, of floating sideways” (116). Dance improvisation taken as an intensive or qualitative movement experience, a moment of ‘self-abeyance’ or pleasurable purposelessness in the midst of a strategically-managed life, could just as well be imagined along these lines. The promise that Berlant senses in ‘floating sideways’ hints at another way of understanding what it is to *avoid responsibility for a moment* within a biopolitical regime that emphasizes the body and life as projects to be lived with “consciousness, intentionality, and effective will” (116). Between the calls to self-actualize on the one hand, and to be critically political on the other—or even to combine the two, as I tentatively suggest above—dancers *and* dance studies writers tend to assume a “melodramatic view of individual agency [...] casting the human as most fully itself when assuming the spectacular posture of performative action” (96). What if feeling good while improvising dancing and enjoying a story about health and self-improvement neither amounted to taking charge of one’s life and discovering one’s truth, nor to neglecting one’s responsibility to be a revolutionary, but rather could be cast as “an activity releasing the subject into self-suspension”, “a kind of self-medication through self-interruption” (115-116)?

With the notion of lateral agency, Berlant is proposing, essentially, an alternative diagnosis for escapism in the context of a regime which keeps us at all times on our toes. For her, discursive representations of those moments in which we are *not* sovereign—“Most of what we do, after all, involves not being

purposive but inhabiting agency in small vacations from the will itself, which is so often spent from the pressures of coordinating one's pacing with the working day, including times of preparation and recovery from it" (116)—are an important antidote to both liberal visions of individual autonomy and the biopolitical techniques of governmentality which hinge upon them.

Understanding therapeutic techniques of dance improvisation through this optic obviously means taking an ironic distance from the essentialist claims about self-actualization which undergird them (or perhaps understanding one's immersion in these narratives as a 'small vacation'). But I think it is an important 'third way' for dance improvisation, which avoids exchanging the obligation to self-design for the obligation to change the world.

Taking politicized notions of self-care within critical race discourses as a starting point, I have sought, in this section, to nuance the stance taken within some dance studies approaches which opposes self-care to political consciousness and action as such, instead taking stock of some alternative configurations of the notions of therapy, the individual, well-being, and neoliberalism. I have also shown the way both therapeutic *and* activist visions of 'good conduct' tell a story about the subject that revolves around intentionality, strategy, and decision-making within a life cast as a project. By complicating the notions of agency, therapy, and the political, I argue against the possibility of adjudicating definitively on the political valence of therapeutic approaches to dance improvisation. Rather, self-care/healing is a conceptual subset with a certain inherent semantic flexibility: by investigating the way that subset is decontested in other critical fields, and placed in relation to other concepts and sets of values, we can begin to imagine self-care/healing as an affirmative object of attachment within dance improvisation, as a temporary belief and a belief constructed through critical study. Self-care, political struggle, race, privilege, precarity, healing, dancing, enjoyment, escapism: unless we want to get bogged down in ideology, these are mobile concepts whose relation to each other can, and should, shift and change.

4.3 What does freedom of movement mean today?

In this section, I linger on the uncomfortable nexus of biopolitics and necropolitics introduced above, shifting the focus towards the spatial implications of such a perspective. I am interested in contemporary approaches to space

which attempt to think about the way space is allocated differentially, such that some portions of the population appear hypermobile (like post-Fordist workers) while others are fixed on the spot (like refugees and the undocumented). The critique of kinetics—particularly as outlined by André Lepecki in *Exhausting Dance* (2006; see chapter one of this thesis)—points out the sense in which the open space of the dance floor is ideologically connected to unobstructedness, thus figuring the privileged fantasy of unobstructed movement and, indeed, the historical crimes of colonial and other ‘clearances’. The refugee and the camp, on the other hand, testify to the sense in which freedom of movement remains, for many, a politically pertinent category. In other words, mobility, space, and freedom are concepts without fixed meanings: mobility is not *per se* innocent or good, but neither can we jettison freedom of movement and the related demand for adequate space to move in as a political claim. By paying attention to the way these same concepts are constellated within other critical discourses, the specificity of the conceptual arrangement diagnosed by the biopolitical critique of dance improvisation becomes apparent: in dance improvisation, space and freedom of movement are contingently, rather than inexorably, linked to self-centered expansiveness, the kinetic subject and the leisure-time subject. As in the last section, my intention here is not to deny the notion that dance improvisation links free-flowing movement to a privileged fantasy of the self—the self as that which unfolds unobstructed across a mute, flattened, or even invisible landscape—but rather, to complicate any interpretations of such an analysis which would extrapolate from it an outright condemnation of movement flow or of any approach to space which prioritizes openness. By turning our attention to space, a more complex and flexible relationship between the concepts of movement, freedom, territory, support, visibility, and biopolitics can emerge: another example of the sense in which dance improvisation is not totalized by the ideological assemblage which constructs it.

In his book *Homo Sacer* (1995), Giorgio Agamben proposes the camp as “the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet” (1998/1995:176). Such an assessment stands in stark contrast to any notion of biopolitics which would choose to emphasize biopolitical optimization and the internalization of control mechanisms, insofar as the camp is the ultimate *external* system of control. Agamben’s analysis is important because, as Mbembe’s notion of necropolitics would do some years later, it expands the scope of biopolitics in such a way that

it can be used to explain the relationship between tendencies which would at first appear at odds with each other, such as the mobilizing force of the labor market and the immobilizing force of the camp. For Agamben, biopolitics refers to the emergence of a “threshold of indistinction between biology and politics” (187), regardless of whether power is experienced as something coming from inside or outside of the subject in any given instance. That is why it is the camp which, for Agamben, represents the biopolitical most acutely: “Insofar as its inhabitants were stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to bare life, the camp was also the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation” (171).⁸³

