

Giorgia and Jamila (SERAFINE1369) started a conversation in 2018, about the embodied emotional and psychic impact of *conservatoire* dance training and their wider research into marginalised forms of knowledge production and strategies for holding space without violence and cringe. They often find themselves talking about language - observing, and thinking about how to untangle it's frictions, inaccuracies and power in shaping bodies, relationships and .ways of being in the world

Some kind of magnetism

Jamila Johnson-Small & Giorgia Ohanesian Nardin

A Blue Skies Conversation

“I think how we are being with words has a lot to do with moving through hostile architectures (language is one of them) and I wonder, with you, if again we are busy with the thing (untangling language) that brings us away from “the point”. I also wonder what point we are talking about, and maybe there are many points and sometimes we are far from them, sometimes we hit them randomly or maybe we’re so in the point that we think we’re not? ”

There is an intention to wonder and wander about the things that are considered ground. Wondering how we arrive at these things, how we arrive at things that make us think about things, and when these things are words, what happens when the words that arrive don't feel aligned with us?

Something around movement|intention|future as architectural words and methodology as something that is found rather than previously designed. We have no maps for this.

G: What are the strategies for not holding everything that are not compartmentalisation?

I want to be in conversation with you about holding. I have so many questions about this word, it sits with me like a load (a load, an inherited position, an architecture, ...) and I wonder how you feel about it. I've said to you before that things changed for me when I realized that holding space didn't necessarily mean holding people, and I want to know what it's like for you, what you think about that.

J: These questions are all so BIG. Okay.

When I think about holding, I think about it as being really physical - the gesture of holding and also the internal holding of tensions, of thoughts, feelings, energies, memories, traumas, in our minds yes, but my first thought is about bodies (not to be going on about the cartesian split right but I don't have good

language here, maybe the intellectual mind? The social mind? The front brain? What are the names of the different brains? I am gonna look this up...) So it's both about supporting and suppressing? Does holding include withholding or am I putting that there?? Maybe, because I haven't understood how or had language to express, articulate, or even sense, around the accumulation of energies from others that is so much part of my experience and has become a major site/pattern of holding for me, and when I speak about holding space or holding people, it's a lot about this, on this energetic level. And there's been a lot of confusion there for me. Maybe this is already evident in the thing you say of having conflated holding space and holding people.

J: I want to know what holding space is for you now?

G: I recently learned a word in Armenian that is used to name people who practice divination, *nayogh*, which literally means "the ones who are looking". For me it really relates to holding space (divination is, amongst other things, about holding space), how ultimately it's about allowing the possibility for looking, at/through/with, with an intention to question and move away from structures of looking that are rooted in pain, violence, sameness, in contexts that are hostile etc. And I guess looking requires some form of facilitation, or I'm interested in facilitating looking, so I guess that's how I hold space.

I also think about agitation in this sense, as holding space. I guess this is where I prefer to call myself an agitator and not an activist, this word I also find hard when related to myself or what I do, cause it immediately frames words/positions and practices in a way that doesn't fit with me, also it gives me Impostor Syndrome if someone else calls me an activist and I really don't claim this role for myself. Anyhow, small tangent.

Agitation for me is a state of possibility, it requires and brings movement, literal movement, definitely vibration. I am interested in this friction. Holding friction, allowing its specific vibration to manifest and I think there is where I feel a space can be generative, and often times I have found myself in spaces where this was not allowed or definitely avoided, which felt stagnant, like stagnantly resolved, like sitting on things that have been hidden (lol so many images of this come up in my head right now!).

So I guess I'm saying that for me holding space is about allowing the possibility for agitation to manifest, to be a collective experience, to be a generative collective experience.

J: I think about being held or holding and seeing, recognising, the soothing of a moment or experience of distinction or alienation. Like where you can feel your own edges and invite a meeting still. A meeting that is not necessarily about sameness but about intimate witnessing and receiving...

