

# PROXIMITY

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Division of the

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI‘I AT MĀNOA

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

IN

DANCE

December 2021

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Keywords: Isolation, Connection, Community, Body Awareness, Proximity, Gestures, Non-Verbal Communication, Mobility, Touch, Pandemic, Facial Expression

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my husband Chace, you have supported me through innumerable trials these last few years. with unconditional patience, love, and understanding. Thank you for seeing my passion, for growing with me, for perpetually convincing me to try new things, and for helping me see the bigger picture when I get overwhelmed day to day. You are my rock, my person, and I love you.

I want to thank my Committee Chair and mentor, Amy Shiffner, for the numerous ways you encouraged and challenged me to take action in my life and be bold. My time as your student has profoundly impacted me personally and professionally, helping me to define myself as an artist, scholar, and dancer. Your energy, sincerity, and passion has been a life raft and example for me more times than you know and I will forever consider you my mentor.

To my cast: Allan, Angela, Greta, Maria, and Marley, thank you all from the bottom of my heart. I cannot begin to express how grateful I am to have worked with you all. I will always remember the laughter and joy I felt investigating sea jellies in the sand, playing in roly chairs, and blowing bubbles together. Thank you for encouraging the endless irrelevant names and sounds I used for gestures, such as ‘cacaw’, and for sporadic mini-dance and song parties that happened throughout rehearsals, such as the one hit wonder ‘bubbled’. Thank you for the unending support you offered during every stage of development. I cherish each of you as friends, artists, and colleagues and am honored by the creative and emotional energy you invested in my work.

Thank you to The Edward A. “Skeep” Langhans Foundation for your generous support that enabled me to complete my thesis and fulfill my vision.

Finally, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Theatre and Dance faculty Peiling Kao, Mark Branner, Amy Shiffner, Betsy Fisher, Dr. Jhalak Kara Miller. You all have profoundly shaped me as an artist, educator, choreographer, critical thinker, researcher, and community member.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

**I. THESIS PROPOSAL.....1**

ABSTRACT.....1

CONCEPT .....1

OVERVIEW AND PURPOSE .....1

THEMES.....2

POTENTIAL TITLES.....2

CASTING.....2

LOCATION.....3

CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS AND VISION.....3

MOVEMENT DESCRIPTION .....4

MUSIC.....5

LIGHTING.....5

COSTUMES .....6

PROPS.....6

TECHNOLOGY .....6

TIMELINE.....7

DOCUMENTATION PLAN.....8

PROPOSED BUDGET.....8

UNRESOLVED NEEDS.....	9
CREATIVE INSPIRATION.....	9
<b>II. PRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>11</b>
CONCERT.....	11
CASTING.....	13
LOCATIONS.....	13
PT. 1 DISSOCIATE.....	13
PT. 2 UNAPPROACHABLE.....	15
PT. 3 REMEMBER.....	17
COSTUMES.....	18
PT. 1 DISSOCIATE.....	18
PT. 2 UNAPPROACHABLE.....	18
PT. 3 REMEMBER.....	18
MUSIC.....	19
PT. 1 DISSOCIATE.....	20
PT. 2 UNAPPROACHABLE.....	20
PT. 3 REMEMBER.....	20
REHEARSALS.....	21
CHOREOGRAPHY AND CREATIVE PROCESS.....	23

PT. 3 REMEMBER.....	24
PT. 2 UNAPPROACHABLE.....	26
PT. 1 DISSOCIATE.....	27
VIDEOGRAPHY.....	30
EDITING.....	31
COMMITTEE VIEWINGS.....	32
CAST RESPONSE.....	32
AUDIENCE RESPONSE.....	33
REFLECTIONS.....	35
<b>III. DOCUMENTATION.....</b>	<b>37</b>
APPENDIX A: VIDEO ACCESS TO FULL CONCERT.....	37
APPENDIX B: REGISTRATION FORM.....	37
APPENDIX C: REGISTRATION RESPONSES.....	38
APPENDIX D: IMPROVISATION CLIP.....	38
WORKS CITED.....	39

## LIST OF IMAGES

Image 1. May 2021 Budget Proposal.....	8
Image 2. Visual representation of concert inception .....	11
Image 3. Marketing Poster for Concert.....	12
Image 4. Giving notes during the re-filming of “Pt. 1 Dissociate” .....	14
Image 5. Room 306, Thomas Hale Hamilton Library .....	15
Image 6. Set design for “Pt. 2 Unapproachable”.....	16
Image 7. Custom posters used in the set design of “Pt. 2 Unapproachable” .....	16
Image 8. Kuli'ou'ou Beach cast photo before filming “Pt. 3 Remember”.....	17
Image 9. Potential costume variations for “Pt. 3 Remember”.....	19
Image 10. Dancers prepare their solos prior to rehearsal in the pool .....	21
Image 11. Collage of ‘reaching’ moments throughout Proximity .....	22
Image 12. Dancers practicing reaching movement together underwater for “Pt. 1 Dissociate” ...	24
Image 13. Dancers open their arms to the sky during the filming of “Pt. 3 Remember” .....	25
Image 14. Dancers distant from one another during filming of “Pt. 2 Unapproachable” .....	26
Image 15. Soloist Marley Aiu dancing underwater in “Pt. 1 Dissociate” .....	28
Image 16. Drone footage of dancers during filming of “Pt. 3 Remember” .....	30
Image 17. Dancers hold hands during filming of “Pt. 3 Remember”.....	32
Image 18. Post filming cast photo from “Pt. 3 Remember”... ..	33

## I. THESIS PROPOSAL

### ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to explore the struggle to connect with self and others virtually and physically in light of the ongoing isolation, fatigue, and anxieties resulting from the COVID-19 Pandemic. I plan to examine the concepts of social isolation and identity dissonance in my choreography in three different stages: 1. Quarantine 2. Online education 3. Approaching a "new normal". I will delve into the distortion of self, community, time, and connection that has occurred in the past year using modern and contemporary dance genres informed by non-verbal communication studies. More specifically I will focus on gestures, proximity, touch, and facial expressions and how our presentation of self and perception of others has shifted during each of the three stages. This performance aims to invoke introspection and community dialogue regarding the shared adversities of the pandemic as we transition to a "new normal".

### CONCEPT

In order to fulfill the MFA Thesis Concert requirement, I propose a suite of three dance works to be filmed and shown virtually via Zoom, Youtube, or ShowTIX4U. The performance will be approximately 20 minutes in length, with each of the three dance suites being 6-8 minutes. The proposed title of my thesis is *Can You Hear Me?*. The performance will explore the struggle to connect with self and others following the COVID-19 Pandemic using non-verbal communication of gestures, proximity, touch, and facial expressions expressed through modern and contemporary dance. I will use mobility exercises to help assist dancer's during the rehearsal process with (re)connection to their own bodies in order to improve their ability to connect with others.