Conceptualized this way, any easy association between biopower, mobilization, and space falls away. Nor can we rely on a schema which would contrast privileged subjects, who move about in a space of ease, with the excluded, whose space and whose movement are entirely restricted. Agamben’s use of the camp is metonymic, in the sense that the camp as *part* of the biopolitical slowly comes to stand in for the whole, the implication being less about inequality and more about an underlying un-freedom which is also, in some sense, immobilizing. Pascal Gielen’s analysis of nomadic art workers is instructive in this regard: while declaring his discomfort about “the geographical proximity of art biennales and asylum centres”—“The junctions where travel bans are imposed and where travel is encouraged as an ideal way of life lie abhorrently close to one another” (2015/2009:104)—Gielen refuses to simply guilt artists for their callous opportunism and disregard for the political climates in which their work is bought and sold. Rather, he characterizes the art worker herself as a “highly *vulnerable* mobile person” (108; emphasis mine):

The freelancer and the consultant do not just meet with pampering in today’s post-Fordist and neoliberal regime. What’s more, their responsibility is only temporary, and their position dependent on the good will of varying employers. Whether their so-called autonomy, which in fact is an extremely dependent and precarious professional position, allows them to take any political risks is very much the question [....] Their highly individual position, which is not institutionally

⁸³ Agamben is here referring specifically to the Nazi concentration camps of World War II.

embedded and which therefore can hardly count on collective support, is precisely what makes this type of nomad particularly weak in every social and political struggle. (110)

In this sense, there is a kind of underlying continuity between the art worker and the refugee, both of whom are displaced by economy—“economic fugitives are not the only ones who chase after capital” (108)—and both of whom are, in and through their displacement, politically disenfranchised.

By no means are the positions of the art worker (who could also be a dancer) and the refugee comparable or interchangeable. But neither does the artist’s legal status as ‘free’ translate into ‘real’ freedom. Nor indeed do the extreme restrictions placed on the refugee ever truly constitute her as ‘bare life’ (Lauren Berlant’s notion of lateral agency, discussed in the above section, is instructive in this regard). What appears at first as a dichotomy between free and unfree, privileged and excluded, turns out to be more of a continuum, as both refugee and artist are channeled, placed, determined, fixed, and dependent, while *at the same time* always able, while living, to carve out small spaces of potentiality.⁸⁴

What such an analysis points towards is a break in the conceptual bind between freedom, movement, and space. New figures are necessary, then, with which to imagine open spaces of unfreedom and confined spaces of agency. The latter is indeed rocky terrain, as the question of the political effect of representing spaces of confinement such as the refugee camp as anything less than de-humanizing complicates whatever theoretical project might grow up around such notions as lateral agency, ‘innermotion’ (Sutil 2015), or even the furtive or virtual forms of assembly discussed by Judith Butler (2014).⁸⁵ On the

⁸⁴ I realize this is a bit polemic, as Agamben’s argument hinges precisely on the notion of ‘living’ as something politically contestable. I will not go into the limit cases of living or not-living here. I do think, however, that there *is* a difference between refugees and the overcomatose—two examples which Agamben uses to illustrate bare life in *Homo Sacer*—and that this difference has something to do with both the definition of living and the notion of potentiality. Bare life is an interesting rubric for tracking political disenfranchisement, but to claim that the refugee is excluded from *all* political power is also to diminish the everyday forms of resistance which do nevertheless go on.

⁸⁵ Here I am thinking of her comments about resistance in prisons in *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2014): “There are bodies that assemble on the street or online or through other less visible networks of solidarity, especially for prisoners whose political claims are made through forms of solidarity that may or may not appear directly in any one public space, and whose solidarity, when it emerges, rests on a

other hand, the deceptive 'un-free freedoms' promised by certain kinds of hypermobility do deserve our attention, not in the least because an analysis of these spaces might help us make a distinction between movement which is in some important sense *free* and movement which merely covers lots of ground.

If it seems we have lost track of the specificity of improvisation here, I would point back towards section 1.2 of this thesis, wherein I laid out the connection between Lepecki's understanding of the kinetic and improvisation. Because movement in Lepecki doesn't only refer to physical displacement, but actually serves as a conceptual link between physical displacement and creative actualization and manifestation more broadly (the movements of a creative process), Lepecki's understanding of movement is, I argued, essentially improvisational. Movement means the power to leave as much as the power to arrive—it is a simultaneous de- and reterritorialization—and thus can come to represent unfixity or openness, even when it is profoundly choreographed. Lepecki's analysis of movement as a fantasy of freedom *from* responsibility or obligation—a fantasy which ignores movement's cost—has implications for dance improvisation insofar as the improvising dancer, indulging in a dynamic and expansive movement flow, becomes the figure of this fantasy, shoring up an imaginary in which living fully means living expansively and without restriction. In my thinking, it remains the case that dance improvisation which vaunts dynamism, flow, ease, and acrobatic skill stands in problematic relation to the kind of humanisms which would posit such a mode of being as 'natural', and those burdened by obligations towards others as distorted or less-than-fully-realized: it is important that we begin to represent Being as a thick and messy terrain of encounter, rather than a purified space of forward motion. I hope, however, that alternative spatial analyses can help us avoid a situation in which the *dynamic* in dance improvisation becomes automatically synonymous with the *problematic*.

common and forcible exclusion from public space, and a forcible isolation in cells monitored by police or security personnel. This raises the question of what form the freedom of assembly takes when it is explicitly denied as a right [...] The forms of solidarity and action which do emerge in prisons, including hunger strikes, also constitute a form of freedom of assembly, or a form of solidarity implied by such a freedom, and that also needs to be acknowledged as an active form of resistance" (135-136).