G: It also makes me think about dancing. I feel like in dance training I've been taught to present myself (to be presentable actually) and, having looked at how harmful that was for me, maybe now if I think of dancing as holding space for possibility, holding space for agitation, for agitation as possibility, for the

manifestation of frictions and not for the presentation of all these things, and then maybe I can like dancing. I mean I like dancing (I know you're laughing!!). I just don't know what to do about being looked at while dancing. Because that is loaded in ways that don't allow for me, right now, in the contexts in which I have been/am looked at while dancing, they don't allow for me to be present with my dancing, with holding the space for my presence, for the all of me that wants to be experienced in the dancing to be there.

G: Also, what are we holding, now?

How are we holding, now?

The word diaspora comes up (another one that gives me many feelings) and I think about how in diaspora holding and proximity are maybe not immediately recognizable as related to each other but they are, I guess in a way they orientate around each other and I think there's something there that shapes the way I hold, how I relate to holding. What do you think about this? How is it for you?

J: Now I am thinking about holding as containing, not in an enforced way (or maybe in an enforced way!?) but as a given, as inheritance. And also as legacy, as something offered. And what is the difference between 'I hold' and 'I am'? I want to ask you about this, in relation to the word or position of being part of a diaspora? I guess we take form through the things we hold. Whether it's this thing we were speaking about the other day, about the specific ways in which the experience of certain traumas can affect gait by impacting our relationships to the ground (for example), or it's about my hand taking the form of a cup I hold so that I can drink from it. Systems form bodies, architectures form bodies, experiences form bodies, feelings form bodies...are these things all held? Do they have to be? Do they each have their own timelines? Is this where form is also content?

When I was a kid and discovered that if you kept a terrapin in a larger space, it would grow bigger, my mind was blown - was bigger better? Were the smaller terrapins not fully formed, forever held back? Would everything get bigger if it got more space? What were the impacts of unrealised or suppressed potential??? What was cruelty?

Anyway...a tangent...

Holding and proximity. Diaspora confounds proximity as the only way we have contact and connection right? I think. I was born in London, in England, this has been my environment for my whole life (so far) but the things that shape me are not only this place, are so many things I have not seen or encountered or known through my present senses. And this knowing is not only through attempts to call in, to find, what has been lost and erased through the violences of the colonial project. We don't emerge out of a void, a vacuum. Okay, my eyes are rolling already but I think I am gonna go there: nature. The misunderstanding of this as something definite, fixed, total - because historical - like only the future can be engaged with change...but if that's the case then the present and past must also be. Whatever, this was a potentially problematic

diversion... Just to say we don't arrive here with nothing, nor do I think we even arrive, I think we emerge. I think we emerge with many proximities and that these are carried in our bodies throughout life, unshakeable, but that our relation to them in terms of distance (in space, time, emotional connection/perceived relevance), can be shifting continually.

This suggests a vast and incidental kind of holding to me.

I have always known that I hold other people and this brings proximity to many deaths, means that I hold many deaths, am shaped by many deaths. I feel tired to follow this thought any further right now.

J: How do you understand the relationship between intimacy and proximity?

G: The difference between I hold and I am. <3. If I try to answer this in relationship to the word diaspora, or to my relationship to this word, what comes up are stories of trauma, internalized and passed on, that make holding and being so liminal to each other that they become almost the same. There is brutality in this, when being means holding, there is something that relates it to service, to holding as service, being of service.

There are so many things to say about this that I'm finding it hard to gather my thoughts. Ok.

My experience of intimacy is not necessarily tied to proximity, I have learned/grew up in a context where being displaced (there is surely a better word for this but this one comes up right now) was how things were, and so the work of holding each other was the work of holding this distance, and the specific intimacy that it generated.

I guess that can be where intimacy and proximity meet, but intimacy is not about proximity and vice versa, maybe it's also because of this that we often talk about ghosts to one another?

