

Imagining Outside of a Pandemic **A Response from a Queer Improvising Percussive Dancer**

Nic Gareiss

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Article abstract

I'm a dancer who engages improvisation every time I put on my shoes to brush, step, click, and knock the floor. Not surprisingly, my work until March 2020 was primarily with fellow sound-makers, usually folk musicians from Ireland, Scotland, what's now called Canada, and what's now called Appalachia. COVID-19 has forced me to listen to the extemporaneous music I make anew, in the absence of collaborators, within a soundscape of profound uncertainty. In this contribution, I offer a voice from the floor, enunciated by my lowest limbs contacting the surface upon which I stand. This is where my work as an LGBTQ2IA+ improvising step dancer finds its meaning. In this essay, I respond to the incisive queer horizon Thomas F. DeFrantz casts, as "imagining outside of what came before." I share ways I have been thinking about improvisation and offer thoughts on how we might learn from DeFrantz to imagine and improvise "outside of" critically, queerly, and generatively.

Imagining Outside of a Pandemic: A Response from a Queer Improvising Percussive Dancer

Nic Gareiss

But then creatively, queerness as I'm trying to think it through at the heart of improvisation, is a willingness to resist the normativity that produced what there was. Then you're trying to improvise outside of there. You're trying to go to a queer space or through a queer methodology to flip the beat or change the rhythm, so for me they go together. (DeFrantz)

I'm a dancer who engages improvisation every time I put on my shoes. I wear shoes because the dancing I do makes sound as I brush, step, click, and knock the floor. Not surprisingly, my work until March 2020 was primarily with fellow sound-makers, usually musicians—or as I like to call them, dancers who hold things. COVID-19 changed all that. To invoke ethnochoreologist Catherine Foley, percussive dancers do not only dance to music, we also make music of our own (Foley 55). This pandemic has forced me to listen to the extemporaneous music I make anew, in the absence of collaborators, within a soundscape of profound uncertainty. In this brief contribution, I offer a voice from the floor, enunciated by my lowest limbs contacting the surface upon which I stand. This is where my work as an improvising percussive dancer finds its meaning.

In these times of pervasive questioning, I'm both heartened and inspired by words spoken (extemporaneously) by dancer and critical race scholar Thomas F. DeFrantz following a recent talk he gave: "That's how jazz works, you have to be able to imagine outside of what happened before. And it's going to be butch or femme or dykey, it's going to be all of these things, it's going to be super queer to get to the place where it's going to be interesting as an improvisation." I am no jazz expert. The flatfoot, clog, and step dance forms I perform originate in rural spaces in Ireland, Canada, and Appalachia among primarily agrarian communities—very different geographies and lifeways than the environments we might associate with jazz. I'm also wary of continuing the history of borrowing brilliant Black thought and misapplying it to my own experience as a white person. Still, as a fellow LGBTQIA+ person (and a fellow improvising percussive dancer), I hear incredible queer promise in DeFrantz's provocation. Like many of us, I am trying to imagine "outside of" this pandemic. We're endeavoring to figure out how to exist in this moment (which feels somehow both faster and slower than the "before time") as well as how to imagine sustainability, equity, and pleasure in both the world of now and the world to come. This proffers tremendous possibility for remolding the topography of our creative lives.

In this essay, I respond to the incisive queer horizon DeFrantz casts through the temporal facets of our moment. More personally, I want to share ways I have been thinking about improvisation and offer thoughts on how we might learn from DeFrantz to imagine and improvise "outside of" critically, queerly, and generatively.

Improvising Queerly Outside Of and In-Between

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the studio where I rehearse in my neighborhood was forced to close. Unable to pay rent on their own storefront, the studio opted to relocate their operations to a shared arts space across town. (Their classes have not yet resumed at the time of this writing in summer 2020.) However, they let me keep my key. Having a space this spring to which I could escape was incredibly helpful. I would often find myself walking down the neighborhood

block late at night, unplanned, to improvise in the studio.

