

**2013 NDEO TOP PAPER CITATION**

Ethical Issues Raised by Strategies of Collaborative Dance Making

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*Just a little bend of the legs. An extension of the arms and tracing a small circle in front of the mid-body. At the center of this motion is stillness. A calm in the storm—and that is where the attention goes. Eyes turn and the wave grows, collecting debris and focusing it into rolling waves, licking the shore. At the crest of the wave is another step, then a return. A rock back, give in, step, step, plunge into the deep. Again and again this peaking, crashing, rolling back. There is an expectation. An anticipation of the next. A thought of destruction. The crashing stirs up the aliveness in all who experience the pounding and relief. It is gathering and releasing at once. It builds to a tumbling fullness and releases to a calm open horizon of the next thing.*

The above describes an excerpt from the evening-length performance of my thesis concert *arrive, create: a Dance made by Many* presented on Friday, December 8<sup>th</sup> at the Dance Lab at Arizona State University. This interdisciplinary work utilized dance improvisation and investigated how to create what I call “a generous performance paradigm.” The processes of the work explored the nature of collaboration in two related senses. 1) How a collaborative effort of the dancers shaped the rehearsal process and how I as the director of the piece related to the cast of the work. And 2) how the *concept* of collaboration—meaning creating something in which all voices present work together—re-shaped the performance experience. In this paper, I explore how the concepts of Ethics of Care, genius, and “moving identity” informed my application of collaborative dance making.

My intention in directing the work was to devise a performance paradigm in which the dance maker, dancers, and audience members each held a more equal role in the unfolding of the creative and performance phases of the work. I was drawn to this way of working as a way to investigate the underlying values in the relationships between dance

maker, cast, and audience. In my research, I have found that there are many historical instances of authoritarian styles of dance making and performing. I also found that more collective or democratic processes, especially amongst Judson Church era dance, have a strong tradition in dance. Overall, I wondered how dance makers’ creative intentions align with their world views, values, and ethical beliefs. How are rehearsal processes considered in dance making? And how do dancers and choreographers think about the relationship between one another in both rehearsing and performing?

As a dancer and performer I have experienced the gamut of creative processes. I have experienced making dances in a cast that feels interconnected and playful in a family-like way. I have also worked as a dancer for a choreographer who used manipulative and fear-based tactics to “draw out” the performance quality she desired from the cast. In my experience, relationships between dancers and choreographers are complicated and multi-faceted and cannot be described as either suppressive or empowering for dancers, but often contain elements of both. I am interested in the various ethical questions that arise out of dance making methods.

I have been influenced by working with various dance artists, mainly at the Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation and at Ponderosa Movement and Discovery in Germany. Some of the dance artists I’ve worked with are on the forefront of improvisation in performance and contact improvisation, including Nita Little, Nancy Stark Smith, Jess Curtis, Stephanie Maher, and Martin Keough. I have found these artists are all very thoughtful in the application of their values to their work and pedagogical practices.

One moral theory that peaks my interest is characterized as Ethics of Care. In 1977 Carol Gilligan published an essay titled “In a Different Voice: Women's Conceptions of Self and of

Morality” in the *Harvard Educational Review*. In that essay she questioned the dominant view in developmental psychology of a hierarchical progression from childlike dependence to adult autonomy, valuing rationality in moral decision making over relational considerations. Gilligan found that women were more likely to weigh ethical decisions within their social sphere, and therefore her essay emphasized the value of considering interpersonal repercussions of moral decisions. She called for a more serious consideration of a “feminine voice” when considering the moral development of people, and called for the field of psychology to consider the value of *care* in the moral landscape.

Since then, the theory of Ethics of Care has been further developed and incorporated into the field of Western ethics. The basic framework of the theory promotes understanding of the interconnectedness of human relationships, attention to the context in which ethical decisions are made, and who benefits from the outcome of those decisions. The emphasis is placed on how to respond in situations rather than what is right or “just.” Ethics of Care has been applied to the fields of health care, international relations, developmental psychology, and economics. My question is, how does it relate to dance pedagogy and creative practices? One way to apply the Ethics of Care to dance making is to consider the emotional or humanistic experience of a cast of dancers. How are the relationships amongst the cast (including the dance maker) being facilitated by the creative process?

When this question is considered, a dance maker recognizes his or her role in forming a community and culture within a cast. As with any group of people, social structures arise within a cast of dancers. A dance maker decides how to utilize those social structures, or how to deconstruct and reconstruct those structures. In my experience in the dance world, the question of **how** to construct a culture of care in the rehearsal process is not directly addressed very often. The complexity of human relationships is an intuitive study, and one that dancers often mine for creative impetus. However, I wonder if dancers consider the moral code that they apply to the rehearsal space and how those values effect the relationships they form there.

Another idea that relates to the way that dances are made is that of the artistic genius. The modern idea of genius originates from the Romantic era, when the creators of original and exemplary works of art were often described as “geniuses”. This idea has survived through time as a way to describe innovative makers in a great variety of fields.