To this end, the circuit, the track, or the loop, as it emerges in the work of Jacques Rancière, proves particularly instructive.⁸⁶ Rancière is interested in the way societal stratification today is not only spatialized through enclosure and partition—the camp, the ghetto, the elite university, the members-only club—but also by a more subtle ‘distribution of the sensible’, which implies no such strict spatial partitioning. Society here is “made up of groups tied to specific modes of doing, to places in which these occupations are exercised, and to modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places” (2010/2001:36): the who, the what, the where, and the how are in some important way fixed in place, such that, in this “matching of functions, places, and ways of being, there is no place for any void” (36). This is a vision of space which allows for circulation, but no change or divergence. And indeed, it is in this distinction—between free movement and mere looping or circulation—that Rancière locates the political:

The police is that which says that here, on this street, there’s nothing to see and so nothing to do but move along. It asserts that the space for circulating is nothing but the space of circulation. Politics, by contrast, consists of transforming the space of ‘moving-along’, of circulation, into a space for the appearance of a subject. (37)

What emerges in Rancière is a more topological space of control, giving the *appearance* of flexibility or breathing-room but actually affording no real modification or exit, “like a self-deforming cast that will continually change from one moment to another, or a like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point” (Deleuze 1992/1990:4).⁸⁷ This topological figure helps us think the way that the global *parcours* of the artist, despite its speed and geographical stretch, very well might involve a fair amount of coercion, and well as a relatively strict determination of “the visible and the sayable” (Rancière 2010/2001:37). For the myth of the artist as autonomous and iconoclastic does not account for her precarious position today, nor her obligation to defer to institutional and market norms in return for their invaluable support, without which many artistic

⁸⁶ I actually was introduced to this Rancierian notion in Lepecki’s article, ‘Choreopolice and Choreopolitics’ (2013). While I contrast Rancière’s spatiality to Lepecki’s for rhetorical effect, it seems clear that Lepecki himself has since modified the rather polemic position he takes on flow in *Exhausting Dance*.

⁸⁷ For an alternate account of such spaces of control, see Gilles Deleuze’s ‘Postscript on the Societies of Control’ (1992/1990).

practices—at least in their current form—would be impossible. So while the ‘nomadic’ artist might serve as a figure of freedom in the cultural imaginary, her actual situation in no way supports this characterization. The track, the loop, the circuit: these are *directional* movement-spaces, figuratively *long but not wide*. Speed and agility are not markers of privilege here, or if they are it is a relative privilege, without autonomy and only the thinnest and most threadbare ‘cushions for enjoyment’ (Berlant).

This is not to say that the kinetic subject has ceased to represent a problematic normative aspiration—it has not. Indeed, never before has the single-minded pursuit of individual, corporate, and national projects and pleasures, and the willful denial of their (energetic, environmental, cultural, social, and other) costs, been so definitively a cause for alarm, if not outright panic. But introducing the figures of the camp and the track, loop, or circuit helps us remain attentive to the locations in which *too little* freedom of movement remains a problem, be that the freedom to step outside of a given artistic paradigm or style; to move into a position of opposition or protest; to *stop* travelling, for a month, or a year, or a lifetime; to move non-productively or without intentionality, or in excess of economy; or simply to determine for oneself where (and when) one lives, loves, works, circulates, and tarries. Can we think these kinetic claims and Lepecki’s kinetic subject at the same time, without one cancelling out the other?

In Rancière’s text, he opposes spaces of circulation to spaces for the appearance of a subject. Presumably, the subject is opposed to circulation insofar as she is the subject of political action, interrupting the economy of a certain normative track, loop, or circuit, and thereby “instituting a dispute over the distribution of the sensible” (37). In this sense, Rancière’s spatial imaginary dialogues with Judith Butler’s. In *Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2014), Butler proposes a twist on just this kind of interruptive politics by insisting on the *corporeality* and *collectivity* of the emergent subject who disturbs the daily flow of things: the subject of politics has a social body, and her political power is dependent on a whole mess of material and spatial factors. In other words, Butler reminds us that the political subject is the subject for whom the terrain is *not yet* cleared: on the contrary, often “the fight is for the platform itself” (2014:126), in the sense that being seen, heard, and felt is a matter of arranging and maintaining a space of perceptibility. Political exclusion, then, can

amount to exile from public perception through the restriction of access to public platforms. Thus the question of infrastructure—the “material supports for action” (72)—and differentials of access to that infrastructure move to the center of political theorization:

...we already know the idea that freedom can only be exercised if there is a support for freedom, understood sometimes as a material condition that makes that exercise possible and powerful. Indeed, the body that exercises speech or moves through space, across borders, is presumed to be one that can speak and move. A body that is both supported and agentic is presumed as a necessary condition for other sorts of mobilizations. Indeed, the very term ‘mobilization’ depends on an operative sense of mobility, itself a right, one that many people cannot take for granted. For the body to move, it must usually have a surface of some kind (unless it is swimming or flying), and it must have at its disposal whatever technical supports allow for movement to take place. So the pavement and the street are already to be understood as requirements of the body as it exercises its rights of mobility. (128)

In this sense, apparently mute, inert, and ‘neutral’ features of architectures and landscapes become not only hotly contested sites but even themselves *agents* in political struggle: “the square and the street are not only the material supports for action, but they themselves are part of any account of bodily public action we might propose” (72). The contested street or square significantly re-frame the question of the space of movement: here, the crime of flattened ground is not *per se* the flattening, but rather the processes of exclusion and expropriation that sometimes make it a “struggle to establish that very ground, or to take that ground back from police control” (127). In my analysis, the dance floor could just as easily stand in for the contested city square as for the empty parentheses of colonial erasure—indeed, it is haunted by both simultaneously. As such, the question of how to improvise upon it remains an open question, despite claims that dance has been ‘exhausted’.

As has become apparent in this section, rethinking the space of dance improvisation leads us inexorably back to movement and its relative freedoms. Who can move into and through the space of the political? Who has the right to appear there? At what point does mobility cease to represent freedom and come to represent coercion, and what does it take to move outside of those

hypermobile circuits, or differently within them? And for whom, and in what contexts, does movement remain impossible, even (and especially) in a globalized world? As Deleuze and Guattari remind us, deterritorialization is 'always relative', having "reterritorialization as its flipside or complement" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987/1980:54). In other words, when we break out of our closed circuits, or into the street, or overcome the physical, legal, bureaucratic, administrative, economic, or cultural barriers which one way or another hold us in place, we do *not* emerge into a virgin *terra incognita*—this is Lepecki's important point. With this warning and call to attention in mind: which improvisational constraints are acceptable, even affirmative and necessary, and which are arbitrary and oppressive?⁸⁸ This ungeneralizable query should, I think, ground the way we think about movement space and how to dance within it.