J: Do you think it's possible that we (me and you) are so busy trying to articulate around the violence of existing conditions and histories, trying to untangle language(/s), that we might be missing the point? How do we listen without direction and not only to gather evidence? How do we move away from mapping?

How do we/you (I guess here I am asking about future strategies and current ones!) remain present with the functional reality of language as something useful for fast communication - via processes of translating and reducing complex experience - and the limitations there are on time (ie always moving towards death)? When is it possible to be casual with language? When is being casual being careless, and when is it not? Why do you think you/we are so concerned with/drawn to working with/on words and language as a site for unsettling oppressive systems? This is also interesting to me because we both spent time in intense physical dance training...

G: Okkkk another huge question - but as you say they are all huge!

Mmmmmm I think I feel an obsession with words (I think I can use this word here) because I am scared of being enclosed by them, maybe if I dedicate so much time and energy and myself in trying to unpack what is being said/how to say something, or the words that are being used, then I can make space for myself, then there is a

possibility to not be devastated by language. Because I feel language is, can be, also devastating.

I don't know if it's about gathering evidence, there was a moment where it was also this for me, like looking for myself in words, in other people's words (which sometimes is like waking up and sometimes is being defined by, which is when I move away) and then there is my intense desire for specificity and complexity to be able to be present at once, and I guess words can do that, or how we (you+I) use words does that for me.

J: When I write gathering evidence, I'm more thinking about the tracking and analysing of systems, collecting proof of their existence, noting their impacts...

G: I think how we are being with words has a lot to do with moving through hostile architectures (language is one of them) and I wonder, with you, if again we are busy with the thing (untangling language) that brings us away from "the point". I also wonder what point we are talking about, and maybe there are many points and sometimes we are far from them, sometimes we hit them randomly or maybe we're so in the point that we think we're not?

Yeah I think dance training also comes into this - how (at least in my experience) training in dance implied something like "not being good with "words. As if body and words could not coexist. And this always made me burn, there is so much assumption and so much is taken away in this approach, both from movement and from language. So maybe teenage me is still trying to prove my teachers wrong (Scorpio sun never lets go of anything right?) or maybe I want/need for body and words to be a part of each other, because ultimately my words are so connected to my body, ultimately all I talk/write/think about is my body, or/and all the things I want to talk about have access to me through my body, or I experience through my body.

Also, I feel for me there's a lot of erasing that happens in witnessing my body so I guess words become context to body? Can I talk my body out? I have also overthought my body to the point of immobility.

So I guess I don't know when or how being casual with language is possible, or when it happens for me. I think I have an internalized understanding of casual as accessible, but I don't feel like the opposite of casual language is necessarily accessible. I guess the even bigger questions would be what is casual language and what is accessible language. Aaaaaaaa!

I don't think I've answered all your questions lol

J: Can we talk about leaders? What do you think about leading? What/who are/have been your guides?

G: Thinking about guides has always been something that frictions with me (I guess we are talking about words as friction here also so it's a very welcome friction, here) because I often have felt like many people around me had clarity about this, like there

is something reassuring about recognizing oneself as a follower or recognizing/relating to a person as someone who can carry. Because I guess ultimately talking about leadership can also mean talking about care, or maybe here I am already trying to move away from (which is obviously also a failed attempt) capitalist/imperialist notions around leadership. I used to say that my guides have been my friends, I think I still feel this, although I feel it might also be a big responsibility to put that on someone who you love and who loves you. But I guess love can also be responsibility and that can be ok?

J: Yes. I want to affirm this. Even though it's complicated...

G: Maybe we need to untangle what responsibility means too, another complicated word to add to the list.

The first things that come up when I think about leading are hierarchies, the problematic potential positionments that this word holds, I think about sitting through many symposiums/talks/round table discussions (omg this image!) about "feminist leadership" and always feeling in the wrong place (lol what's new) and like care was being mistaken for softness/or like softness could erase (or attempt to erase) the messyness that comes with leadership, like there can be a chance for safety there (another word that is like !!! what is safety). Omg thoughts go so fast I am missing myself in trying to write!