### OVERVIEW AND PURPOSE

Through the production of this thesis, I seek to answer whether the pursuit of bodily awareness and processing of shared experiences through the choreographic process can improve dancers' perceived connection to self and others and the audience's perceived sense of community. Dancers will take audiences on a journey through the emotional and physical embodiment of our unique circumstances following the COVID-19 Pandemic, highlighting the struggles of quarantine, online schooling, and a re-emergence into each other's physical space

using non-verbal communication with space, touch, gestures, and facial expressions. The first piece will be an underwater work that emphasizes a struggle to stay afloat following extended periods of isolation, endless screen time, distortions of time, and altered self-perception. The second piece will focus exclusively on the virtual attempts to connect with others and the resulting non-verbal gestures that have become a part of our everyday movement vocabulary. This piece will emulate a virtual meeting in the beginning and shift into one singular classroom where dancers will remain distanced in their desks and go through the motions of zoom gestures, flat responses, and never ending meetings. The final piece will be set in a large, open field and embrace an awkward return to the physical connection of dancers sharing and taking up space without regard to proximity. Dancers will joyously investigate a "new normal" with some fumbles along the way, sharing in an open connection to oneself and one another without the barriers of the virtual world or physical distancing.

## THEMES

Pt 1. Isolation, sterility, silence, disconnect from self and others, identity crisis, fear of the unknown, stifled, sinking

Pt 2. Miscommunication, Zoom fatigue, shifting perceptions of self and others, missing crucial body language, fake positivity, dread, sunken

Pt 3. Awkwardness of physical proximity and touch, improved awareness of self leading to improved connection to others, felt energy, joy followed by panic, rebound

## POTENTIAL TITLES

Pt 1. Isolated Incident, Be Flexible, Inward Pressure, Sterile Bodies

Pt 2. Look But Don't Touch, 2D Limits, Your Mic Is Off, Across Lines

Pt 3. Awkward Re-Introduction, Uncertain Joy, Hello Again

## CASTING

I will be emailing University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM) dancers in the beginning of May to begin casting. I am seeking six to ten dancers with a strong desire to improve their

connection to self and others through bodily awareness and physical presence. Dancers must be able to swim and willing to participate in ongoing conditioning and mobility exercises throughout the rehearsal process.

## LOCATIONS

Pt 1. The first piece will be set in the private pool located in the backyard of my duplex rental. The pool's floor and walls are covered in small, dark-blue tiles. I have unlimited access to this space and the pool is regularly cleaned and chlorinated. The dancers will only be dancing solos for this piece. I expect to split the cast into two smaller groups for pool rehearsal days in order to give more individual attention to underwater exercises and training and to allow a more comfortable distancing in the pool and on the patio before, during, and after rehearsal.

Pt 2. For the second piece I would like to use a medium-to-large-sized classroom and smaller study spaces. I am proposing room 113 in Thomas Hale Hamilton Library for the classroom, with room 101 in John F. Kennedy Theatre as a potential alternative. I will have the dancers doing solo work in the study spaces to emulate the Zoom-like setting and then dance all together in the large classroom in a socially distanced manner with tape on the floors sectioning off six-foot grids. Ideally, a majority of the choreography for this location will be rehearsed in the dance studio using the chairs from Hamilton Library, if possible, or, on-site in room 113.

Pt 3. I would like the third section to be set in a large, open park or field. I am proposing Lyon Arboretum as the specific venue. Ideally, I would like for my dancers to be able to dance without masks or physical distancing, but will adjust my rehearsals and choreography to follow all local COVID-19 policies and state laws. Rehearsals for this piece will start exclusively in the studio and as the summer progresses, more will be set at Lyon Arboretum to begin connecting with the space and land on-site.

## CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS AND VISION

In order to have my dancers first improve their bodily awareness and connection to self, I will begin rehearsals solely focusing on mobility exercises. The goal of these exercises will be to bring the dancers closer to their own bodies, fostering an improved sense of spatial awareness and self-confidence that will impact their collective confidence to dance with each other later in

the process and bring about a strong sense of community over time. I will ask dancers to continually take an inquisitive approach to their movement and non-verbal communication throughout the rehearsal process, noticing their breath, apprehensions of proximity or expression, gestures, sensations of the skin.

Pt 1. For the first piece I intend to teach the choreography to my dancers on dry land and then give them the artistic freedom to adjust and adapt the movement as needed underwater to feel best in their bodies. I will have pre-set phrases for this piece and will supplement these phrases with personal movement from each of the dancers that emulates their own struggles with isolation and connection during the pandemic.

Pt 2. For the second piece I will focus specifically on gestures and how they have shifted and become more exaggerated during our extended time on Zoom and wearing masks in public. I will ask each dancer to reflect on the unique posture and gestures they may knowingly or unknowingly embody during their Zoom meetings and classes and incorporate those into specific phrases. The choreography will be isolated to six feet apart and each dancer will have their own desk to be used as a prop and dancing partner during the piece.

Pt 3. For the third piece I will continue to observe the body language and dynamic shifts between interactions of people I see out in public and on social media and use these as inspiration for the movement. I will incorporate the hesitation I see when others engage in hugs, handshakes, close proximity, bumping into another person, speaking directly into another's face, and struggle to maintain eye contact as the main impetus for movement. I would like for the choreography to embody a deep yearning for touch and physical closeness while acknowledging the anxiety we may feel towards re-engaging with these behaviors. The choreography for this piece should emphasize a trial and error of new physical freedoms and the emotional hesitation of pursuing a "new normal" for communication and connection.

## MOVEMENT DESCRIPTION

Pt 1. Ethereal, slow, sustained, timeless, constricted, inward, reaching and grabbing, turning away from, trapped, sinking, haunting, use of mid and low levels, never surfacing, struggling

Pt 2. Reactionary, mimicry, zombie-like, exaggerated, interruptions, lagging, literal, without flourish, leaning into, slouching, gestural emphasis of face, hands, and shoulders, shaking

Pt 3. Hesitant, stumbling, embrace, sharing weight, rebound, awkward touch, joyous, energetic, leaps, face-to-face interaction, playful, inquisitive, taking up space, avoidance of low levels for any sustained period of time, spinning

## MUSIC

For my thesis I will be avoiding the use of any words in the music selections for all three pieces. I am proposing the following songs or concepts for each of my three works.

