Title of the article: THEM:ME:US;
EXPLORING THE SYNERGIES BETWEEN COLLABORATIVE CHOREOGRAPHY AND DEMOCRACY

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THEM:ME:US
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Abstract

This article explores the layers uncovered within the collaborative dance-making process of *Them:Me:Us*. Utilizing a practice-led methodology, this research is an investigation of the research question: How might I facilitate a collaborative choreographic process that explores notions of a choreographic democracy? This article focuses on four key elements that correlate to a political democracy: relationship, communication, process and values. It suggests that a layering of these elements enables dancers to shift traditional understandings of hierarchical power in the dance-making process and allows the collaboration to move collectively with ideas that might not be discovered alone. Collaborators can be creatively connected and feel safe in offering their voice, their stories and their realities into a dance-making process and thus enact a process that may enhance and deepen skills that facilitate collaboration and perhaps, democracy.

Keywords

Democratic collaboration; Dance-making; Choreographic process; Power relations; Dancer engagement.

Biography

Joanna Cook is a dance artist, researcher and teacher that worked internationally for over ten years and is now based in New Zealand. Joanna is a Masters student at the University of Auckland, Dance Studies Programme where her research interests centre around choreographic processes, power relations, feminist practices, multi-modality and writing in the expanded field. The research findings within this article were collected over her Post Graduate Diploma semester where she researched tools for shifting power relations between dancers and choreographer within a collaborative dance-making process.

Prologue

This article explores the practice-led research project *Them:Me:Us.* The intention of this project was to unpack the question: How might I facilitate a collaborative choreographic process that explores notions of a choreographic democracy? Facilitating a creative exploration within narratives of lineage, specifically focusing on matrilineal genealogical inheritance resulted in *Them:Me:Us*. *Them: Me:Us* manifested as a dance-making process and it is this process that I will refer to as the practical data for this research. The *Them:Me:Us* process has been documented by video and curated in a trailer (2019) as well as the initial development of a live work (not yet performed), a multimodal archive journal (2019), and an academic thesis (2019). The process is ongoing, unfolding in new ways through this research and thus will be referenced as "*Them:Me:Us."*

Them:Me:Us as a whole artistic and scholarly project is nestled within the field of practice-led research (Candy, 2006), which allows the uncovering of new notions of knowing through praxis (Kratochwil, 2018). Loehr (2015) adds that "by adopting a Practice-led Research model, the artist is able to communicate the entire artistic process within the realm of research" (p. 21). This unpacking and scholarly presentation of the work is still part of that artistic process, and by reflecting I am able to continue the notion of "laying down a path in walking" (Varela et al., 2017, p. 237). In this article, I will be utilising Butterworth (2004), Knox (2013) and Foster (2017) to weave together my understanding of a strong collaborative choreographic foundation. *Them:Me:Us* will further ground my understanding by providing vivid examples of the challenges and successes cultivated through the development of this process.

Them:Me:Us explored ways of dismantling hierarchical notions of traditional academic methods of an authoritative choreographer giving instructions to subordinate dancers by stepping instead into an approach to dance-making wherein participants seek to share authority and thus decision-making power. Though the academy gave dance practitioners a range of "methods, techniques and definitions that were once in the vanguard but are now considered the donnees of the art" (Barnes, 1981, p. 100), this project takes inspiration from movement artists such as Judson Dance Theatre, a group of artists who did not reject the '*donnees'* but instead, " freely sampled, borrowed, criticized, imitated, satirized, and subverted them" (Banes, 1981, p. 100). Judson Dance Theatre was made up of a group of choreographer/dancers, composers, and visual artists who performed at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, Manhattan New York City between 1962 and 1964 (Banes, 1981). Their work began a political shift in the dance world as the group was committed to "democratic methods and to the complex collective process led to choreographic modes that seemed to stand metaphorically for freedom" (Banes, 1981, p. 104). These dance makers were pushing back against the institution (academic and political) by creating new ways of working together. *Them:Me:Us* continues this pressing.

I recognise that this project is situated within a time where notions of democracy are being threatened as extremist leaders gain power and undermine that nature of democracy. Michael Abramowitz, president of Freedom House, a U.S.-based organisation that researches democracy, political freedom, and human rights, asserts that

these leaders are damaging democracies "through their dismissive attitude toward core civil and political rights, and they weaken the cause of democracy around the world with their unilateralist reflexes"(2019, para. 10). In a time when notions of democracy and the integrity of the institution of democracy are being questioned (and threatened), it seems pertinent to explore ways of moving notions of democracy out of the theoretical realm and into the everyday. *Them:Me:Us* explores democratic processes in action, focusing on specific dynamics, elements, and consequences.

Discovering the site

What is a choreographic democracy? Is it possible? How might it be practiced? Could a 'choreographic democracy' be a framework for describing what I was attempting to create with *Them:Me:Us*? These questions first require an exploration of democracy as a process. Democracy may be understood as a frame for engaging citizens to deliberately participle in decision-making processes (Issacharoff, 2008; Sorensen, 2018). Citizen participation invites perspectives and information that experts may not have (Rocha Menocal, 2014). If citizens are actively involved in decision-making, they could have an empowered sense of ownership over the outcome (Graves, 2010). Samuel Issacharoff (2008), an American law professor whose work focuses on constitutional law, voting rights and civil procedure offers that through participation citizens hone skills as well as develop attitudes and confidence by actively engaging their point of view. Citizens learn how to navigate across difference and diversity which in turn may strengthen their voice and empower the individual (Issacharoff, 2008). These seem useful skills for dance-making as well.