I want to close out this section with one final spatial figure: 'the surround', as theorized by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. Harney and Moten's *The Undercommons* (2013) opens with the Hollywood image of a settler fort surrounded by 'natives'. While "aggression and self-defense are reversed in these movies [...] the image of a surrounded fort is," according to Harney and Moten, "not false" (2013:17). The 'fort'—which here stands in for racialized capitalism—is *indeed* surrounded, and moreover "besieged by what surrounds it, the common beyond and beneath—before and before—enclosure" (17). With the notion of the surround, Harney and Moten draw attention to those practices, spaces, and temporalities which are *not* or *not yet* commodified or overdetermined by capitalism—"a break in the wall here, a shallow place in the river, a place to land under the rocks" (29)—the common 'beyond and beneath' enclosure which bubbles up between the cracks of power, or which bubbles away beneath the surface. Throughout their book, Harney and Moten make reference to those spaces of common living, learning, and planning (the barbershop, the bar, the kitchen, the staff coffee room, certain classrooms) in which the individualizing pressures of *homo oeconomicus* find a moment of temporary reprieve, and wherein individual, privatizing ambition is revealed to be less-than-totalizing. These are the spaces of the surround.

⁸⁸ For more on affirmative constraints, see Lepecki's notion of 'devotion' as elaborated in 'Choreopolice and Choreopolitics' (2013).

As *The Undercommons* unfolds, the 'surround' of the surround turns out to be less in the nature of the surrounded fort and more in the nature of extracellular fluid, which surrounds by interspersing and occupying the gaps. The surround is what the enclosures of capital are bathing in: "We're in a trance that's under and around us. We move through it and it moves with us, out beyond the settlements, out beyond the redevelopment, where black night is falling, where we hate to be alone" (19).⁸⁹ Harney's and Moten's figure serves as a kind of warning against critical descriptions of power which convince us "that we are surrounded, that we must take possession of ourselves, remain in the emergency, on a permanent footing, settled, determined, protecting nothing but an illusory right to what we do not have" (18). For them, this "false image is what emerges when a critique of militarised life is predicated on the forgetting of the life that surrounds it" (17). Instead, Harney and Moten remind us that "even when the election that was won turns out to have been lost, and the bomb detonates and/or fails to detonate, the common perseveres as a kind of elsewhere, here, around, on the ground, surrounding hallucinogenic facts" (18).

In my thinking, the surround is the substrate which tempers all of the other spatial figures that participate in this section—Agamben's camp, Rancière's circuit, Butler's public square, Lepecki's dance floor. While the political issues that these figures highlight are real, the surround reminds us that something else is always going on, too: the social, and lived lives. The binary opposition which some thinkers erect between (revolutionary or reformist) political action and (oppressed or oppressive) passivity is belied by the pervasive *happening* of the surround, that "nightlife which ain't no good life" (19). Both normative and critical politics ...

...threaten the common with democracy, which is only ever to come, so that one day, which is only never to come, we will be more than we are. But we already are. We're already here, moving. We've been around. We're more than politics, more than settled, more than democratic. We surround democracy's false image in order to unsettle it. (19)

⁸⁹ The citation continues: "back inside to sleep till morning, drink till morning, plan till morning, as the common embrace, right inside, and around, in the surround" (Harney & Moten 2013:19).

Bringing Harney's and Moten's insights to bear on the discourse of dance improvisation would mean balancing the insights of critical approaches to the space of improvisation, and the restrictions, fixities, enclosures, and erasures they reveal, with an appreciation for and validation of that which the space of improvisation *does* allow, even if those small allowances do not add up to a program of political change. Within dance studies, the notion of space and the movement potential it holds perhaps gets too often and too quickly bound to the question of the political and its resistance to change. Certainly, the political is part of what is at stake when we theorize about and through bodies and movements. But Harney and Moten teach us that in addition to, besides, under, or around the political and the various regimes it seeks to impose is "actually existing social life" (20), an irreducible lived experience which pairs politicized moments with moments in which we refuse to participate in the mobilizations of politics, in which the call of power or to resist power simply strikes us as irrelevant. "We aren't politics", state Harney and Moten, "We are the general antagonism to politics looming outside every attempt to politicize, every imposition of self-governance" (20). An important reminder as we negotiate the densely-populated conceptual space which the question of space in dance improvisation conjures.

In this section, much as in the last, I took a look at one particular conceptual sub-set highlighted as problematic within the biopolitical critique—that is, space/freedom—and showed some of the ways this conceptual subset does different, more affirmative work in other critical fields. The method that I used here, where new ways of thinking these conceptual subsets emerge not from ungrounded speculation but rather from within other critical discourses, is one way in which the temporary beliefs I gestured towards in section 4.1 might come into use. That is to say, I do not propose *any* approach to space, freedom, mobility, self-care, therapy, and healing as *the* approach, but merely intend to give some examples which actually imply an infinity of approaches, a multiplicity of meanings, and a continual process of re-signification. This way of thinking allows for criticality within the dance field while refusing to stake out a universalized position from which to make totalizing descriptions which amount to new claims to truth. Rather, a more flexible approach is required; one which thinks dance improvisation and the assemblages in which it participates with

care. In what follows, I propose improvisation as one way of thinking about ongoingness in such a scenario.

4.4 Conclusion: What would it mean to improvise a good life?

In this chapter, I have followed the thread of the biopolitical critique of dance improvisation, wondering: if the problematic aspects of dance improvisation emerge in an ideological field—that is to say, if what is problematic about dance improvisation has something to do with the particular way the concepts and practices it mobilizes are fixed in their meanings and stitched together in a characteristic way—what can still be done with the knowledge of improvisation? What sorts of redefinitions and re-arrangements might the biopolitical critique imply? If we take the biopolitical critique seriously (as I propose we do) but also approach dance improvisation from the perspective of care for ongoingness, what remains of dance improvisation to be optimistic about?