Pt 1. For the first piece I would like to collaborate with Monika Haar to create a soundscape that includes the natural vibrations of the water during filming with sounds of breath and exasperation. I am interested in having words and phrases spoken during this piece that are distorted through the water making them incomprehensible to the audience.

Pt 2. For the second piece I would like to collaborate with Monika Haar to create an original composition that encompasses the soundscape of quarantine households. I am envisioning the incorporation of the notifications from Zoom, iPhones, social media, the sounds of dogs barking, children yelling, laughing, and doors slamming. I would like this piece to have a rhythm and melody to it that is fairly monotonous and repetitive with occasional crashes, silence, or freezes.

Pt 3. For the third piece I am searching for one or more musical compositions that have a dual connection to feelings of joy and uncertainty or hesitation.

## LIGHTING DESIGN

For lighting design, I will be collaborating with the same person(s) selected to assist with the filming and editing of the production.

Pt 1. The first piece will be set during the evening and will utilize a single can light installed underwater in the pool as the main source of light. I anticipate a need for additional underwater lighting to enhance the quality and clarity of each dancer's movement and have included this in my proposed budget.

Pt 2. The second piece will be set in the Hamilton Library and will require minimal additional lighting. There will be a single projection onto a screen or whiteboard in the classroom behind students mimicking Zoom meetings and seminars. I anticipate I may need one to three supplemental lamps to account for shadows in the classroom and should have no issues with lighting for the open study spaces.

Pt 3. The third piece, set at Lyon Arboretum, will be filmed during the day and will utilize natural lighting.

## COSTUMES

Pt 1. I would like the somber mood of the first piece to be reflected by simple black, long-sleeved leotards and black bike shorts to highlight lines of the dancers' bodies in front of the dark-blue tile and water of the pool.

Pt 2. I want the costumes for the second piece to reflect the quarantine, work-from-home apparel seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. This would include an assortment of faded, raggedy t-shirts, baggy sweatpants, boxer briefs, professional button-up shirts or blouses, hooded sweatshirts, and mismatched socks.

Pt 3. I am proposing an assortment of saturated pastel pants, tops, and dresses to be worn for the third piece. The costumes will emulate a return of color to life, but in a more muted manner than the bright and bold pre-COVID-19 era.

## PROPS

I am proposing the use of desks as a prop for my dancers in the second piece. I am most interested in the specific rolling desks in classroom 113 in Hamilton Library and will inquire about rental or use of these and the number of desks available.

## TECHNOLOGY

I am proposing a paid collaboration for the filming and editing of my thesis. I will send out my proposal to the Academy of Creative Media (ACM) department at UHM along with a few local connections in April. Ideally, this person would have some of their own camera and sound equipment to include any of the following: Tripod, GoPro Hero 5 or higher, camera stabilizer (gimbal), camera microphone, projector, and drone. I am anticipating a need to

purchase or rent a large speaker, tripod, and stabilizer should my collaborator not have their own equipment. I currently own a GoPro Hero 5 and will require at minimum: a large speaker, stabilizer (gimbal), a tripod for filming at Lyon Arboretum and in the classroom, and a projector for use in the classroom. I would prefer to use a handheld camera of equal or higher resolution than my GoPro for filming in Lyon Arboretum and in the classroom.

#### TIMELINE FOR COMPLETION

December 2020 - January 2021	Preliminary research begins
February 2021 - April 2021	Choreographic exploration begins
March 1, 2021	Formation of proposed Committee and Circulation of thesis proposal
March 2021	Second Draft of thesis proposal submitted to Committee
April 2021	Proposal sent to community members for filming and editing collaboration
Early May 2021	Casting of dancers via email, proposal sent for music collaboration, request made to Hamilton Library for space and desk rental
May 2021	Full cast rehearsals begin twice weekly starting May 24th
Late June 2021	First Committee showing, propose lighting and costume revisions to Committee and collaborator(s), select costumes
Late July 2021	Second Committee showing
Mid August 2021	Third Committee showing, costume alterations, publicity photo shoot, dress and tech rehearsals
Mid August 2021	Filming of work, begin film and music editing

Early September 2021	Begin circulation of marketing/publicity materials online, on-campus, and around town
Mid September 2021	Participate in a radio and/or social media interview, finalization of all video and music edits, marketing email and social media blasts
October 1 & 2 2021	Virtual presentation of show
Mid October 2021	Submission of first draft thesis paper and Defense of thesis
Late October 2021	Submission of Second draft thesis paper
November 5	Deadline for thesis submission to Graduate Division

#### DOCUMENTATION PLAN

My goal is to take one or more photos or videos per rehearsal, save screenshots of important texts or emails, and journal throughout the entire process.

#### PROPOSED BUDGET

<b>Videographer: \$1,500</b>
Filming \$150/hr x 10 hrs (Three 8-min films)
Included: Collaborative meetings, set-up and break-down, camera, lenses, GoPro 8, gimbal (not waterproof), tripod
<b>Editing Collaboration: \$425</b>
Included: Collaborative meetings, two major revisions, improved video & color grading, graphics/overlays
<b>Equipment: \$75</b>
Gimbal w/ underwater capability (\$75)
In-kind support from UHM Theatre Department
<b>Virtual Publicity, Marketing, Production: \$0</b>
Self produced, marketed, and publicized
<b>Venues: \$0</b>
Private pool, Hamilton Library, public field or beach
<b>Costumes: \$0</b>
In-kind support from UHM Theatre Department
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<b>Total Estimate: \$2,000</b>

Image 1. May 2021 Budget Proposal

## UNRESOLVED NEEDS

I am still in need of a confirmed location and desks for my classroom piece. I am proposing classroom 113 in Hamilton Library in addition to the open study spaces. I will need to contact the appropriate officials to inquire about ongoing rehearsals and use of the spaces and desks.

## CREATIVE INSPIRATION

I am inspired by the works of Jacob Jonas and have specifically been influenced by his works *There's Been a Study* which debuted in 2019. Before having seen parts of this work, I had the special opportunity during my Dance 650 Research Seminar to be guided through all of the available resources Hamilton Library had to offer graduate students in their first-floor classroom. It was that day I fell in love with a particular set of rolling desks in the space and turned to my colleague Erika Sanchez to tell her I wanted to create a dance with these desks about our education system before I graduated. No less than a year later, I stumbled upon Jacob Jonas' work on Instagram and it felt kismet. His use of space, desks, lighting, and wildly energetic choreography brought me back to schoolyard days and never-ending expectations. I appreciated the strong and unwavering message to audiences surrounding the US education system's innate ability to stifle creativity. I immediately reflected on my experiences of absurd amounts of standardized tests, grading criteria, pass-or-fail mentality, hours of homework, lack of personal autonomy, methods of instruction, lack of movement, uncomfortable environments, and robotic nature of producing a "well-educated" child.