Shortly after sharing the news that they would be closing, the studio organizers pulled up their Marley dance floor covering, leaving a patchwork of plywood connected by black gaff tape. In an attempt to create a consistent topography upon which to move, the knots and inconsistencies of the boards were filled by the tape to allow the rubberized dance surface to lay smoothly. I discovered this newly exposed jigsaw of plywood after arriving at the studio late one evening.

Plywood is no stranger to me. I grew up dancing on sheets of it at outdoor folk festivals. As I put on my shoes and began to warm up in the studio that night, I experimented with the way the “new” floor shaped my improvisational sounds and movements. Moving through the space and sensing the inconsistencies of the plywood through my soles, I realized how much more information I was aware of with the layer of rubber removed. My haptic and auditory relationship with the wooden surface was strikingly different. The friction between my feet and the floor was altered. Certain frequencies were highlighted, while others were less present. Sibilances were more muted while the lower tessitura of my shoes was amplified. In brushing and sliding across the surface, I realized that these seams, knots, and inconsistencies had been there all along, but were rendered invisible and intangible by the “more perfect” rubber dance floor. Stripped of the veneer of smoothness, the irregularities that were always present became perceptible.



Detail images of the plywood flooring in the dance studio space where I rehearse.
Photos by Nic Gareiss.

Something about this exposure, the removal of the smooth dance surface, feels connected to our present moment. In the midst of this pandemic, the illusion of evenness, of seamlessness, is lifted away. I wonder if variations of form and texture in our lives will be more knowable than before. How will we respond to these variations of which we were blithely unaware because of the privilege of evenness underfoot? Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes that “textural perception always explores two other questions as well: ‘How did it get that way?’ and ‘What could I do with it?’” (Sedgwick 13). I know how the dance floor in the studio became the way it is. Now what can I do with it? Working with it improvisationally, I experienced new sensations of sound and touch. This allowed me to imagine new potentialities for a floor I thought I knew. While we may not yet know precisely how the pandemic began, the questions remain: What will we do with its effects? How will we alter our social practices based on what we’ve witnessed and experienced?” The removal of the Marley provoked what DeFrantz calls an imagining “outside of” for me. It made me wonder how we will interact with the variegated social circumstances we have (perhaps) recently become aware of. How can we queerly imagine “outside of” the in-between place in which we find ourselves?

Queer Percussive Dance Improvisations through the Screen

I've been teaching a small weekly roster of students online from my home, exploring how this new kind of virtual pedagogy could work for improvised percussive dance. How does one teach improvisation when so much of that process seems contingent upon offering in-person encouragement and constructive feedback? How can an instructor digitally foster a disinhibiting mood to enable students to move in new ways? Early in the pandemic I felt hamstrung by these questions. I struggled to imagine ways of sharing the joy and pleasure of improvisation with my students through a screen.

This changed when one of my Appalachian flatfooting students, a white woman who also identifies as LGBTQIA+, suggested that we take turns improvising to some fiddle and banjo music she had been listening to while isolating at home. While on FaceTime, we set our iPhones on the floor so we could see each other's feet as we danced. We each improvised through the duration of a few different tracks, playing them in our own space through a speaker. As my student and I took turns dancing through the full length of each track, we observed the nuances of one another's movement, sounds, and engagement with the music. Afterwards, we talked about what we liked, what made sense, and what could be improved: "I loved the way the darker timbre of your toe sounds interacts with the way the fiddle plays the melody down the octave." "The feel of the 'B' section could be a little more laid back, I think." "What if you used L.C. King's step for a full time through at the top of the tune to establish a consistent rhythmic pattern?" This experiment dissolved (some of) the hierarchy of teacher-student relations, creating a mood of dialogical, improvisational exchange. It also allowed me as the instructor to be vulnerable enough to respond in-the-moment, to depart from lesson plans, and to have a real-time dance conversation with my pupil.

It wasn't until the lesson ended that I realized how much this pedagogical improvisation trading borrows from Appalachian flatfoot dance contests. At these events, participants improvise one time through a thirty-two-bar fiddle and banjo tune with a four-bar tag. This usually means each contestant dances for less than a minute. Competitors flatfoot to the same tune and are scored by two or more judges on their style, timing, and presence within the conventions of this extemporaneous Appalachian percussive movement style.

