

African Performance Review

Vol. 15, No. 1, 2025

pp. 21-25

**Listen, Watch, Move: Embodied Listening as Structured Improvisation in
Decolonialist Research¹**

Rainy Demerson

The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill, Barbados

Not So Long Ago...Not So Far Away is a performance I created in 2018, and it was first performed at the University of California Riverside in parallel with my academic research into the South African student movements #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall which began in 2015. This research led to my 2020 doctoral dissertation: "Decolonial Moves: Re-Membering Black Women in South African Contemporary Dance." The performance at the 2019 African Theatre Association conference mobilized notions of decoloniality and artistic practice in a different southern African space, providing opportunities to engage an international audience in thinking through and moving around the challenges and opportunities of embodiment as a decolonial practice.

I take my place and press 'Play.' I lay on my back, knees bent and feet on the floor, with one hand on my sternum and one on my abdomen. This stance comes from a position somatics practitioners call constructive rest.² I use this pose to ground myself and my senses, beginning to listen to my body and the sounds around me. In stillness, the subtle lilt and collapse of my hands being moved by breath is observable. I tune into my breath first, then the energies of the conference participants standing around me.

¹ DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30817/0151.apr0204>

² Somatics is a term used to describe the practice of heightening sensory awareness, fusing mind and body consciousness for mental and physical well-being. The international field of somatics has been pioneered by people of European descent such as Irmgard Bartenieff, Moshé Feldenkrais, Frederick Matthias Alexander, and Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen whose knowledge and approaches are based in centuries-old and modern Asian philosophies and practices such as Buddhism and Judo, as well as Western science, and their own research.

The classic academic format for orating written evidence of research was also performed at the conference, but the inclusion of performance within the conference program demonstrates that AFTA understands that dance/drama/music performances result from their own research methodologies and convey their findings kinetically. Hosted by the Instituto Superior Politécnico Metropolitano De Angola, we entered a beautiful dance studio with bright teaching lights and nothing to amplify the tiny speakers of my laptop. Departing from a Western proscenium layout, the audience was close, and everyone could see everything. Although I did not know the dimensions of the room before performing, the circularly structured audience was an intentional dramaturgical practice I have been employing for the past several years. Inspired by many diverse practices of West and Central Africa which I experienced in its diaspora, the circle forms a space of witness which invites conviviality, cooperation, and co-construction. Although I designed the piece to have the audience encircle me on foot, walking or sitting, the vulnerability of the performance was amplified to an unexpected measure, by the unalterable lighting schema. I decided to 'lean into it' as the performance was about communicating in and through contentious intimacies. In the small well-lit space, no one could hide behind theatrical lighting. We read each other's facial expressions, felt each other's heat, and heard each other breathe and shift, thus co-creating the performance as a community. While this closeness made me a bit nervous and I sometimes retreated emotionally by averting my gaze from that of others, it is also a type of performance I crave more and more lately as someone who lives in a country that is not my own and having experienced the isolation of academia, doubly impacted by the Covid-19 crisis. Being physically close to an audience better enables the intimate relationality of society that the work invites the audience to recognize.

Pressing my feet into the floor one at a time, I begin to slide into the circle, claiming it a space for performance – asking for observation and offering gestures constructed previously and in the moment. Then crouching low with my head below my hips, I press my ear into the floor and listen to what this place is telling me. Tuning in to voices not my own, I allow my body to become a conduit for the experiences of others while simultaneously and spontaneously expressing my own journey as a biracial American in South Africa. I am moved both by a familiar struggle and my own distance and ignorance.



Figure 1: Rainy Demerson at the AfTA conference, copyright Edo Tshisungu

By embodying a diversity of voices and experiences, this performance attempts to attend to the paradoxes, desires, blind spots and quantum leaps of decolonial dance practice. The title, *Not So Long Ago...Not So Far Away* refers to the living spectres of colonialism, apartheid, and neo-colonialism, all global paradigms that frame our lived experiences to this day. It is a dance piece that examines various ideologies of decoloniality as embodiment, and as artistic and directorial praxis by interacting with sound in a particular way. I created the sound score in three parts: First is a recording of young women chatting on a train. I could not understand their Indigenous language and this distance reminded me of my foreignness and my guest responsibilities on Indigenous land. Second, is excerpts from an audio recording I made during a 2017 conference on decolonizing dance at The University of Cape Town, where a panel of Artistic Directors responded to the question, “How has the artistic director in South Africa responded to calls for decolonialism?” The panel was part of *Confluences 9: Deciphering Decolonization in Dance Pedagogy in the 21st Century*. The responses reflected the diverse experiences in artistic directors of various ages and from differing ethnic groups, highlighting that even within one country, decoloniality will always manifest in multiplicities, registering meaning differently for different people. The third is the encore performance of a chant song by the South African *a capella* group *The Soil* (<https://southafrica.co.za/the-soil.html>). At the end of their concert in the 2017 National Arts Festival, the audience just would not stop singing until they came back on stage and followed the *audience’s lead*. The audience then continued singing all the way out of their seats, gathering in a dancing circle in the foyer,