The issue I want to address in my thesis, however, does not stem from the education system, rather, an unforeseen, uncontrollable situation resulting from the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic's influence on our education system and overall student engagement, mental health, and outcomes will likely go on to be studied for years to come. When considering inspiration for a thesis performance tethered to the brink of possible return to a "new normal" in life and education, I struggled to be inspired by anything other than the chaos, fatigue, and immense loss that surrounded my existence as an MFA student in virtual classes. There was a

process that needed to happen in order to move forward not only for myself, but I suspect so many of my fellow students and colleagues as well.

I felt a personal pressure to be one of the first UHM Dance Graduates to return to “the stage” following a year of lockdowns, quarantine, and social distancing, bringing us all back to the “before time” and showing everyone “how it’s done”. At the same time, I also felt the immense weight of uncertainty and emotional strain surrounding the planning and execution of a live performance that might not come to pass with little resources or support resulting from economic struggles and health sanctions. I realized that it could be far more enriching and illuminating for audiences to highlight the struggle of connecting and communicating virtually through a virtual platform. Although I am still mourning the live performance I originally envisioned, I saw this as a unique opportunity to foster community, empathy, and connection with a larger audience online and spark conversations around our need for one another.

## II. PRODUCTION

### CONCERT

*Iana and Amanda's MFA Dance Thesis Concert* aired virtually via YouTube on October 2nd, 2021, at 7 p.m. and October 3rd, 2021, at 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. (HST). The COVID-19 Pandemic resulted in a loss of venues, live audiences, and financial support due to economic hardships and state and departmental policies. This led fellow MFA Dance candidate Iana Weingrad and me to self produce a joint virtual concert.

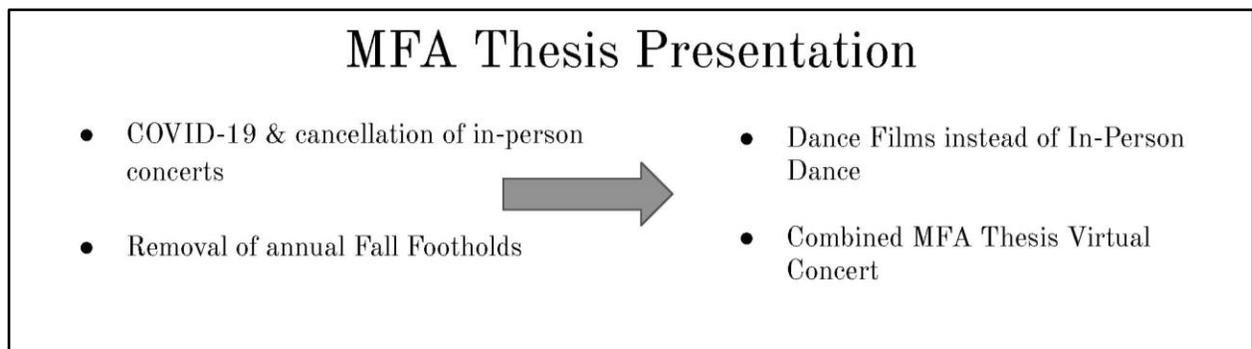


Image 2. Visual representation of concert inception

Our concert was comprised of my thesis, *Proximity*, and Iana's thesis, *Embodied Memories*, in which I am also cast as a dancer. The original show was thirty-nine minutes and thirty-two seconds long with the show order of: 1. *Embodied Memories* 2. *Proximity*. After watching the show several times, I regret the joint decision to place my thesis first due to titling and transitions. Because Iana did not have an opening title page, I felt there was a more clear distinction between works when placing my thesis second. This change also supported the show order listed on our marketing poster. We later produced an encore showing of our works (See Appendix A) that included an adjusted show order and show title page.

We used a GoogleForm to gather registration information for audience members including their anticipated number of viewing guests in an effort to more accurately gauge our audience turnout (See Appendix B). We had ninety-four people registered (See Appendix C) to attend and we received over 220 views on YouTube between the original showing and encore. The original concert was live, meaning that audience members needed to be online to watch the

shows at their exact date and times. The encore performance, however, remained available for audiences to watch whenever they wanted, as many times as they liked for a week from October 21st to October 28th.

Iana and I marketed using social media, flyers around campus, and email blasts to our communities on and off campus. We shared the following publicity quote in some of our electronic marketing:

*Embodied Memories*, choreographed by Iana Weingrad, explores memories of our grandmothers through dance. The dance film features eight dancers who embody their maternal ancestors by telling their stories in movement.

*Proximity*, choreographed by Amanda Allen, investigates the experiences of quarantine, social distancing, and isolation following the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting struggle to adapt to an ever-changing "new normal".



Image 3. Marketing Poster for Concert

## CASTING

I decided not to hold auditions for my thesis and instead emailed a specific list of dancers I was interested in working with based on their technical ability, maturity, reliability, and availability during my desired timeframe of rehearsals. I did not have intentions for the specific casting of each section of my thesis in the beginning and let these things work themselves out throughout the summer. My final cast consisted of five dancers:

1. Marley Aiu, BFA Dance and BFA English graduate from UHM. I previously danced with Marley in the Mainstage production of *Integral Bodies*, choreographed by Peiling Kao, who serves on my committee. I also joined Marley as a cast member in Angela Sebastian's thesis.
2. Maria Teresa Houar, Ph.D. student in Performance Studies at UHM. I performed in Maria Teresa's Late Night Concert *Baby Shampoo* as my second show upon entering the dance program at UHM. I also took many courses and workshops with Maria over the course of my degree.
3. Greta Pearse, MFA Dance Candidate at UHM. Greta and I have taken several courses together following the pandemic and were among the first students to return to the dance studio fulltime in the Spring of 2021.
4. Angela Sebastian, MFA Dance Performance and Choreography graduate from UHM. I was a dancer in Angela's thesis and was a fellow company member with her in Convergence Dance Theatre. Angela was also a castmate for the Mainstage production of "Integral Bodies."
5. Allan Zablocki, MFA Dance Candidate at UHM. Allan and I took several courses together following the pandemic and he also experienced a bad case of COVID-19 in the Fall of 2020 as I did.

## LOCATIONS

"Pt. 1 Dissociate"

A previous school project completed during the pandemic in my Digital Media for Dance class inspired me to continue my underwater work with others. The cold, dark mood created by the dark-blue square tiles paired with the ethereality of the open underwater space was

captivating and evocative to me. I loved how the water acted as a partner in shaping the movement, emulating a constant contact improvisation between the dancer and the resistance of the water on the skin. The pool posed many difficulties during the rehearsal and filming process, however, and was ultimately my most trying venue and section of the work.