I've put some space between me and these contests since I won a ribbon at sixteen. However, dancing with my students through our screens during the pandemic has reminded me that Appalachian flatfoot competitions create a culture of conversation around specific improvisational performances. This feels rare. How often is an extemporaneous dance practice allowed the space and attention to occupy conversation and, in its way, create discourse? We seldom observe improvised movement so keenly. On FaceTime, my student and I watch each other and are somehow reminded of traditional steps or techniques we knew but had forgotten. We are animated by the other dancer's improvised music, which in turn reveals their relationship with the melody of the fiddle tune. We are titillated by their contact with the sound-making surface and enlivened by a fellow mover's affectual virtuosity: how we do or do not let the dance light us up. This pleases us.

This feels like a DeFrantzian "queer methodology." For my students and me, the exercise of improvising through a screen recuperated the pleasurable facets of Appalachian flatfoot contests that are often overshadowed during in-person events by normativity: palpable performance anxiety, passive (and overt) aggression as competitors wait for their turn, and a hierarchical calculus of winners and losers. Sharing improvisations through our screens opened up a queer space of pleasurable extemporaneous possibility for Appalachian percussive dance

and allowed us to imagine “outside of” the contest format.

Queer Pandemic Improvisations and Isolation

It feels like no coincidence that my student who suggested we trade improvisations and I are both queer people. Queer folks set ourselves apart through imaginative improvisational acts that prioritize pleasure. Whether that means pursuing the anonymous connection sparked on the dance floor or on the street, disclosing our desires that might be off the beaten track, or adorning (or de-adorning) ourselves to innovate away from binary gender norms that hem us in, these spur-of-the-moment decisions seize the possibility of pleasure, diverting from the planned or the expected. However, over and over, the same binary calculus of winning and losing sets us back as we opt for other extemporaneous uncharted paths. As queer dancer, curator, and author Clare Croft often reminds me, queerness is marked by its refusal. Time and again, queer refusals have detrimental implications for us materially and socially: the refusal of (often-internalized) heteronormative, cis-normative pressure to “get ahead” by societal standards of achievement; the refusal to do one’s gender the “right way;” or the refusal to desire the “correct” bodies or sexual acts. To quote José Esteban Muñoz, these choices put us “out of step with straight time” (Muñoz 149). However, it’s through such improvisational acts of refusal that we find animating corporeal meaning. Through our queer improvisations, we imagine “outside of” to find new ways of being.

Thinking about this queer corporeal animation reminds me of other imaginative queer improvisational bodily choices made during a different pandemic. Deaths in the US during the AIDS crisis eclipsed the current US death toll of COVID-19 (as of summer 2020) by at least four hundred percent (Centers For Disease Control 2). Both pandemics disproportionately devastated Black and Brown people; however, deaths from HIV/AIDS never made the front page of *The New York Times* the way the announcement of 100,000 US coronavirus fatalities did on May 24, 2020 (Barry). In the face of devastating loss, compounded by the tremendous uncertainty, fear, and apathy from the heteronormative media, queer folks improvised “outside of” the HIV/AIDS pandemic to imagine new ways of seeking pleasure. Queer theorist David M. Halperin writes that “much of what now qualifies as ‘safe sex’ is the result of gay men’s spontaneous improvisation, their calculated risk” (Halperin 19). In prioritizing these moments of pleasure, we imagine, we get tested, we inform ourselves, and we “balance safety and risk in proportions that have turned out to be both acceptable...and successful in limiting the spread of HIV” (Halperin 19). Halperin highlights serosorting, the process of sexual decision-making based upon HIV status, as one of the innovations improvised within queer communities since the 1980s. Serosorting was an important strategy in that it initiated conversations about HIV status, encouraged testing, and helped slow the spread of the virus. Though to this day no drug or technique has been developed that is one hundred percent effective in preventing the transmission of HIV, serosorting flipped the beat, “changing the rhythm” of the AIDS pandemic. For many of us that can’t afford HIV antiviral PrEP drugs, which preemptively reduce the risk of HIV infection, serosorting, and condom use, continue to be an affordable and sustainable sexual health strategy. I recognize this is a very different matter in our current pandemic. Without access to effective, affordable, regular, and reliable COVID-19 testing, it’s impossible to serosort ourselves for the coronavirus right now. It feels too early to tell what will flip the beat of COVID-19, but thinking about it in relation to the AIDS crisis is helping me begin to cultivate empathy for the range of emotions (terror, loss, despair, guilt, shame, rage) that might have been, and continue to be, experienced by queer people during that (ongoing) epidemic.