In this final section, I propose improvisation as a way of thinking about what it is to manage oneself in relation to a destabilized ideological landscape. I therefore revisit the notion of improvised movement as something which happens both in the dance studio *and* in the context of lived lives. Indeed, one of the most important conceptual challenges the biopolitical critique extends to the field hinges on opening up the notion of dance improvisation beyond the scene of spontaneous movement generation, framed by the temporality of the score or the exercise. In one way or another, all of the thinkers surveyed in chapters one through three of this thesis make their arguments by drawing the link between studio improvisation and the improvisation of lived lives: it is in this manner that the figure of the kinetic subject does its conceptual work, claiming dance improvisation as a process by which a certain biopolitical subjectification is aestheticized, insofar as dance improvisation is read as a representation of a certain kind of life (see chapter one). In the same way, critiques of essentialism in dance improvisation revolve around an implicit understanding of dance improvisation as a field in which certain values and presuppositions are (re)produced, values and presuppositions which neither cleanly emerge from nor remain cloistered within the dance studio but which rather structure the way we think through and perform our lives as they unfold, including while dancing (see chapter two). Therapeutic approaches to dance improvisation, moreover,

explicitly posit improvisatory skills as life skills, and in particular as methods of intervention in the feedback loop of action and perception which guides moving organisms through the world (see chapter three). What this means is that what is problematic about dance improvisation bleeds over into what is problematic about life, and vice-versa. Nevertheless, improvisation as a way of thinking about moving through life is not in itself disqualified by (indeed, it should be *qualified* by) critiques which point toward dance improvisation's ideological blind spots. My point is that improvisation can still productively serve as both a metaphor and laboratory for living lives with some margin of freedom. Here, feminist scholars of affect and Giorgio Agamben form a strange, temporary alliance in order to show us how. In particular, the fading figure of the Good Life—that is, life in the mode of 20th-century bourgeois white heterosexuality—serves as a reminder of just why improvisational skills remain both promising and important today.

Here is Sarah Ahmed on the good life:

...life gets directed in some ways rather than others, through the very requirement that we follow what is already given to us. For a life to count as a good life, then it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. A queer life might be one that fails to make such gestures of return. (2006:21)

The good life, in Ahmed's account, is a kind of traffic system or groove which directs flow, spatially similar to Jacques Rancière's circuit, track, or loop (see section 4.3). The good life is itself a biopolitical trope, a technique for stylizing lives in a particular way; it is an ideological assemblage. What is really valuable about Ahmed's account is her emphasis on the way queer divergences from this particular collective groove land us in trouble. "A 'with'," Ahmed points out, "can be simultaneously mobile and thick. When there are so many, you have a crowd, a thickening, a density. You are carried by that flow: it might even save you energy" (2017:45). In this sense, the good life functions both as a traffic system and a support system: for example, "as long as your choices are different sex (and sometimes more: a suitable match is often same class, same race), your loves can be celebrated collectively, mourned collectively" (46). Outside of these

normative coordinates, on the other hand, the support of the collective falls away, or is no longer so dependable. "The more people travel upon a path, the clearer the path becomes" (46); straying from this path might get you tired, lost, or lonely. This is one way, according to Ahmed, that biopolitical normativities and ideological assemblages do their work—by extending a promise of ease, or of happiness, guaranteed by the support you get from others when you follow the route. Resisting ideological fixity and biopolitical normativity, then, would require something other than pure gumption and inventiveness: it would mean skillfully navigating newness as it emerges in a densely populated context, and building new relations of support at the same time as new forms of life.

In some sense, Ahmed frames the knowledge of improvisation as a queer knowledge, as the set of techniques employed in order to orient oneself when engaged in a process of straying. The difficulty Ahmed tracks here is related to the attachment trouble discussed in section 4.1 insofar as the question of living or building one's life without the comfortable assurances of the good life fantasy revolves around projecting and performing attachments to others and to a future with a pervasive sense of hesitancy, doubt, and not-yet-knowing which can be tiring and produce fragility. But what Ahmed's analysis suggests is that the fragility of the queer, discordant, or experimental life is at least in part due to a social context, in which certain kinds of searching or not-yet-knowing are collectively supported, while others are not. After all, the good life is not a life altogether without uncertainty; it is simply a life in which the disorienting effects of uncertainty are somewhat eased by social rituals of legitimation and recognition, as well as confirming moments in which legal, administrative, and economic frameworks resonate productively and reassuringly with one's felt needs and self-understandings. What rituals and frameworks might be better suited to supporting lives lived with of a sense of agency with regards to what counts as a good life, or even what counts as a life? Lives conceived otherwise than as journeys through fixed points along a line, in which the non-givenness of the concepts which structure lives as meaningful becomes an invitation for experimental practice? Perhaps the techniques that improvisors use for generating movement, for attending to unfolding action amidst a variegated possibility-space, and for orienting themselves within disorienting situations, especially collectively, might serve as a starting point for thinking about social

structures and subjectifications which provide improvised lives with adequate support.

This is not some utopian call—we might need such productions in the relatively short term. The good life, after all, is not only under attack within the rarefied domain of critical theory, or from the perspective of leftist or social activism. Inequality, increasingly vicious competitiveness, expanding unemployment, environmental degradation, and other myriad precarizations under neoliberalism—what Lauren Berlant mildly calls the “retraction [...] of the social democratic promise” (2011:3)— have also, in their own noxious way, contributed to the good life’s impending bankruptcy. For many, if not most of Earth’s inhabitants, the white-picket-fence dreams of the 20th century “now appear to mark archaic expectations of having and building a life” (6), such that we are thrown into improvisation, like it or not. If we give credence to such a description, the 21st century announces itself as the time of the singular being, expelled from any well-trodden path and thus prone to “diverse dramas of adjustment to being postgenre, postnormative, and not knowing entirely how to live” (28).