I realise the framework of a political democracy and the sphere of a choreographic democracy may not be exactly the same. However, I see that there could be synergies between these processes. One of the foundational philosophies of both practices is the "innate worth of the individual" (Parks, 1953, p. 113). For *Them:Me:Us*, we developed and worked with an understanding of democracy in accordance with leading researchers as well as our own notions of what it might mean for dance-making (Dahl, 1998; Daly, 2002; Graves, 2010; Issacharoff, 2008; Rocha Menocal, 2014; Sorensen, 2018; Wise, Buck, Martin, & Yu, 2019).

Further similarities that resonate with both political and choreographic democracy, as reflected in *Them:Me:Us* include our discovery and pursuit of four key elements: Communication, Process, and Values, all under an umbrella of Relationships. These four key elements could be described as the foundational principles upon which *Them:Me:Us* sat. While they are distinct layers, they were all happening within the dance-making process simultaneously.

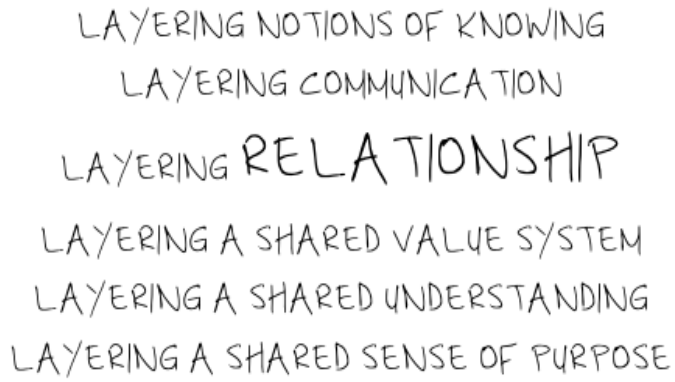
The frame of democracy and the four key elements are utilized in exploring the complex layering of *Them:Me:Us* as a multimodal creative process involving generative movement and written contributions, the development of a shared aesthetic/dance idea, as well as the enactment of shared authority and decision-making power by all collaborators in the group. There is the potential to explore how complicated, multi-layered, and often messy collaboration can be, whether inside a political or creative process. In this article, I will explore how the shifts in power and the fluidity of layers provoked an unravelling within *Them:Me:Us*. Further, I will excavate some of the challenges that arose within the choreographic process and how parts of 'what happened' could align with a democratic framework.

The conversation highlights that led to the unearthing of these elements

During the process of *Them:Me:Us,* I encouraged my collaborators to engage in conversation and reflection, through individual written reflections or verbal exchange. This was significant because of my collaborators' positions as 'citizens' (Graves, 2010; Issacharoff, 2008; Rocha Menocal, 2014), and the recognition that their voices were essential in the process. Conversations arose at multiple times throughout the rehearsal period; priority was given to these conversations as they were fields for questions, musings and views to be exchanged. We engaged in many conversations about collaboration: what it is, what it needs to function, what each collaborator needed, and what might result.

It consisted of coming together and engaging in the sharing of actual life experience from outside of the studio.
Of communication and collaboration.
What is collaboration?
Collaboration happens on different levels.
Collaborating, but still looking to the facilitator for direction.
Facilitating collaborators to be themselves.
The balance between collaboration and the sense that this is 'my' dance-work.
Where is the blurring of the line?
How much does each person have to bring into the group for it to be collaborative?
The process is directed by someone, but to what extent?
Each person steps out and that role is shared and used to make the creative decision.
The foundation of shared understanding has been built quite quickly.
The building of community and the building of shared understanding does not come from dancing next to each other.
If we were going to put something on stage, it could develop quite quickly because of the foundation and shared understanding.
A shared trust and a shared knowledge are built through other layers.

These conversation highlights led to the culmination of understanding that there is power that exists in preconceived understanding of the roles of and relationships between dancer/choreographer/collaborator and that shifting or dismantling traditional power hierarchies (Barbour, 2008; Butterworth, 2004; Newall & Fortin, 2012) is possible when experimenting with and making through the multiple layers of a creative process and the resultant dance-work.



It seems pertinent to invite collaborators into an understanding of the core essence of the dance work. The core essence refers to the fundamental threads that create the heart of a dance-work. These threads can sometimes feel intangible and difficult to language but as a facilitator beginning a dance-making process I have an idea of what the core essence is. In a collaborative process the core essence may grow and shift as views, opinions, and insights are shared. Still, by weaving the layers with an understanding of the core essence the collaborators may create a solid foundation, roots, upon which a dance-making process can settle and from which a dance work can grow.