then continuing to trail off as they slowly exited the Guy Butler Theater. This collective joy, subversive radicality, and ecstatic anti-apartheid spirit was how I chose to end the work.

The voices are uplifting and tinged with suffering. My movement is angry but my spirit is being elevated with each step. My torso and legs punch down, but my arms and head fling up and back in euphoria.

Performances of *Not So Long Ago...Not So Far Away* are rooted in what I term embodied listening. This is a practice of using the whole body to ingest and respond to sound – be it music, ambient noise, or dialogue. Embodied listening does not necessarily create movement to mimic, symbolize or represent the sound, but uses bodily engagement (in stillness and movement) to hear more deeply. In this work, it is an element of structured improvisation which allowed me to contextualize the research materials of found sound and formal presentations within my own body. Performing this process as an improvisation necessitates the constant re-engagement with the material in a way that fully set choreography does not promote. Embodied listening as improvisatory performance invites the viewer to witness the research praxis where historical facts, emotional responses, intellectual curiosity, and artistic production converge.

An improvisatory performance can be structured in many ways. In this case, during the rehearsal process, I encountered and refined certain landmarks to improvise around. For example, in one session I found myself writing out the word ‘truth’ in the air as if holding a piece of chalk while walking around the circle. I would do this task each time at the same point in the sound score, but never in exactly the same way. In between each landmark the movement vocabulary would be created in the moment, in response to the physical, aural and emotional sensations of myself and the others in the room. Structured improvisation is only new to the concert dance realm and has likely been in practice for thousands of years. Structured improvisation allows for the performer to compose in the moment while adhering to a framework that provides a beginning, middle, end, and possibly a thematic foundation. In *Not So Long Ago...Not So Far Away*, this technique facilitated my efforts to remain present not only in my body but with those whom I shared the space.

My goal with this performance as research was to deeply listen and physicalize the speakers’ responses. I was not intending to interpret the speakers, nor comment upon their statements, but rather to extend listening comprehension to my body and place myself in quiet conversation with the panel as a mode of engaging more deeply with their statements. As a scholar, dancing while listening, as opposed to re-reading a written transcript, allowed me to hear and

Listen, Watch, Move

understand differently. For example, when listening to Debbie Turner, CEO of Cape Town City Ballet (<https://capetowncityballet.org.za/>), describe how as a young White girl at an integrated dance school, she didn't know anything about apartheid, I felt a bit frustrated by her naiveté and found it hard to imagine. In improvised performance however, crafting my body while listening to the very same words facilitated a sense of compassion and curiosity.

I thrust my fists towards the floor, dragging my torso just behind them...over and over, wrenching out frustration and confusion. Where does this body belong when I do not honour these racial boundaries? My arms cross and uncross sharply, then weave through one another like DNA strands, then pull harshly apart as if by imaginary magnets. There is a gap that cannot be crossed. Not yet.

In the next moment, as I ran in a circle around the periphery of the audience, I picked up an imaginary stone to throw as Emile Jansen (<https://emileyx.co.za/>), Creative Director of Heal the Hood Project, described trying to defend himself against attacks by the police. I attempted to throw it but was shocked back by the fear of bullets. In his words I only heard indignation, but in my body, I also felt fear. Moving while listening facilitated empathy and helped me to witness the layers in each speaker's experience.

I hear the iconic voices of The Soil with hundreds of fans beyond them creating a brilliant chorus. In that moment, the audience were more than admirers, they were collaborators, crafting a shared and interdependent experience. I kick my right leg up high, foot flexed, then swoop it down with force – the iconic gesture of ngoma, danced in solidarity - a daring attempt at oneness. Undulating my spine, stomping my feet and looking inward and outward at the conference attendees around me, in this moment we are co-conspirators. My invitation to witness has been answered and although they stand in stillness, complicit in the colonial underpinnings of our academic training which compels us to church-like mannerisms, I believe, I hope, I trust...that we are dancing together.