In its most extreme and hyperbolic iteration, the end of the good life is an opening up of forms of life such that lives are lived as absolute singularities, uninterpretable, referring to nothing but their own being-thus. In *The Coming Community* (1990), Giorgio Agamben fleshes out a theory of just this sort of existence, of being in the light of total incommensurability and singularity, at the endpoint and apogee of both critical insistence on radical difference and biopolitical processes of uprooting, atomization, and un-belonging.⁹⁰ Those who live such an existence are ‘whatever-beings’, beings which are only as they are, “expropriated of all identity” (2007/1990:11) and abandoned in time, “Like letters with no addressee” (6). In his book, Agamben is interested in asking the question: on what basis can such singular whatever-beings enter into political community? In lieu of national, cultural, or ethnic belongings, even in lieu of

⁹⁰ Absolute singularity is of course a kind of limit-case scenario: *The Coming Community* is more of a thought experiment about a possible future than a realistic description of life in the contemporary era. Although it is interesting as a philosophical exercise, I do not think it is necessarily realistic to imagine that anything like what we think of as a human being could actually exist entirely purged of citationality, “expropriated of all identity” (Agamben 2007/1990:11) in a radical sense. Another strange kind of essentialism emerges in the thought of the being which is absolutely itself, without precedent and without reference, purified of the deferrals of the citation.

'biography'—which I take to mean something like without having a common form of life (like the good life) upon which to build sympathy, common interest, or a sense of knowing the other—what would it mean or require to act in concert, to form attachments, to give or receive support? I will return to this question below. For now, I want to insist on the performative or improvisatory quality of lives lived in an open relationship to form by noting the way improvisation is explicit in Agamben's description of whatever-being. "The individuation of a singular existence is not a punctual fact" (19), Agamben claims. Rather:

The being that does not remain below itself, that does not presuppose itself as a hidden essence that chance or destiny would then condemn to the torment of qualifications, but rather exposes itself in its qualifications, *is its thus* without remainder—such a being is [...] *continually engendered from its own manner*. (28; last emphasis mine)

What is characteristic about whatever-being is not its essence but its *manner*, its "modality of rising forth" (28). As whatever-being passes from potentiality into actuality, it follows the rule of "usage—or rather, *ethos*" (20; emphasis in the original), conforming not to a set of forms but rather adhering to a performative principle, extending itself through time like a "line of writing" (19). Agamben makes it clear that, after normative forms of life, being is a doing, governed more by creative principles than by aesthetic conventions. Without being able to answer the question: 'what are we, now and in the future?' we are forced to think instead in terms of an ethics or merely a good-enough practice of processes of emergence.

It is important to remember here that doing-as-being is not only a laudable, creative, or emancipated state: it is that, or has the potential to be that, but it is also and maybe primarily the reality of those "feeling forced to take on living as a practice" (Berlant 2011:62) due to the *failure*, never mind the transcendence, of long-standing narratives detailing what it means to live well and how. Berlant urges us, therefore, to consider those aspects of improvised living which are not in the first place about creative (self)actualization, but which amount more accurately to "experimental modes of staying tethered to life" (57). If the "conditions of reciprocity that ground how to live and imagine life are becoming undone in ways that force the gestures of ordinary improvisation

within everyday life into a greater explicitness affectively and aesthetically" (7), then improvisation is as much about "gathering up diverse practices for *adjusting* to the singular and shared present" (57; emphasis mine) as it is about living one's life in the modality of rising forth like a line of writing. 'Affective adjustment' and 'intuitive rehabilitation' (Berlant's formulations)—the construction of ad-hoc, provisional, interpretative frameworks as last-ditch coping strategies—is, according to Berlant, just as much a part of postgenre life building as is the act of the radical rejection of or departure from conventional meaning-making. Berlant's analysis cautions against a slippage whereby the semantically and materially precarious are read as heroic, singular iconoclasts: for her, "the ongoingness of adjudication, adaptation, and improvisation" (54) needs to be described, but *not* because it characterizes forms of life which are ideal or liberated.

Improvisation within a life, therefore, is not only what moves us forward; it is also what characterizes life lived in the impasse, that "time of dithering from which someone of some situation *cannot* move forward" (4; emphasis in the original):

the impasse is a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help clarify things, maintain one's sea legs, and coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event. (4)

In other words, improvisation in the context of a precarized life might not feel like progress, or creativity; it might feel instead like coping, like the effort it takes to discern the outline of a least-bad option amidst a yawning palette of vague or altogether inscrutable potentials. Improvisation, then, has something to do with *reading*: it might be understood as the skill of sensing what is required, of taking the temperature of an atmosphere and organizing oneself accordingly, especially when the situation one finds oneself in denies the comforts of genre.

Moreover, while the notion of building an improvisational literacy or some sort of steering technique for getting through and making do with the impasses

of the present might threaten to lead back to the problematic terrain of *homo oeconomicus*, or the self in the guise of the manager, this need not necessarily be the case. For what is problematic about *homo oeconomicus* and the notions of self-awareness and self-control set out in chapter three of this thesis is in large part the atomized and sovereign fantasy of the self which such ideological features both shore up and depend upon. Skilled navigation of disorienting scenes, atmospheres, environments, and situations need not imply a unified subject at the helm, nor a weighing up of pros and cons in the style of a manager. Indeed, it is interesting and hopeful to note within in a paradigm like Teresa Brennan's in *Transmission of Affect* (2004)—which as a matter of course admits of no such atomized self-containment—that conscious discernment, concentration, attention, awareness, comparative weighing-up, and even the education of feeling can still name salutary potentials, despite their Enlightenment baggage and their historical association with the subject of rationality (and later the subject of management).