The creation of space

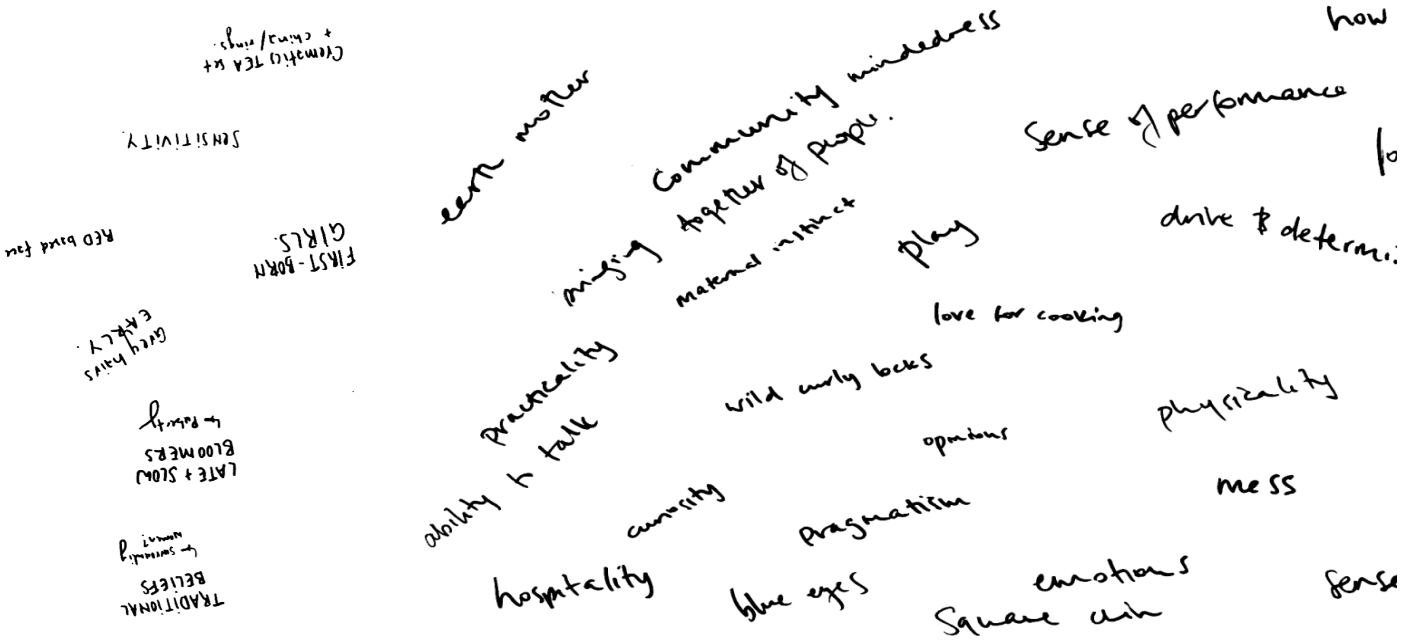
Considering where to begin a dance-making rehearsal that sets out to employ choreographic democracy prompts a myriad of questions ranging from the mundane to the very philosophical. Given Communication, Process, and Values all under the umbrella of Relationships, how much time do we dedicate to getting to know each other? Knowing that these key elements are paramount to engaging in democracy, does personal sharing then become an implicit part of the creative process? It is clear from the outset that how each participant may interpret the elements of democracy in the sculpting of our dance-making environment is a delicate balance.

Dance can be both a dynamically social environment and a political space. In *Dancing Democracy* (2002) Ann Daly suggests that this could be due to the constant shifting of energy, relationship, process, and practise. Within both a dance-making process and a political democracy setting up parameters, the way in which people are invited into participation in the process and the creation of a shared understanding as to how the process will run, is vital. Collaborators need to be able to discuss the values, methods, and expectations by which they hope to engage, and together create a process for how rehearsal will begin and unfold.

In facilitating and leading *Them:Me:Us*, my understanding of democracy included the expectation of shared decision-making with collaborators (Graves, 2010; Issacharoff, 2008; Parks, 1953; Rocha Menocal, 2014; Sorensen, 2018). I gave priority to cultivating relationships, believing that the way collaborators reacted and interacted was pivotally important to developing a choreographic democracy. This was enacted from the outset on the first day of rehearsal:

> *Journal Entry - 5 August 2019.*
>
> *...I felt the full weight of being the 'carrier' of this project and the 'all eyes are on me' feeling surfaced. Both of my dancer collaborators were there when I arrived and seeing their faces calmed the inner storm for a moment. The normal 'how are you's' were exchanged and though I knew both of the dancers, they didn't know each other. So, a round of introductions turned into a 45minute introduction to each other's lives* (Personal Journal Entry, 2019).

During this first conversation with the collaborators, I had moments of stepping out of the present as I felt the inner pull toward the need to 'achieve' something, to make something happen, to dive in and get started. Interpersonal communication and leadership style theorists Penley and Hawkins (1985) suggest that my desire to 'make something happen' could align with a "task-oriented" leadership style (p. 322). Still, by allowing the conversation to take its course, I rather enacted a "human-oriented" leadership style (Penley & Hawkins, 1985, p. 322). I noticed that this approach created an awareness of the important role that communication plays in relationship building (April,1999). The dancers did not seem overly concerned with the duration of the conversation and eventually it occurred to me that perhaps this conversation was the important first layer of creating Relationship. I had invited these women into a process that I hoped would invite an unpacking of the narratives that make us who we are. Thus this 'sharing of self' conversation seemed to be generating the first layer of a sense of unity and of building trust.



Them:Me:Us placed value on the flow of conversation between collaborators without hindrance and by encouraging them to express their views and opinions. As Daly (2002) offers, the dance space may already operate as a civic space, we just need to recognise it. She adds that a civic space is "a communal space where feelings can be shared and meaning generated" (p. 9). *Them:Me:Us* rehearsals purposely included time for sharing views and opinions. This time allowed the discovery of communal feelings which, as Daly pointed out, could be the beginning of the creation of a shared value system. If the dance-making space is likened to a civic space, how is that created and facilitated? Could this be linked to the way collaboration is understood?