The term genius, however, can devalue the developmental and experiential history of a person. It can also limit what it means to be “creative.” Because it places such value on natural talents, creative abilities that have been learned or developed can be overlooked. Many educators have attempted to debunk (or reevaluate) the idea of genius in their approach to teaching artistic practices. Constructivist educators, such as Maria Montessori and John Dewey, believe that the learning experience is one of expanding knowledge—not creating it. In this view, all people are innately intelligent and creative and it is the educator’s job to excite and add to those abilities.

In dance making, the idea of genius places emphasis on the inborn ability of a select few to create “masterful” dance works. The concept often undervalues the process in which those works are made and the dancers who contribute to the work. In this way of thinking rehearsals can easily be viewed as a means to an end of the performed work. For example, it is well accepted that William Forsythe is an innovative choreographer and has been very influential in the contemporary ballet world. However, the dancers who work with Forsythe to develop his dance making and training method are not commonly recognized as authors or contributors to Forsythe’s dance making methodology. The fault of this lack of credit does not necessarily lie in choreographers’ hands, but in a cultural tendency to attribute the success of great works to the “genius” of one person. The concept of artistic genius creates a paradigm of an emphasis of the product and the singular maker of that work, over the choreographic process and cast of dancers who contributed to the process.

As dance making practices evolve and various uses of more democratic choreographic structures become more broadly utilized, it is interesting to consider how the role of the dancer is re-examined. Dance scholar Jenny Roche has developed the term “moving identity” as a way to describe the embodied

contribution dancers make to the creative process. She argues that modern-day dancers seek out movement training and creative input from an increasingly diverse array of movement and somatic practices. Roche writes,

The dancer's 'moving identity' is the result of the accumulation of choreographic movement incorporations and training influences. It holds traces of past embodiments that are also available to the dancer to be re-embodied again. Thus the moving identity highlights the underlying sense of consistency in how the dancer moves and could be regarded as the movement signature that the dancer forms throughout a career path. (Roche, 111)

Roche suggests that dancers' individual investigation of movement forms calls for a reordering of the traditional power structure of the dance making process. The movement that audiences' see on stage is in fact authored by that particular dancer—composed and/or performed with the aid of his or her "moving identity." Therefore, Roche argues, it is important to recognize that dancer's contribution to the work. Roche's term "moving identity" is a way of terming the contribution that dancers make to the work.

Roche's articulation of the "moving identity" incorporates an ethic of care into the dance making process. It also deemphasizes the idea of "genius" as a singular maker of new dance works. In the process of making *arrive, create* I utilized a collaborative interdisciplinary improvisational creative and performance process. The dance making methodology I used included elements of dance making that are exciting to me—and also attempted to incorporate my values (as a dancer and humanitarian) into the process and performance of the work.

As I began working with the cast for *arrive, create* I had a strong sense of trying to counter the perceived "traditional" rehearsal protocol, in which I, as the dance maker, create the dance and teach it to the dancers to digest and then perform. I clearly verbalized my intent to use collaborative and democratic structures in rehearsal, and I soon realized I was focusing on *countering* a seeming norm. I found that reacting to authoritative rehearsal processes continued to bring my focus back to those

very structures/ ways of thinking. In an effort to shift my attention from the perceived "problem" to the "solution" I began to concentrate on the word GENEROSITY. I chose this word because it encompasses a sensibility of compassion, trust, engagement, and inclusivity, all values I hoped to incorporate into the project. As the process evolved, the word generous became defined as: inviting engagement and recognizing the creativity of all people present.

It is interesting to investigate an idea choreographically. My intention in this work was for the concepts driving the work to continue to generate understandings beyond the performance of the project. This became a *generative* process in which community-building dance structures were employed with an aim of the collaborators stepping away from the project with a self-led sense of exploration of the ideas underlying the work. In this way I hoped that the process would be empowering for the collaborators as we continued to investigate our creative voices in dance making.

My research question became: how can I create a generous creative process and a generous performance? Following this question I felt as though I was entering the unknown—as most works I had participated in were made in more traditional, single choreographer fashion. In order to gather information from the cast about *how to* collaboratively make dance work, I composed structures in which we explored elements of collaboration and improvisation in performance.

As I worked to create democratic methods for rehearsing my thesis project, I found that creating an ethic of care in the rehearsal space allowed for conversation to unfold. Promoting a caring environment that incorporated an understanding of the interconnectedness of human relationships, to me, equates to opening up the experience to dialogue. In the rehearsal process of *arrive, create* several rehearsals were composed purely of conversation surrounding the topic of how to create dance in collaboration with others.

An example of a score we used for the warm up was: each dancer lead the group in something that warms up the body and explores something you are interested in. This score functions in several ways: it serves as a warm-up, it is a democratic structure in which everyone partakes creatively, and it explores

improvisational ideas that contribute to performance abilities/interests.

As the process progressed the role of improvisation moved from a tool to explore concepts to a central element of the work. It became clear that the exploration of the nature of collaboration was unending—and that it would become a central focus of the performance. I also became very interested in how the collaboration could reach beyond the cast. I wanted to include the audience—to make them, as they enter through the door, additional collaborators. In order to be inclusive and investigative, even in the performance, I chose to re-shape the performance into an improvisational experience. The improvisation became organized around a “master score,” which was collaboratively created.