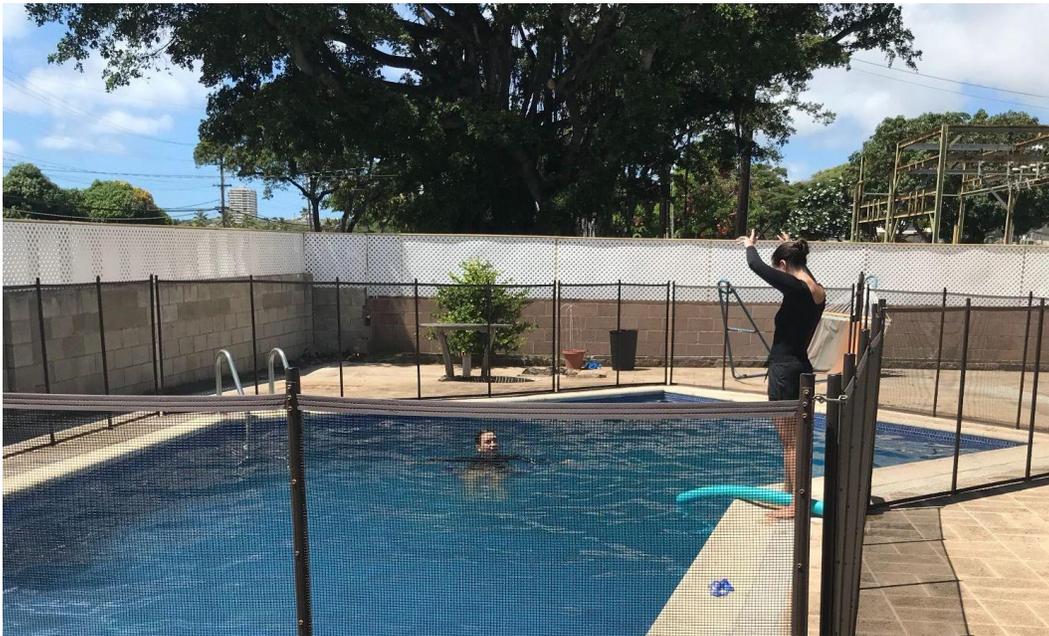


Image 4. Giving notes during re-filming of “Pt. 1 Dissociate”

Dancers would get cold quickly in the water. Exhaustion from treading water and holding one's breath was also a factor. To counteract this, we cycled dancers out on the days of filming, only having them in the water for brief periods of time before having them rest and warm up between sections. In addition, the clarity of the water in my pool during the selected filming dates was much hazier than my original project inspirations. This forced me to lean into a blurry aesthetic I was not prepared for when editing, but ultimately enhanced the notion of dissociation for the solo dancer. The blurry water also lent to the notion of uncertainty of surroundings and proximity to anything or anyone.

“Pt. 2 Unapproachable”



Image 5. Room 306, Thomas Hale Hamilton Library

I was specifically drawn to the idea that I could set my dancers in an actual classroom environment for this section of my thesis instead of attempting to create a classroom environment on the stage. I reached out to the Thomas Hale Hamilton Library for assistance and was able to secure free, unlimited access to room 306 for our rehearsals and filming courtesy of Vicky Lebbin, Interim Associate University Librarian at UHM. I felt this piece was particularly successful because of the location and set design. The beige, empty walls, tan desks, and fluorescent lights evoke sensorial memories for me as a student. The floors were linoleum and suited my directorial and set design needs perfectly. The shape of this particular classroom is a long rectangle, which enabled better wide shots of the square space I had created in half of the space. Having the ability to film the set from another section of the room further back enabled better wide shots and enhanced my concept. Everything in the room was moveable aside from the mounted television on the wall, which made the set designing process smooth and efficient.

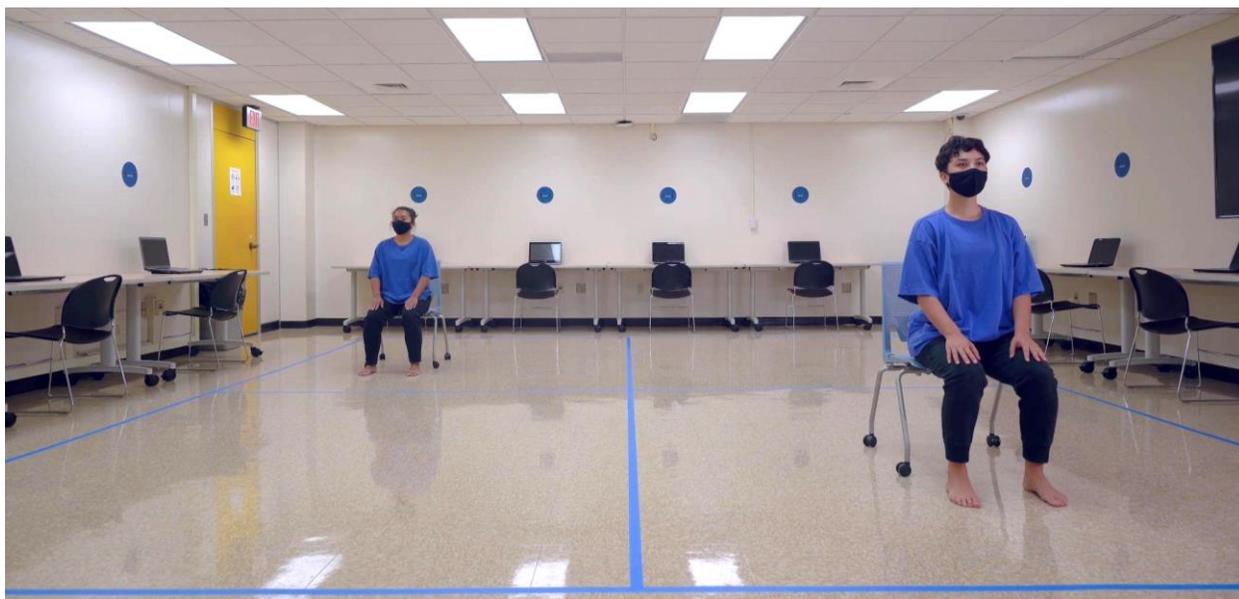


Image 6. Set design for “Pt. 2 Unapproachable”