The place of the pen + The stories self

Within the process of *Them:Me:Us* some of the tools that provided a scaffolding for collaborators to express their personal views and opinions, create a shared language and generate collective meaning included*: creative writing, stories, and generating movement.* I stepped into the process of *Them:Me:Us* with the intention of incorporating creative writing into the process. In the first rehearsal we engaged with a task that asked: *What do you feel you have inherited from your matrilineal line?*

Instead of expecting a verbal answer from collaborators we wrote together on a large piece of paper. This activity offered the opportunity for us to sit with our own thoughts as well as time for ideas to surface, thoughts to process and choices to be made regarding what to verbalise onto the paper. After the writing activity, questions surfaced, and layers began to unfold: Questions like: *What are things you feel you have inherited that you don't want? Postures? Movement patterns? Behaviours?* shaped the development of our ideas and thus the movement that emerged.

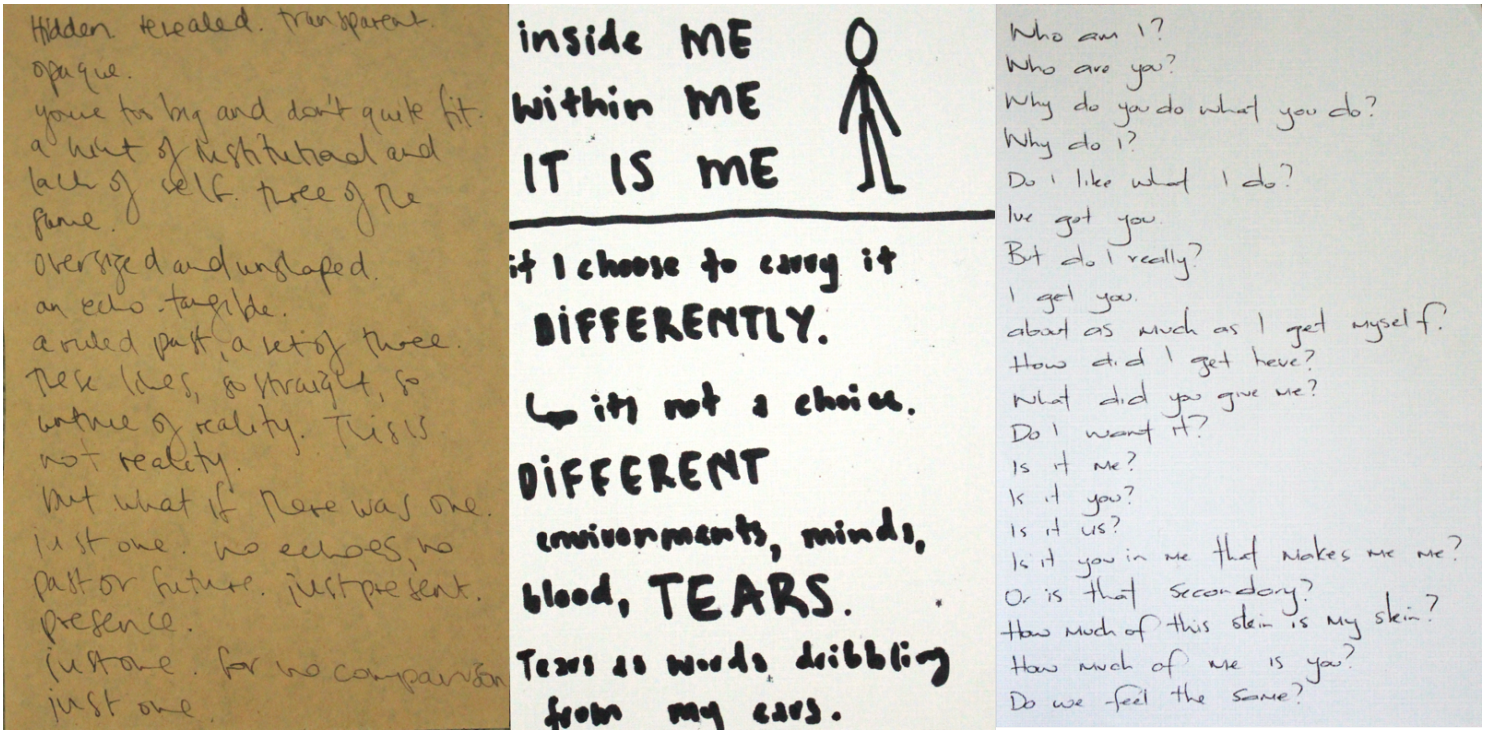
It seemed that giving collaborators the freedom to refrain from having to verbalise thoughts immediately enabled them to process and dig deeper individually. Taking inspiration from the things we wrote, we began to engage with movement through unstructured improvisation; The

provocations for the improvisation included the words we had written and the invitation to read aloud the words we had written. After a few minutes of improvisation, I noticed no one had engaged with the words so I took the lead and began to read aloud. This opened the door for others to engage and, without extra prompting, each collaborator took turns reading the words we had written. Words were read in any order often overlapping without sense and thus a muddling and mixing of words created a potent soundscape within which a rich improvisation unravelled. Further, this activity allowed our own revelations to be shared verbally without taking personal ownership for what we had written.