How so? *Transmission of Affect* is a project dedicated to tracing the ways in which individualism is predicated on the suppression of the knowledge of our affective permeability. While, in an essentialist mode, we tend to think of emotion and feeling as something which belongs to the individual, and even which reveals something about her and her truth, Brennan argues instead for a consideration of the “the energetic level at which we are not separate from others—the level at which my affect enters you and yours, me” (2004:14). Rather than a self for whom the skin represents a border between body and world, Brennan emphasizes our affective permeability, quite literally: “Affects (via hormones and other means of projection and reception) are carried in the blood, and with them is carried the presence of the other and the social in the system” (139). This dynamic of permeability on the level of affect lends theoretical heft to Berlant's emphasis on debilitating environments and atmospheres: if we are sometimes so viscerally thrown off course by a change in context, that is because context literally *enters* us and makes itself felt from within, chemically as well as in a more subjective sense.⁹¹ Brennan presages Berlant when she writes about the present as a historical moment of debilitating affective swamping, a period in which “negative affects increase especially in

⁹¹ Brennan memorably argues that we “imbibe each other via smell” (2004:10).

relation to the present global economy, and [...] the physical toxicity and stress of daily life in the West" (22). But Brennan places the emphasis of her analysis elsewhere: rather than tracking or building an archive of affective adjustment, Brennan chooses to analyze the epistemological, social, and embodied effects of the denial of affective transmission itself.

Today, the endemic nature of depression, anxiety, attention deficit disorders, and other affective maladies has started to become a matter of public knowledge and public concern. Still, these conditions are often mapped onto private biographical narratives, rather than being somehow 'in the air', contagious in the manner of infection diseases. Brennan argues, on the other hand, that affect is indeed transmitted, and that the extraordinary surge of disorienting negativity which leaves so many struggling to cope in the 21st century is not only due to harshening economic realities. Negative affect accumulates so efficiently today, Brennan claims, in large part due to our insistence on the "illusion of self-containment" (118), such that the dynamics of affective transmission are concealed. Instead of understanding negative energy as something we are stricken by, we tend to expel it by projecting it on others, or introject it as depression, as if negativity were our own production or essence.

In contrast to this dynamic, Brennan comes out in favor of practices of discernment, or "considered sensing" (94), through which the circulation of negative energy can be stopped, controlled, or even managed. Discernment "works by sensing (touching, hearing, smelling, listening, seeing) and the expression of the senses, particularly in words" (120). Discernment is therefore a technique of attention which works both through feeling *and* through deduction, predicated on pointedly eschewing any mind/body dualism. Discernment means examining one's own feelings with a sense of detachment, wondering: where did this feeling come from? such that the turbulent swirl of affect emerges as that which we bathe in, as well as that which we are. It also means sometimes choosing, as best as we can, to halt the circulation of negative affect, as a gesture not only of self-preservation but also as care for one's environment. If this sounds old-fashioned and moralistic, that is because it does indeed owe something to "religious codes and codes of courtesy" (122): Brennan says practices of affective discernment are more widespread in "cultures and historical periods that are more inclined to take transmission of affect for

granted, that is to say, are more conscious of it" (11).⁹² But a religious or moral framework is not a necessity here: simply becoming conscious of the way we build energy and therefore creative power together, and letting go of the contemporary habit of identifying strongly with one's own feelings, could be a first step to reviving practices of discernment which might allow us to live together better, especially when the traffic patterns and support systems Ahmed describes start to dis-align and come apart.

In *Transmission of Affect*, Brennan's focus falls squarely on energy circulations between humans.⁹³ But clearly, material non-human others like plants, animals, buildings, books, and streets, as well as incorporeal others like economic systems, data, and narratives, also play their part in affective transmission. Discernment is one way of thinking about improvisatory practices of reading and acting within these kinds of heterogenous environments that retains a sense of deciding agency while dispensing with the self-contained subject. Moreover, it hints towards the kind of vocabulary which a reflection around improvisation as the modality in which lived singularities rise forth could begin to articulate. For discernment is precisely the kind of principle which might be useful for shaping improvisatory lives, lives lived in an open relationship to form: it is an ethos, a technique of sensing and understanding, a particular literacy or manner which guides and provides support to processes of living but does not impose anything like a deterministic content. Dance improvisation, as a field in which the relationship between perception and action is examined, honed, experimented with, and performatively enacted, could be a site for the elaboration and development of embodied techniques of affective discernment, as well as other vocabularies for supporting singular forms of life.

Thinking about improvisation as a way of naming what happens when we step outside of normative, good-life frameworks brings us back, in some sense, to the improviser as a figure of freedom. If improvisation is what we must do when we abandon the good life fantasy, then improvisation *does* have something to do with agency, with a refusal of constraint and a certain creativity. But this

⁹² Brennan notably makes link between discernment as she proposes it and meditative traditions in philosophy: "awareness of the struggle with affects or passions runs as long as the meditative tradition in which the faculty of concentration has been pitched in battle against the sources of distraction" (2004:117).

⁹³ Although Brennan readily admits of the affective qualities of non-human others like cities—"Visitors to New York City or Delphi testify happily to the energy that comes out of the pavement in the one and the ancient peace of the other" (2004:8)—this sort of exchange falls outside of the scope of her book.

freedom looks very different to the freedom of the kinetic subject as discussed by André Lepecki (section 1.1). In other words, read through the lens of impasse, discernment, and affective adjustment, the freedom of improvisation is decontested differently. Here, the improvised path through life might be undetermined, but it is *not* the willful creation and expression of a solitary sovereign subject. The space of improvisation is thick, atmospheric, and populous, a swirling and seething energetic terrain where the subject is never fully in control. While pockets of agency do open up, these are relative and require negotiation with myriad others, such that they sometimes feel liberating and energizing, but also often disorienting or even draining. An analysis of forms of life which starts from the bankruptcy of the good life fantasy suggests that dealing with the problems of living together in the contemporary world might indeed require rehearsing improvisatory skills, but specifically skills which *don't* reproduce fantasies of freedom *from* others, avoiding any conflation of improvisation with ease.