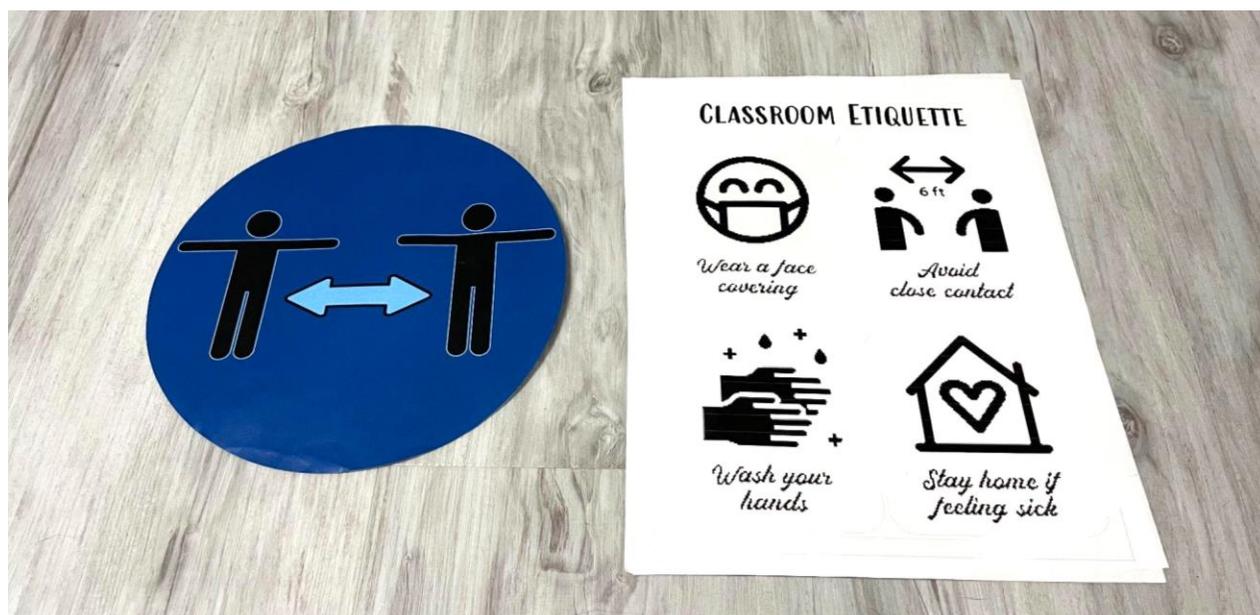


Image 7. Custom posters used in the set design of “Pt. 2 Unapproachable”

The most striking aspect of this section is undoubtedly the rolling chairs. I loved how this prop emulated the instability of our lives and education during the pandemic. Dancers had to learn to dance with this prop as if they were learning a whole new genre of dance. The chair had

a unique response to different forces acting upon it and held each dancer differently due to our unique bodies.

“Pt. 3 Remember”



Image 8. Kuli'ou'ou Beach cast photo before filming “Pt. 3 Remember”

As I began rehearsals for this section, Lyon Arboretum still had many restrictions for social distancing, hours of operation, and reservations. This led me to consider an alternative outdoor venue that would provide the opportunity to dance together in space while still following local and state guidelines during the pandemic. It was important for this section to be outdoors as a symbol of returning to a "new normal." The past several years have been turbulent, filled with division, isolation, and tremendous loss. As outdoor activities began to open in particular regions following lockdowns and quarantines, communities flocked outdoors seeking fresh air, respite, and connection with one another. In general, nature holds positive associations of renewal and community for many people and has been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression (Dingfelder). As I considered alternate outdoor locations for this section, I remembered a favorite beach of mine that I frequented during the pandemic and decided to commit; Kuliouou Beach becomes a sandbar every low tide, making it ideal for calm waters, relaxing energy, and stunning views.

In choosing a weather-dependent location, I knew it would be difficult to coordinate my cast's availability with the tide tables. The day of filming was scheduled to be on the high end of low tide. Unfortunately, I wrongfully estimated the difference. The tide was much higher than anticipated and rose quickly on the day of filming, resulting in the entire cast, including myself, struggling to execute some of the more complex movements. Even a few inches of change in the tide affected the weight and drag of our feet in and out of the water, making execution of movement, confidence in balance, consistency, and precision difficult as a group. Ultimately, my dancers and I decided to emphasize this uneasiness and hesitation. The metaphor of "finding one's footing" in a constantly changing and unpredictable environment found through on-site exploration created a deeply embodied experience for the dancers and myself.

## COSTUMES

I was able to use a combination of personal items from dancers' closets, low cost items from thrift stores, and existing items in the UHM costume shop to create the costumes for my thesis.

### "Pt. 1 Dissociate"

I chose to stick with my original concept of black leotards and black bike shorts for this section. This created clean, simple lines that contrasted the hazy/dark water and aided in the moody, dark emotions of the piece. I also felt that a simple, black costume without color or design embellishment aided in the notion of dissociating from oneself.

### "Pt. 2 Unapproachable"

I wanted to bring the fashion of Zoom class to the physical classroom for this piece, tying a little bit of quarantine and Zoom fatigue into the now socially distanced classroom space. The baggy, royal-blue shirt reflected the 'blue' from the water in the first section and paired well with the sweatpants to give a sort of "I'm over this" and "I don't care anymore" aesthetic.

### "Pt. 3 Remember"

For the last section I wanted to incorporate varying tints of sea glass colors such as green, blue, tan, and white. I decided to have each dancer in a distinctly unique color variation with minor differences in clothing cuts, styles, and lengths. I hoped this would show the audience a

renewed sense of self in relationship to others while creating a cohesive look for the cast. When selecting specific items, I considered the fabrics and colors of each item to ensure nothing would become see-through or damaged from exposure to the ocean. On the day of filming, Allan and Maria’s pants both became extra loose and started to fall down during filming due to the weight of the water. For this reason, I wish I had considered a dress rehearsal prior to filming, which would have given me the time to alter or adjust costuming for each dancer’s comfort.



Image 9. Potential costume variations for “Pt. 3 Remember”

## MUSIC

Due to time constraints, minimal funding, and non-response from my originally proposed collaborator Monika Haar, I was uncertain of music selections in the beginning of rehearsals. I decided to start by using Ingrid Michaelson and Zayn’s popular hit song “To Begin Again” for inspiration. The song included hopeful sentiments of coming back together and being okay in the aftermath of hard times. I have a personal affinity for Ingrid Michaelson’s music which has been an anchor for me during many distressing or turbulent times over the past fifteen years. Starting this way was a helpful way for me to begin moving and creating but quickly turned into a roadblock for new creative movement. I found myself falling into the same choreographic tropes and movements I used many times before, allowing the words or the phrasing of the music to

dictate my movement. This was the nudge I needed to shift away from pop music and find another music selection that would push me as a choreographer and artist.