This feels important for me personally. Coming of age when I did, I am embarrassed to admit that, before the COVID-19 pandemic, I had never given deep thought to my own connection to the AIDS crisis, especially the adaptations it forced queer people to make. Now I think of it every

day, especially in relation to my dancing. I was trained in improvisational percussive traditions that value transmission of a different kind: transmission of style, weight, musicality. My teachers shared their time, their homes, and their improvisations with me to pass on the dancing they do—percussive dancer and dance scholar Janet Schroeder calls this “ongoingness” (Schroeder 8-9). While I have many dance teachers who generously share “ongoingness” with me, I feel bereft of queer mentor figures, specifically older gay men, due to the AIDS pandemic. When I do have the rare pleasure of speaking with queer folks who lived through the nineteen-eighties and nineties, I’m struck by the profound sense of loneliness and isolation that many of them express having survived their friends and lovers. While I know I will never fully comprehend these feelings of isolation, something about our present moment might be similar. If, as DeFrantz says, queerness is at the heart of creativity, maybe isolation is at the heart of queerness. Sue-Ellen Case wrote one of my favorite passages about queerness: “the queer dwells underground, below the operatic overtones of the dominant; frightening to look at, desiring, as it plays its own organ, producing its own music” (Case 3). It feels like we are queerly listening to our own music as we distance ourselves from one another right now.

Social distancing itself has forced me to learn to listen to the music I make in the absence of collaborators. This feels like DeFrantz’s “resisting the normativity that came before,” as so many of the percussive dance traditions that I study occur in the context of live fiddle music. The necessity of sheltering in place has forced me to go to a queer place of listening to the shoe music I make on my own. A teacher who recently watched a Facebook livestream performance I gave called me afterwards to say that my ability to evoke specific pieces of fiddle tune repertoire was “unparalleled.” I was very flattered by this comment. It felt good to have my teacher understand some of the strategies of queer adaptation I’ve been forced to make during this time of improvising alone. However, I was struck by the way that the fiddle tunes were still there, even in the absence of the fiddlers. The time alone has helped me to imagine “outside of” what my relationship with music can be, without the foot and instrument symbiosis that has historically characterized the percussive dance styles I perform.

It feels callous to say that it took a pandemic for me to begin to realize the improvisatory potential of my own dancing, my own listening, my own music. Currently the COVID-19 numbers are on the rise in my region, and it doesn’t look as though there is any end in sight to the relentless uncertainty, economic deprivation, and death caused by this disease. However, DeFrantz’s words have helped me to imagine beyond the horizon of the present. Reiterating his ideas to myself as I improvise alone or work with my students through the screen, the queer potential of extemporaneous movement and sound-making feels urgent, pleasurable, and timely.

I’ll end this contribution with an invitation. After all, not everyone is trans, lesbian, or gay, but maybe everybody can be queer (O’Rourke). Maybe in embracing our uncertainty we can abandon the normativity that came before this pandemic: the ways we’ve been made to feel small, the ways we have been cast as outsiders, or the ways we have deluded ourselves about our ability to get along inside a system we didn’t design. This is one hope I have during this pandemic, a time when hope can feel really far away. Another hope is that through resisting the normativity that came before, we can extemporize ends to systems that de-animate queer people, and, disproportionately, Black and Brown trans people. Perhaps through re-imagining improvisation with queerness at its heart we can find new ways of animating our movement and resisting normativity, with and without instruments, screens, or each other.

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