Because the performance was improvisational and had elements of interaction with the audience, it drew heavily from the performers’ personal experience. However, I struggled to provide a space within the work where the performers stories were heard—and something about their identity was shared. For this reason I chose to make short videos in which the dancers chose three locations that represented some element of themselves and played with pedestrian movement and dance in those locations.

The performance had two basic sections: section one was an open space with the videos projected on various surfaces. Near each video, a textural element from that film was incorporated—water, rocks, plants, fur, and food (chocolate). The audience was invited to interact with those environments, and the cast members acted as facilitators of the experience. Section two was a transition into seating in the round and consisted of a 20 minute improvisation that followed the score we developed:

- open the space
- say what you see/ know
- listen
- do what you want to do
- move

At the end of the performance, the audience was invited to share anything from their experience of the work by writing it on the back of their program and putting it in the middle of the performance space.

After the performance of *arrive, create* I interviewed each of the cast members [names in this paper have been changed for the purposes of anonymity]. With that information, along with the comments left by the audience, and my own reflection on the project I will share some of my findings.

Some of the most interesting discoveries focused on the way the process utilized collaboration. Each cast member was invested in the collaborative process, and positive about the inclusion of their artistic “voice” within the work. Kara said, “I found myself enjoying the setup (of rehearsal) because it was a different kind of engagement of your mind... I like feeling like I could resonate with the context of the material right away.” However, several members of the cast relayed frustration over the amount of mental effort a democratically shaped collaborative process was. One quote from Tony stands out to me. He said, “I think that collaboration has more to do with sharing the conceptual work.” In his interview, he expressed that it is very helpful for him as a performer to get specific feedback and clear direction from the maker of the work. His sense of collaboration is that creative decisions do not always need consensus among the group, but rather that collaborators are aligned in terms of the conceptual underpinnings of the work. Eva noted that a single choreographer is often more efficient than collaborative works.

The notion of responsibility was another interesting through-line for many of the performers. I reflect that creating an environment in which everyone is heard makes it the responsibility of each cast member to *listen*. In rehearsal I urged the performers to keep an awareness of the group while committing to their own choices of action. Tony felt accountable for the reciprocity of those relationships. “There was so much responsibility all over the place. You’re responsible just to yourself, but you’re also responsible to the group. And you’re also responsible to the audience; and all those levels changed every day, so the performance changed.” Because the rehearsal and performance environment were so inclusive, the cast felt very aware of how their actions created repercussions amongst the whole group and ultimately shaped the performance. This idea of responsibility accentuates the values that each cast member was bringing to rehearsal—

and how they applied those values to their interactions with one another.

The audience responses were telling, and overall enjoyable to read. In my everyday research of what generosity means, I found that it is important to receive and to give in a generous relationship. That said, most of the audience responses were positive. One reads “Loved the laughter and how alive it was. Interactions are real! Dance work was strong. As a viewer I felt honored to be part of this piece.” Others were more akin to offerings, and resonated with the deeper concepts of the work. Another read, “Piano chords or chords of people. making snow angels on that furry rug. Lights dim-focus. Two in the circle~ praying mantises at play. The circle—in its power. It draws all into its center even when it is empty. Perhaps even more so when it is empty—we want to fill it.” And some comments relayed confusion about the role of the audience. One comment observed what they viewed as an unfocussed nature of the work, and another commented that she/he was not sure when to participate in the work. These comments are an indication to me that an improvisation can easily lose focus—and it may take time to re-define that focus. It also reveals that some audience members have a propensity to view and engage with the ever-changing focus of a group improvisation, others do not.

In conclusion, my research of collaborative dance making and creating a “generous performance paradigm” I found it useful to consider the following question: How would incorporating a clearly defined moral framework into the creative and performance process of dance making affect the type of dance work that we make and see? Being guided by this question shifts the focus from what kind of dance work to make to how to make dances and how to share dance with an audience in a way that reflects my values. In an ever changing dance world, I implore dancers and dance makers to consider how their value systems apply to dance making methodologies and shape the performance experience.

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### BIOGRAPHY

**Laurel Wall-MacLane** is a recent graduate of Arizona State University with a Masters in Fine Arts in Dance. She is an engaged artist who is interested in how people experience and reflect on the world through the expression of movement. She has thoroughly enjoyed teaching classes in modern technique, improvisation, introductory dance, and conditioning at ASU. She has extensively studied dance improvisation and contemporary dance choreography and performance at festivals in United States and Europe. As a publicly engaged artist she has worked with Elizabeth Johnson employing some of the Dance Exchange tool bag with community classes and intergenerational dance productions at the Mesa Arts Center in Mesa, AZ. Laurel has danced professionally with Headwaters Dance Company, the Open Field Artists, and the University of Hawaii Dance Ensemble. She graduated with her Bachelor of Arts in Fine Arts with an emphasis in Dance in 2007 from the University of Montana.

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