My friend A. gifted me a book about tarots that I've been reading, and your question makes me think of the third Arcana, the Empress, and how in the book they talk about them as the "one who is misunderstood". I'm sitting with this right now, the possibility for leadership to be a misunderstanding (also, what isn't?), and how that might be a generative position to look at it from. I think of the Empress as a card that offers more than shows, how their energy is not gifted nor held, but nonetheless here. I think about how I hardly ever draw the Empress when I read tarot for myself, and now I'm wondering what this means. Lol am I saying that cards are my leaders?! I'm not sure, but I guess that in the suggestion of a direction, of an intention, an orientation, I guess they're there.

G: I want to talk about destruction as methodology. Is destruction a methodology? You and I often speak about destruction as methodology and I wanted to ask you what being destructive means to you. Does it create space?

J: I guess it's a word that's been put on me by others - that I challenge, confront, destroy things...and when there's repeated feedback that doesn't match

with what you understand to be your intentions, you have to check with yourself to see what's bringing the disjunct right? So I started thinking, looking for what I might be destroying in actions or words that came from me with the intention to do something else. A basic thing - if I talk about my feelings or experiences and I am told that I am destroying things, how can both these things be true, be happening at once? Because

I can't deny one reality in favour of the other. And I guess I've learned about the ways in which the cultures that I move through/live within function on homogeneity, sameness, agreement, and if this is what I risk destroying when I speak my truths then I can get with that. Because if I believe that we all should have the right to be seen, to be loved, to be heard, to be well, to survive, then I have to include myself within this and push for my space to access those things. Yes, I think destruction can create or open space.

G: If so, do you have words for that space and what can manifest there?

J: So much of my work is concerned with strategies and technologies for opening this space but I never know what will emerge and maybe emerge is a very different word to manifest anyhow...I think I tell myself that I don't know? But actually maybe it's more like I do know - other things become visible, assert their presence - difficulty, discomfort, other kinds of ease, release, the impacts of overwhelm, shifting proximities, collapse, the failure of language, the failure of communication, dysfunction, the desire to be held, alienation, emotion, trembling, grief, pain, lightness, contradictory paradoxical and conflicting realities...quite a brew. I mean, the things that are always there, often being 'held down'. I don't know what happens after we give attention to these things. I don't know how to attend to these things. This is not a safe space. But I guess the patterns of violence are not so clearly entrenched t/ here let's say, are not foretold. So what can manifest? Possibility, I hope, the destruction of illusions, false prophets, aspiration, systems of oppression...space for new imaginaries, movements...

G: If destruction is a methodology, what are hierarchies?

J: Hmm, this makes me think of a question I've been struggling to put into words for you.. I'll just put it here:

What is it to hold the fact of our own multiplicities and the multiplicities of others? I've been thinking about how I have to get better at holding paradox, in my body - so not panicking, not existing only in tension and adrenaline spikes - but also in actions/ practice/conceptually....and if more than one thing is true at any given movement, what do we base our decisions about moving on, without constantly seeking to create hierarchies and go with the things at the top? Because this kind of thinking creates violence in many ways...and I am not necessarily looking to do the easiest or most comfortable thing, because I am wanting shifts not stagnation, not stuckness...

Are hierarchies the same as priorities? When does power become about implicit importance (Authority) and dominance rather than facilitation, supporting, enabling? If there is nothing to be powered then power is just energy looking for connection, lost, wandering...so, if all parts are necessary for there to be a system of operation and there are many simultaneous systems, can we think differently about the fixity of hierarchies?

How do we make a space/group that is non-hierarchical? If there is no hierarchy then how do we know our place? How do we ensure there is no abuse of power? I hear this coming up a lot, especially at the moment, and it's important but it's also long...like haven't we been here before?