Part of the practice-led methodology *Them:Me:Us* employed connected directly to creative documentation and reflexive writing as a way to 'write the body' (Rich, 2003). It allowed us to engage a sense of showing through the flow of creative text rather than a sense of 'telling' what has been discovered or experienced (Faulkner, 2007). Fitzpatrick and Longley (2014) further explain that creative writing "rather invites the reader to feel, to linger in the text and understand the context in a deeper or more embodied way" (p. 4). The writing and soundings provided tools for adding layers to the communal understanding of the core-essence of the dance-work.

In the fifth rehearsal, we revisited that original piece of paper from the *"What do you feel you have inherited from your matrilineal line?"* task and a collaborator commented that the things on that piece of paper were 'so shallow compared to where we had travelled to' (Greig, S. Personal communication, September 30, 2019). This highlighted how far our collaborative community had shifted. It seemed to show that the process had allowed for a shared sense of depth and value to arise from the written word which was not only as DeLahunta and Shaw (2008) suggests, "a catalyst for creation" (p. 67) but that it also built a foundation of reciprocal trust and with it a sense of autonomy (Freiburg & Lamb, 2009).

This building of trust and sense of autonomy together seem vital to both a choreographic democracy and a political democracy. This could also be described as an agency in which 'the people' or collaborators take responsibility and make decisions about their input, furthering the collective project without "forsaking their own autonomy" (Wright, 2004, p. 537). *Them:Me:Us* engaged with the promotion of autonomy by providing collaborators the time, space, and opportunity to make decisions about how they would contribute to the process, input into conversation, as well as write, speak and/or embody ideas and material the group agreed as part of the shared experience.



Collaborators were given a choice. They were also given the opportunity to create their own platform of choices within the scaffolding and shared understanding of the process. The collective understanding of where we were going and the empowerment to be self-governed enabled collaborators to connect to their personal sense of agency within the dance-making process. This level of agency, where the collaborator is acting as a creative agent is believed by Kirsh, Muntanyola, Jao, Lew and Sugihara (2009) to allow dancers greater purpose and deeper meaning within their contribution to the overall choreographic idea, thus enabling an empowered sense of ownership over any creative outputs or results (Bandura, 2006; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Knox, 2013; Foster, 2017).

Another tool that was utilised as a scaffold for collaborators to generate collective meaning, was the sharing of stories. Hoffman (2003) suggests that storytelling is "a dynamic process through which relationships form" (p. iii). *Them:Me:Us* placed incredible significance on the building of relationships and it was hoped that collaborators would share their personal stories in order to inform or add layers of meaning to the generation of movement (Knox, 2013). One of the factors that arose as an element for the promotion of connection and the sharing stories was vulnerability. It appeared that as the facilitator/leader, if I stepped into a place of vulnerability first, it introduced an understanding that I did not expect my collaborators to have an emotional journey that I was not also willing to have (Rogers & Stevens, 1967). **This levelling off of the playing field within the experience enabled my collaborators to engage their sense of personal agency. I knew this as they were able to verbalize their feelings of safety as they stepped into their own vulnerabilities and share their personal stories.**

Sharing stories, writing, then embodying (Smudge Skittle, 2018) enabled collaborators to unpack thoughts, feelings and reactions, which allowed for a variety of personal internal processing. The level of processing was made evident by the depth collaborators were able to

achieve with their ideas. **The process of *Them:Me:Us* unfolded over one three-hour rehearsal a week for three months. During this time collaborators were able to develop informed connections to the core-essence of the dance-work, which generated a sense of community, collective understanding, and a shared sense of direction and purpose.**

The focus within rehearsal was about the people in the community and the generation of a shared understanding coupled with a foundational shared openness to each other's voices. The openness was cultivated by all collaborators and could be said to foster a sense of safety in bringing 'self' into the dance-making process. This valuing of voice and the individual does not mean compromising the integrity or quality of dance-work, rather as Butterworth (1989) suggests, when the needs of the group are attended too, along with the choreographer's vision, this might produce something "remarkable" (p. 27).

One of the values created through *Them:Me:Us* was the ability to navigate through moments of dissent. These moments appeared through questioning and the encouragement of feedback. Daly (2002) points out that , "It's dissent that is implied in the vote: that we will disagree, but that we will disagree intelligently, respectfully, and productively. And that's where civic dialogue comes in, as a means to intelligent, respectful, and productive dissent" (p. 9). The vocalisation allowed us as collaborators, to hear and respond to each other's point of view and through this a myriad of ideas and new connections were conceived; new avenues of thought which might not have been discovered alone emerged. Further, as Hess (2009) points out "learning to talk effectively about the issues of the day is the cornerstone of a healthy and well-functioning democracy" (p. 5). Communication became really important in how we revealed and discussed our differences.

There was a clear process that took place in building relationships for *Them:Me:Us*, though it was flexible and changed along the way. The flexibility came through a practice-led methodology that allowed us to learn and make decisions as we engaged with the dance-making process. As collaborators, we also built a shared value system through the use of open communication, both verbal and non-verbal. These philosophies can be seen as similar to that of a political democracy. Wise, Buck, Martin and Yu (2019) point out that "we cannot assume that dance and democracy go hand in hand" (p. 4), however within the scope of *Them:Me:Us* I propose that some synergies were happening between the two realities.