What is urgent, moreover, is a recognition of the fact that improvised movement, or movement outside of normative coordinates, still requires support. In an improvised paradigm, the straight and narrow path is also that which is lost, and being able to continue in the thicket or in the dark is largely dependent on what kinds of support are available to us. As Sarah Ahmed states:

What happens when we are knocked off course depends on the psychic and social resources we have behind us. Such moments of being thrown off course can be experienced as a gift, as opening up a possibility; or they can be traumatic, registered as the loss of a desired future, one that you are grasping for, leaning toward. (2017:47)

Dancing or living in a way which suspends the given—whether that given be a future, a form, an aesthetic, a teleology, an ideology, or simply set of choreographed steps—also suspends, to some extent and perhaps only momentarily, the optimistic attachments which keep us tethered to life and to ongoingness. The socially, psychologically, and materially privileged can afford these moments of impasse, in which, for them, the possibility of building a more livable life opens up. But what of those who depend on old fantasies for support, or who do not have the resources for improvisation at their disposal? As Berlant asks, “Can a person on the bottom *survive* living ‘life’ stripped of the illusion of

indefinite endurance via whatever kinds of fantasmatic practices he's been able to cobble together" (2011:40-1; emphasis mine)? These differentials remind us to be cautious in vaunting improvisation as an individual emancipatory gesture, or something which those who 'really live' do.

On the other hand, the assurances of ideology are indeed failing, and more and more people are forced into improvisation, navigating that for which an ad-hoc plan needs to be made and in which a way forward can only be sensed and intuited, whether or not they are equipped for the task. In an era in which normativities of all kinds have become the object of debate, and the promises of public and private life hold less and less water, epistemological certainties give way to 'dramas of adjustment' (Berlant) which leave us reeling or at a loss. In that sense, improvisation and the knowledges it generates might remain an important tool for rethinking and supporting collective living on, even after the disillusionments of the biopolitical critique.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have asked the question: can dance improvisation be understood as a support for collective living-on under conditions of epistemological uncertainty and material precarity? While the theorists of the biopolitical critique argue that dance improvisation is an aesthetic component of the dominant ideology, that the discourse of dance improvisors reveals ideological commitments to problematic essentialisms, and that the affective atmosphere of healing which cloaks dance improvisation obscures the power relations which are nevertheless at work, I have demonstrated that, indeed, dance improvisation is not exhausted by these critiques.

My analysis undoubtedly reveals much about my own ideological location. It is underscored by investments of hope in collectivity, in ecological thinking, and in conceptual flexibility. It is powered by the conviction that certain long-standing power structures must fall: white supremacy, coloniality, patriarchy, the class system, the 'free' market. Most of all, it is motivated by an attachment to collective survival and to ongoingness, beyond the scope of nationalistic, identitarian, or even species categories. In 2020, these are, for me, the coordinates of a possible optimism, given the state of society and the planet. But if this thesis has demonstrated anything, it is that ideologies can and must shift, as the promises of one generation become the problems of the next. Over and above the specific conceptual de- and reterritorializations I have proposed, there is also a more general insight which emerges here about the potential for change inherent in ideological assemblages and the importance of exercising that potential.

By showing how dance improvisation becomes motivating and meaningful by selecting some concepts as central and others as peripheral, by organizing specific conceptual relays and blocking others, I have emphasized the sense in which physical practices—including the physical practice of living—take shape not within some kind of 'pure' materiality but rather at the messy and multifaceted point of intersection between material reality, the discourses of specialized groups (like dancers), and the larger material-discursive environment in which physical practices are embedded. In other words, I have argued that it

is important to pay attention to the language we use to narrate and to plan improvised dancing and living because that language tends to close down certain possibilities while opening up others, making certain things visible, sayable, and doable while condemning others to obscurity, in ways which are not politically innocent. By analyzing the mechanics of this selection within dance improvisation, the biopolitical and ideological valences of the field come to the fore, such that they can be scrutinized, discussed, and adjusted, not just once but again and again. This openness to change, particularly on the basis of arguments which point out what is not yet included in a world view or which conceptual relays have been suppressed, seems promising as way of beginning to think embodiment as an open (ethical) question.

In *Of Hospitality* (1997), Jacques Derrida argues that an attitude of openness towards otherness—towards the repressed, the oppressed, the neglected, or the excluded—needs to be continually re-performed, as the practical limits of hospitality always fall short of the ideal of radical inclusivity the concept points towards. In my reading, Derrida’s analysis gestures toward a more fundamental insight about meaningfulness; to wit, that meaning-making always involves selectivity and therefore exclusion, no matter how inclusive our intentions are. In that sense, we never arrive outside of ideology, outside of injustice, outside of the problematic of living together on a damaged planet.⁹⁴ Put in other terms, deterritorialization is ‘always relative’, having “reterritorialization as its flipside or complement” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987/1980:54). In that sense, copping to my own ideological commitments doesn’t delegitimize the work I have done in this thesis, but it does leave the door open for the de- and re-territorializing process to continue.

It is one thing to exchange one ideology for another. It is something quite different to do so as a way of demonstrating the flexibility of ideological assemblages in general, and as an invitation towards continued experimentation. What kind of object is dance improvisation, once its ideological fixity has come undone? Perhaps dance improvisation is a collective process, a methodology which continually re-thinks itself. Perhaps it is an open invitation to experiment with the relationship between embodiment, thought, space, and time. Perhaps it is a conceptual reminder of the complexity of agency, of the push-and-pull

⁹⁴ With reference to Haraway 2017.

between freedom and determination. Perhaps it can be all of those things, and more. My intention in this thesis has been to think improvisation in relation to uncertainty, to epistemological unfixity and material precarity. In conclusion, I propose to leave improvisation itself unfixity, uncertain, in process, without teleology, 'like a letter with no addressee'.⁹⁵ In my analysis, it is only in this formless form, in the shape of an invitation rather than a command, that dance improvisation can respond adequately to the difficulties of the present moment.

⁹⁵ With reference to Agamben 2007/1990.

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