There is a tension between a desire for agency and equity, and fear and mistrust of others not to continue to call on systems of dominance. I wonder when calls for toppling hierarchies are actually calls to be the new boss and when the trauma of systematic oppression - of being continually crushed, continually told your reality is not a thing - can establish within us a modality that is always functioning to counter the other, further entrenching us in our positions and perpetuating the system that we rage against. Do you know what I mean?

Systems give us our identities. Will we be able to recognise ourselves when these things fall or dissolve? Change always involves loss or sacrifice of some kind, and this can be terrifying, even when what we are losing has never offered any nourishment or support.

Having said all this, destruction is maybe not the word - ha! Maybe I am misnaming this thing and actually what I want to talk about is dissolution. Destruction brings harm right? It's emotional, it suggests the things being destroyed is sentient - and even if systems resonate in our sentient bodies, they themselves are not sentient, so maybe destruction is too suggestive here? Okay so I am in a word tangle (as ever)... I was in a conversation the other day where we were speaking about whether the use of terms associated with the law can be useful (or not) in disentangling demands for justice/the recognition of systemic violence from the dismissive gaslighting response that can often come, that people being critical are being emotional or angry or that the situation is 'personal'; can the language of the law which enacts and supports this violence really be used to make it visible? Dissolution is a legal term no? Hmm...

Or is the word ruin? I want to ruin things! But again, there is a life given with this word, as a certain relationship to inevitable processes of time and degradation...

Can we think hierarchies as structures that grant temporary and specific (as opposed to total) authority to guide collective performance/offering towards a particular action? Hierarchy not as identity but as functional technology applied towards the creation or enacting of specific intentions?

G: If we recognize that destruction can be an act of killjoy but we don't want it to necessarily be (only) that, then what can we propose?

J: So we talk about this killjoy thing a lot no? After you made me read Sara Ahmed (lol) and I wrote all my critical notes and read them to you on the phone and we laughed and I had to also admit feeling seen by that text, and that it has lent us more language to move in our conversations...

Who wants to be 'only' anything? Who/what is 'only' anything? And also we know that we are not only killing joy just by the fact of the joy we find in each other so...what are we really talking about here? How we navigate and are received by the world? How we navigate and are received in our places and offerings of work? The feeling that this can often relate (or be related to) the role of the killjoy?

G: Is this imagining future landscapes?

J: Is this taking on new roles? Is this self-definition? Is this shifting focus? Is this re-orientation? Why are we imagining and not doing? Is imagining a kind of doing in the way that it opens (and perhaps is also limited by) possibility, and if kept open, will act as a draw towards the recognition of that possibility in the material world? **Some kind of magnetism.**

Giorgia Ohanesian Nardin is an artist, independent researcher and queer agitator of Armenian descent.

Trained in dance, their work exists in the shape of movement/video/text/ choreography/sound/gatherings and deals with narratives of hostility, rest, friction, sensuality, healing.

SERAFINE1369 (previously Last Yearz Interesting Negro) is the London based artist and dancer Jamila Johnson-Small. SERAFINE1369 works with dancing as a philosophical undertaking, a political project with ethical psycho-spiritual ramifications for being-in-the-world; dancing as intimate technology.

Their work is informed by research into movement and dance as a tool for divination, decoding messages from an oracular body - on personal/structural/symptomatic/somatic/psychic levels - to be processed through the medium of choreography. Always thinking about the metabolic - impact and exchange through/in/as movement. Their shows are stage/dreamspace/battle-ground, decompositions, atmospheric landscapes created through the live unfolding of the tensions between things that produce meaning.

SERAFINE1369 has a relational, cumulative and often collaborative practice, gathering and transmitting information through working in various constellations, at different scales and in different roles to build spaces for communing/attuning/communicating through dancing, performance, listening and conversation; spaces that might hold the complex, multiple and contradictory, spaces that consider movement and transformation as inevitable, working to be unsettling situations of non-dominance.

The **Blue Skies Conversation Series** is presented by **International Curators Forum** and made possible with support from **Art Fund**.