Our collaborative community

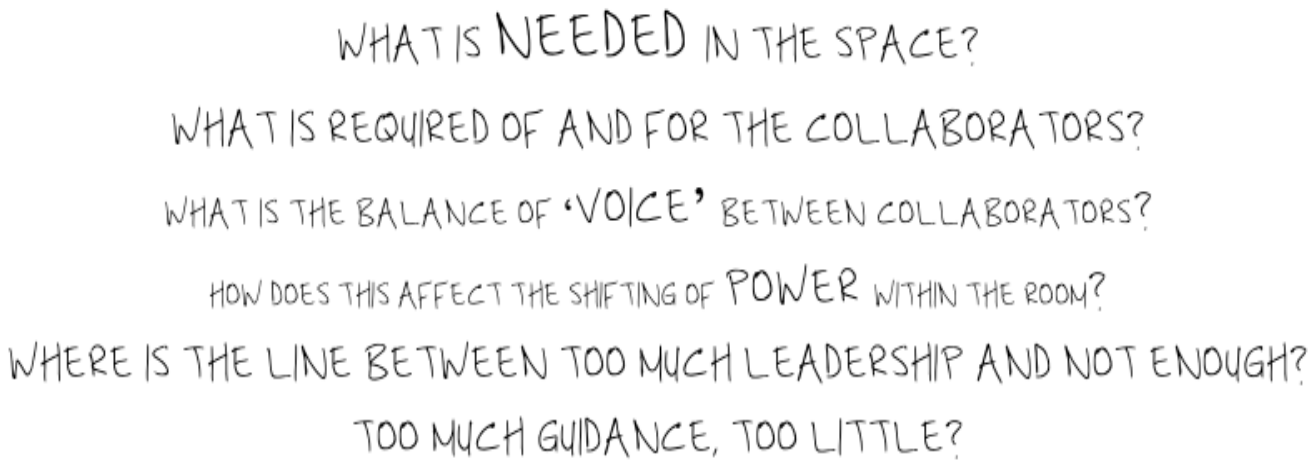
Dance-making has been likened to a civic space, a space which encourages conversation and the expression of views and opinions. How does this understanding align with a collaborative framework? Collaboration has been described as two or more people actively participating in a process that is creating a mutual outcome (Barbour, 2008; Butterworth & Wildschut, 2012). This does not mean that all participants must agree on every detail but rather that they actively journey toward a shared destination, propelled by the same creative outcomes (Tharp, 2009). Culture and communication theorist, Nikos Papastergiadis (2000) offers that collaboration "presupposes mutual understanding, shared languages, common goals and the ability to negotiate across differences" (p. 1).

Them:Me:Us utilised Jo Butterworth's (2004) Didactic-Democratic Model that presents a framework for defining the level of agency a choreographer and a dancer each have within a collaborative dance-making process. At one end of the model, Butterworth frames the choreographer as expert and dancer as the instrument. At the other, she frames choreographer as co-owner and dancer as co-owner, with varying stages of agency and ownership in between (Butterworth, 2004). *Them:Me:Us* primarily operated within an understanding of "Process 4: Choreographer as facilitator—dancer as creator" wherein "the choreographer and dancers engage in a negotiated process, in an intellectual process and in a situation where each gains a sense of contribution and ownership" (Butterworth, 2004, p. 60). In this approach, dancers are encouraged into a high level of active engagement. They not only have voice in regard to movement generation but also in the methods used for generating material. This input from dancers does not mean that the choreographer gives up control of the overall direction of the dance work, but this allows for more dialogue and creative input as well as more agency for all collaborators (Butterworth, 2004). Wieke Eringa, CEO and Artistic Director of Yorkshire Dance outlines how an effective facilitator role could be defined. In addition to managing risk and guiding the creative process, a facilitator has the ability:

> To facilitate participants to 'go beyond themselves' but not pushing people too far out of their comfort zones. To engage in play, (re)discover the sheer joy of being physical and creative and somehow give meaning and coherence to potential feelings of discomfort and frustration. That in itself makes the process, […] life transforming and exceptional (2008, para. 8).

For *Them:Me:Us,* collaborators were facilitated through multiple and various opportunities to actively engage with each other and the emerging ideas. Collaborators were encouraged to step beyond their comfort zones but never pushed, only invited.

Them:Me:Us has highlighted the importance of collaboration which considers:



Them:Me:Us collaborators were encouraged to connect with and give voice to their personal stories, histories, and values as they deemed relevant to the questions posed. The engagement of self into the process was done gently yet consistently, starting with surface level questions then gradually layering in depth. Collaborators were given agency over their responses to questions. They were able to generate a written, spoken, embodied 'answer' and engage in a way that felt authentic for them. The sharing of these insights created the foundation of shared understanding that I propose was necessary in order to form effective relationships and move together toward a common goal. Further, an emphasis on community indicates that collaborators are facilitated with safety and where building trust is possible and central to the dance-making process. My aim was to facilitate an experience in which the collaborators felt encouraged to share their voice, their stories.

The dance collaborators in *Them:Me:Us* came from a variety of backgrounds. One had just completed a Bachelor's degree, another held a Bachelor's degree in dance with ten years of professional experience, and the last came with eleven years of professional experience. That mix of experience produced a subconscious feeling of a power hierarchy from the outset. As Knox (2013) points out the collaborative approach to dance-making may present a complex layered situation for collaborators to navigate. Within *Them:Me:Us* part of this complex layering manifested through the recognition of collaborators feeling less experienced, being in a room with people with more or different experience. Placing value on the building of relationships first, seemed to highlight the reality that we are all continuously learning. Through engaging with the collaborative process, we each began to undo some of the shared insecurities around 'how do I communicate myself into the space in a way that reflects what I think?' It also began to dismantle the subconscious belief that 'I am younger, I have so much to learn so I should be quiet' and the traditional/ stereotypical response of 'I am a dancer I should be silent' reality. Barbour (2008) points out that these types of issues may arise from dominant hierarchical working processes, where vertical power dynamics (Foster, 2017) appear as the traditional binary that often accompanies Western academic concert contemporary dance, between choreographer and dancers (Lakes, 2005). However, Corring and Cook (1999) point out, engaging with a person-centred approach, valuing the people and the building of relationships, enables a "shift in power" (p. 71) to occur, consistent with horizontal power dynamics that are sought among collaborators. Within *Them:Me:Us* this occurred by creating a shared experience that fostered a sense of equality through the encouragement of each person's voice, questions, and input.