At the time, I was in rehearsals with Convergence Dance Theatre with former UHM MFA Dance graduate Amy Bukarau who suggested I look up [soundformovement.com](http://soundformovement.com). Michael Wall's website was a culmination of years of powerfully inventive compositions that were meant to stir movement in us all. Wall composes for dancers and movers all over the world and graciously allows students to use his compositions for free. I spent days coming back to his website, searching for a certain song that would stand out to me. I came across the album *Chiolis/Wall-Music for Solo Piano* which only has three songs by Wall. I immediately felt a distinct connection with each song in relation to a particular section in my thesis.

#### “Pt. 1 Dissociate”

When listening to “*The Crumpled I.O.U.*” by Wall, I heard timelessness, vastness, echoes, sinking, and yearning. The title conjured thoughts of giving up on the unkept promises or expectations we hold for our lives. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, I imagined a crumpled note reading “ I owe you some “normalcy””.

#### “Pt. 2 Unapproachable”

When listening to “*One or the Other*” by Wall, I heard monotony, boredom, fatigue, and whimsy. The title reminded me of a constant miscommunication or stalemate where there is no winning for either party. I imagined outside circumstances creating an environment in which there is no possible means of connecting. seeing eye to eye with someone.

#### “Pt. 3 Remember”

When listening to “*Hope*” by Wall, I heard a hopeful turbulence, unease, excitement, and nostalgia. When I think of the word hope in the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic, I think of my desire to rebuild the emotional and physical connections I shared with the people in my life prior to the quarantines, mask mandates, social distancing, and travel restrictions.

## REHEARSALS



Image 10. Dancers prepare their solos prior to rehearsal in the pool.

I decided to treat rehearsal warm-ups as a low-pressure opportunity for reconnection with self and others. I avoided rigorous training, instead opting for low-impact mobility warm-ups with verbal cues to help dancers tune into their body’s need for the day. I gave each dancer autonomy to adjust or change the warm up however they needed, allowing them to linger a little longer in certain moments, flow into a particular movement their body was craving, or get lost in conversation. I considered this a dual-purpose physical and mental warm up for dancing together again. I provided snacks and beverages at the beginning of rehearsals to encourage self care and conversation. I cherish this time equally as much as my choreographic devising with the cast.

During the creation process, I regularly reminded dancers to voice their limits, needs, concerns, and ideas. I believe this positively affected the social dynamics of rehearsals and hope that it fostered a sense of mutual respect within the rehearsal process. It became abundantly clear to me early in rehearsals that nurturing a safe space for my dancers to explore this stage of “coming back together” following the pandemic was more important than achieving impressive dance tricks through intensive exercises and training. One of the ways I hoped to create this

comfortable atmosphere for dancers was by focusing our energy on one section at a time. I fully choreographed, rehearsed, and filmed each section before moving on to the next in the hope that I could prevent physical or emotional burnout during the transition back to regularly scheduled rehearsals.

It was difficult to confidently jump into a major project during the pandemic, let alone finish the entire choreographic process in a month or less for each of the three sections. Coming into my thesis creation, I decided the only way I could mentally handle choreographing was to embrace a “come what may” attitude and let go of some control. I would remind myself each rehearsal to relax, enjoy the moment, and trust my dancers’ skills and talents. I had a breakthrough with this method following some particularly confusing spacing I was trying to achieve. It was only once I gave dancers the freedom to create their own path that the section began to run smoothly every time. I tried to come in with a plan each rehearsal but gave myself full permission to deviate as ideas, energy levels, injuries, body language, or personal struggles shifted and dictated the needs of rehearsal for that day.