The 'voice of the people' was seen as important as the movement generation, if not more. This notion aligns with political scientist and democratic theorist Robert Dahl's (1998) view of democratic theory that places value on the voice of the people. Dahl offers that democratic theory centres on "each person within society having a voice, and decisions are determined by the collective voices of the people" (p. 36–38). Rocha Menocal (2014) adds a layer to this sentiment with a democratic system based on "increased dialogue, collaboration and participatory decision-making"

(p.13). Daly (2002) adds yet another layer to this framework of understanding in that collaborators can share their feelings, views, and opinions in a "non-combative, non-threatening way where meaning can be deliberated in a forum conducive to the practice of democracy, and subsequently, where meaning can be generated together, facilitating a collective strength" (p. 9). Within the collaborative community of *Them:Me:Us* dialogue, participatory decision-making, relationship, and collective meaning generation became an integral part of the work. Collaborators were given movement or writing tasks as a scaffold but responding to these tasks was open to their choices, including the choice to not to participate. This level of autonomy and the importance placed on the people as well as on personal input and perspectives reflects many of the same aims and values to that of a democracy.

Dahl (1998) further describes a democratic system by outlining that it is a type of system that encourages effective participation, equality in voting, gaining enlightened understanding, and exercising final control over the agenda. Within *Them:Me:Us*, collaborators were engaged in 'effective participation' and encouraged to exercise their agency and participate in decision-making likened to 'equality in voting' (Dahl, 1998). They were encouraged to use their voice, to question, to give input in order to gain 'enlightened understanding.' Though collaborators stepped into the collaboration knowing that as the facilitator I would have the final say in choreographic decision making, I made it clear that my final say was deeply informed by and dependent upon consideration of their voices, their votes. These connections align with Gould (2012), who proposes that a democratic understanding is "about understanding interdependence, seeking connections, exploring together, and inventing new ways of doing things" (p. 4) and with Leonard (2014) who offers that democratic ideas are exemplified through "a dynamic means of moving, responding, creating, and transforming" (p. 4). Within *Them:Me:Us*, we created a process and a foundational layer of understanding that enabled us to work, respond, and make dance together.

The challenge of this reality is maintaining balance. I discovered that the reality of facilitating an open democratic space that operates within "Process 4" blurs easily with Butterworth's (2004) "Process 5 - co-choreographers and co-dancers, where members of the group must take responsibility for aspects of the whole and be able to manage the interrelationship and articulate their concerns " (p. 63). What happens when the balance of power tips too far into or beyond Process 5, to a place in which another collaborator becomes the 'leader' in an unintentional 'coup d'état'?

Choreographic democracy and the blurred line of power

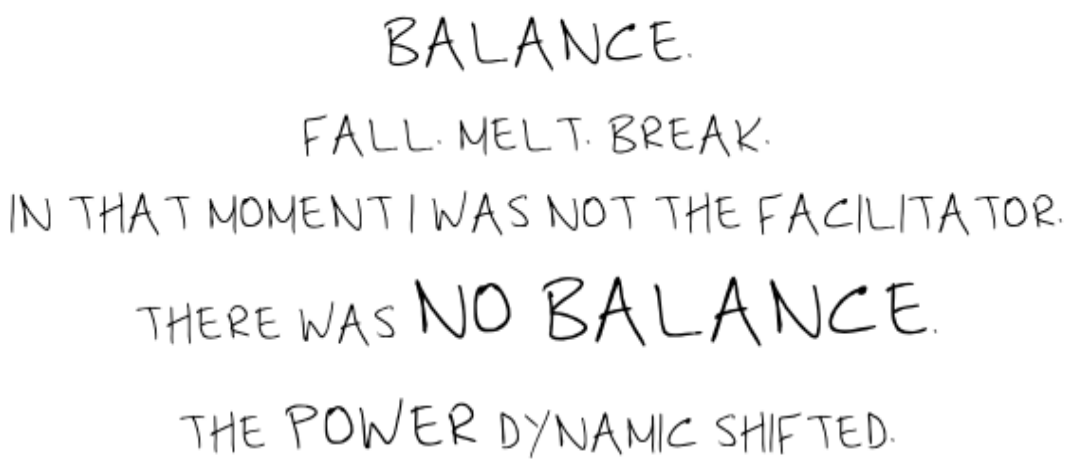
"Power. Hierarchy. We don't talk about this" (Reflective Writing, 2019). This potent sentiment pulled from a piece of *Them:Me:Us* reflective writing encompasses my initial relationship with power. In the academy, choreographers traditionally occupy the top tier on the hierarchy of power and the dancers are not seen as collaborators but instead as blank slates that are lower in status (Abra, 1994; Knox, 2013). Within the process of *Them:Me:Us*, I intentionally avoided telling the dancers what to do or treating them as blank slates and instead conscientiously pursued a democratic approach to collaborative dance-making. This was attempted through the cultivation of a safe space, a shared understanding of

collaboration (Butterworth, 2004) and the active encouragement of open communication. *Them:Me:Us* intentionally placed importance on relationship and shared meaning-making rather than enforcing traditional understanding of choreographer/dancer/collaborator positionings (Banes, 1981; Barbour, 2008; Butterworth, 2004; Daly, 2002; Knox 2013). One of the challenges that arose from this, however, was the recognition of the fine line between encouraging collaborators to have a voice, valuing their ideas and giving, or allowing the 'power' of facilitation to be taken away. An example of the power shift occurred during the third rehearsal for *Them:Me:Us* when, during a conversation with my collaborators, I felt the conversation shift in a way that made it clear that I was no longer the facilitator, an unintentional coup occurred.

In that moment, my encouragement of 'voice' and open communication had outworked in a way that shifted the direction we were heading. Through intentionally
facilitating my collaborators into a spirit of agentic engagement I had blurred the line of the original parameters of the project; I had neglected to hold the framework of the experience in a way that indicated our shared values and agreed upon direction. Wise, Buck, Martin and Yu (2019) share that a facilitator may work to democratize the conventional understandings of hierarchical power in leadership. However, in this instance, my attempt to deconstruct the power hierarchy played out in such a way that the control of the project was held and directed by another collaborator. Leadership had shifted.

This experience led me to reflect that though it is important that the voices, input and opinions of my collaborators are valued, there needs to be a leader, someone that holds the experience. This leader/facilitator must be diplomatic so as to engage the group dynamically and the dance-making process may require that the role of leader shifts among the collaborators. How is balance maintained? How do I ask for help with an idea without giving away ownership of that idea?

This experience during the third rehearsal for *Them:Me:Us* caused me to feel momentarily uprooted. I was trying to juggle my ideals for a choreographic democracy, with the desire to move in the direction I had already determined. Knox (2013) points out that in a person/collaborator/dancer' centred process "a person might be perceived as of equal or higher value than the dance" (p. 33), but I wonder, if the



person is more important than the work, then how do we actually make the work? In order to value both the input from my collaborators as well as maintain a clear direction for the original parameters and the core-essence of the dance work, I realised we could create a shared understanding of parameters within which the project would function. These parameters included the research questions we had set out with, the emerging methodology that was discussed and evaluated along the way, and the core-essence of the dance-work. The parameters were reinforced to the collaborators with an emphasis on their particular contributions but that the structure of the dance-work and the unfolding of the processes was exclusively from my point of view, as the experiment was for me to discover my own sense about and leadership with a choreographic democracy. I shared the roots of this project in a way that allowed for communal understanding through a recognition of the foundational ideas and the core-essence but the understanding that within those parameters of understanding they were free to explore and initiate in any way they desired. *Why did I not set these parameters earlier?*

Initially there was a concern that by coming in with parameters and methods of engagement that the creative expression of collaborators may be hindered or repressed. Because Schwartz and Ward (2004) say that "unconstrained freedom leads to paralysis" (p. 81), I was trying to provide 'constraints' in the form of creative writing, embodied expression, and stories. Having a frame to work within might create an opportunity for empowered engagement as collaborators agree to parameters and are facilitated toward a common goal.

This moment within the process of *Them:Me:Us* helped me to realise that a framework of parameters might disrupt traditional notions of power for choreographer/dancer relationships by promoting two of Dahl's (1998) principles of democracy: the effective participation and enlightened understanding of collaborators. It could also be proposed that the provision of this frame allows collaborators to generate collective meaning which in turn facilitates "a collective strength" (Daly, 2002, p. 9). This collective strength might enable a choreographic democracy to move toward a common goal, a collective choreographic intention. Within this forward movement, it is important that a foundation of shared values and a language/vocabulary is created so that collaborators build layers of knowledge, meaning and personal connection within the shared layering of communal understanding. How do I facilitate a shared understanding? How might collaborators develop a personal connection to the dance-work?

Where to next?

In this article, I have explored some of the layers that were uncovered during the creative process of *Them:Me:Us*. I have unearthed some of the strategies used and challenges to creating a democratic choreographic space. Further, I have outlined my understanding of a collaborative dance-making process, made links to a political democratic process, and explored similarities between the two processes. Ultimately, I have uncovered insights into facilitating a collaborative choreographic process that explores notions of a choreographic democracy. What *Them:Me:Us* revealed was the notion that a power-sharing framework of understanding could be an effective structure for supporting a choreographic democracy.

Through enacting these ideas, *Them:Me:Us* was able to disrupt the notions of hierarchical power between choreographer and dancers by engaging with a repertoire of tools. For *Them:Me:Us*, these tools allowed me to invite and guide collaborators into a layered meaning-making, relationship building, and a personal connection to the core-essence of the dance work as well as to collaborative dance-making.

A layering and scaffolding of process, parameters, actions and responses are needed in order for democratic choreographic facilitators to create a space in which collaborators are empowered to flourish. Collaborators can be creatively connected and feel safe in offering their voice, their stories and their realities into a dance-making process. Scaffolding and layering strategies might enable dancers to participate in shifting traditional understandings of power and may allow the collaboration to move collectively with ideas that might not be discovered alone or in submission to a more vertical power hierarchy. The experience

of an empowered collaborative group may be more potent than the experience of one creating alone.

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