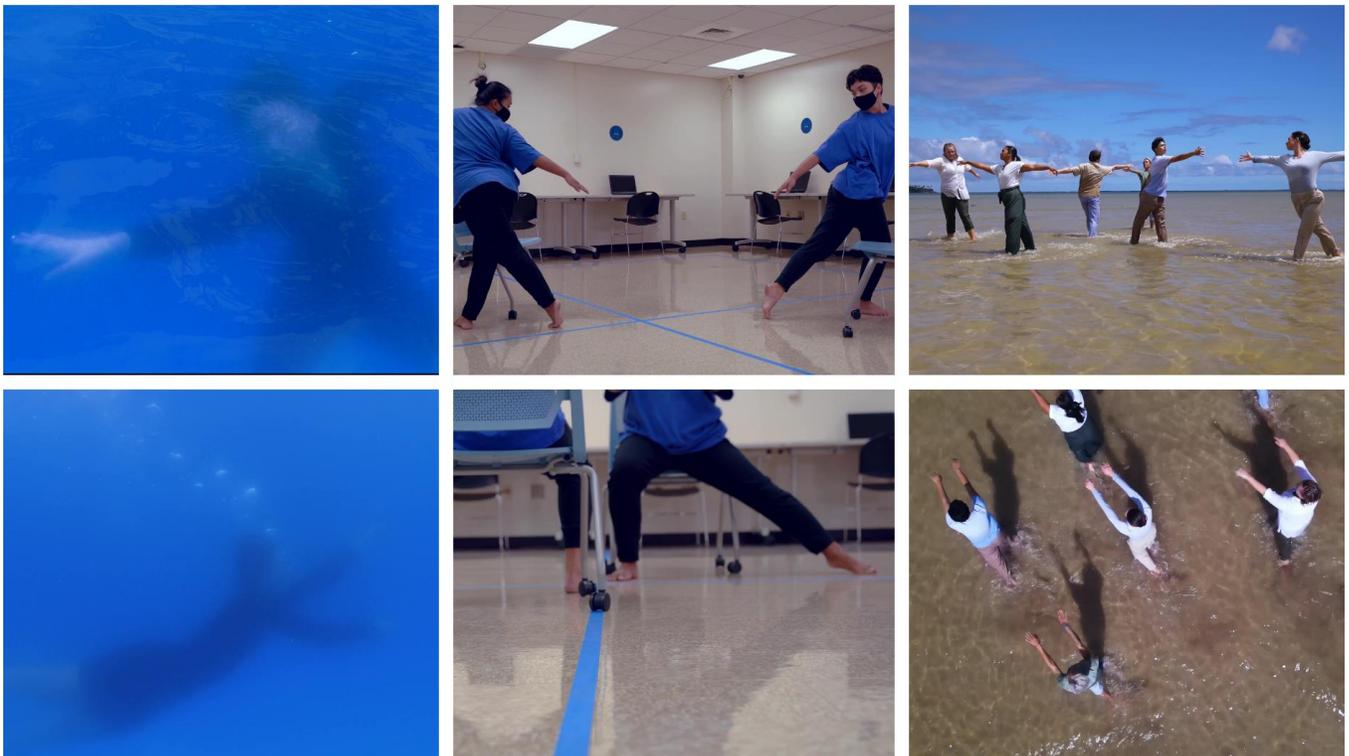


Image 11. Collage of ‘reaching’ moments throughout *Proximity*

## CHOREOGRAPHY AND CREATIVE PROCESS

A majority of our communication with one another comes from non-verbal communication in the form of body language, proximity, touch, eye contact, facial expressions, and tone of voice (Oputu). In Bianca Nobilo's CNN article *Coronavirus Has Stolen Our Most Meaningful Ways to Connect*, she states that while "something is better than nothing... a smiley face is not a smile and pixels don't evoke proximity- physically, emotionally, or biochemically." The attempted return to "a new normal" using online platforms was necessary and helpful in many ways but may have also felt empty to others at times, "lacking the richness and depth of interaction" we were used to before (Nobilo). I took the inspiration I received from articles online and referenced *What Every Body is Saying: An Ex-FBI Agent's Guide to Speed-Reading People* by Joe Navarro to help establish the recurring gestures, postures, and motifs I used when choreographing. Some examples I chose were hand holding, reaching, covering of the head and face, slouching, and hanging the head low. I was intentional with my use of space, tempo, touch, and gesture to convey moments of hesitation, exasperation, isolation, and yearning. There is a recurring motif throughout that symbolizes holding onto pieces of oneself during difficult times and figuring out how to put the newly changed pieces back together. I.e. picking up legs, knees, elbows, and contracting limbs to the center of the body. I hoped that by using a combination of overt and abstracted gestures in the dance, the audience would attach their own meaning to the dance as a means of processing their own experience during the pandemic.

The most influential decision I made choreographically was to work in reverse show order for my three sections. The final decisions I made very early in rehearsals for "Pt. 3 Remember" directly shaped the choreographic themes and motifs for the rest of the work. For this reason, this reminder of this section will flow in the same order: "Pt. 3 Remember", "Pt. 2 Unapproachable", and then "Pt. 1 Dissociate."



Image 12. Dancers practicing reaching movement together underwater for “Pt. 1 Dissociate”

“Pt. 3 Remember”

It was quite daunting creating the finale at the beginning of my thesis rehearsals. My biggest concern was how I could possibly figure out the “right” closing statement at the beginning of my rehearsal process. I shared my dilemma with the dancers during a rehearsal and we spent the next twenty minutes discussing. We shared our perspectives on the current state of social connections and community resulting from COVID-19. My biggest take away from the group was a feeling that there is no end in sight. Every day is an unpredictable “new normal” and thus an unfinished ending would best suit the overall message and storyline arc.

In total, we had nine rehearsals for this section. Although I do not regret having several rehearsals back in our dearly-missed studio in upper campus UHM after several semesters online at home, I wish I had set aside time for more on-site rehearsals. The water’s impact on dancer’s movement naturally created a sense of hesitance and struggle as they visibly fought to stabilize themselves in shifting sand. I found it refreshing to see Marley struggle to hold their leg up in the final moments of “Pt. 3 Remember” only to confidently catch their balance at the last minute, seemingly brushing off the weight of the past year and celebrating with a momentary, laughter-filled break in character. I feel my choreographic work reaches emotional peaks for audiences

during this section. The moments of physical touch and interaction in this piece were particularly memorable for audiences based on the social feedback I received.

My dancers were patient with me during the trial-and-error phase of defining movement style, intentions, and choreography for Pt. 3 Remember. There is a section in the middle of “Pt. 3 Remember” where the dancers break from their solos one at a time to join a swarm of inter-tangled, moving bodies. This was originally intended to be the first close physical contact for my entire thesis, and I felt an internal pressure to create a profound moment. I fervently tried to control and perfect this serpentine-style weaving of dancers with specific rhythms and timing over several rehearsals. It was not until I gave up on trying to create the idealized vision I had in my head that the movement in this section began to flow and the energy in the room lifted. I shifted approaches to a loose improvisational prompt, allowing dancers to engage with one another more fully rather than trying to achieve a specific movement pattern and formation. The authentic exploration of negative space and proximity to one another in this section is a great visual representation of the hesitancy, unease, and tenacity we often face when encroaching on another’s personal space following the COVID-19 Pandemic.



Image 13. Dancers opened their arms to the sky during the filming of “Pt. 3 Remember

My goal for this section was to convey a desire to be fully present and engaged with our peers in the space while simultaneously processing the anxiety and uncertainty of social

gatherings. I hoped audiences would feel a bit of nostalgia and kinesthetic from tender moments and reflect on the close proximity and trust we used to comfortably share with friends and family. I took for granted how wonderful it was to be greeted with a big smile and a hug when running into a close friend in town. It is these seemingly small moments of interaction with others that can have a profound impact on our relationship to others and ourselves.

“Pt. 2 Unapproachable”



Image 14. Dancers distant from one another during filming of “Pt. 2 Unapproachable”

I decided to challenge myself with a moving prop for this section, following the experience I gained in past semesters working with small, medium, and large stationary props. After switching from a rolling desk to a rolling chair for the sake of safety and mobility, I chose to shift the subject of this section away from Zoom fatigue and instead focus on the ways that masks and social distancing create a barrier to deeper connection and social engagement (Nobilo). I hoped to convey a sense of being together in space but completely disconnected with one another. Dancers skirt around one another, keeping distance while seemingly remaining unaware of one another. I also included themes of exasperation, longing, and feeling numb. I used gestures and abstracted movements to convey personal struggles and explored the proximity of dancers in space through formations as a visual representation of the trajectory of community and social relationships during the pandemic.

I began choreographing this section with a two-hour solo improvisation session. This gave me the time to explore the prop's capabilities, limitations, safety, and mobility (See Appendix D). My cast compared it to learning an entire new genre of dance. The chair had a specific way of receiving weight and pressure from certain angles. Maria Teresa helped me to realize I needed to be more specific in the initiation and weight distribution I was using to accomplish my specific choreography because these things were not intuitive in the chair the way they were intuitive in our bodies on solid ground. Marley, Greta, and Angela helped me to understand how immensely different the choreography felt and worked on our different unique bodies. I appreciated the candid discussions we had during rehearsals about process and choreography. In total I held seven rehearsals for this section. I worked to ensure I pulled certain motifs from "Pt. 3 Remember" into "Pt. 2 Unapproachable" to create a throughline and cohesive aesthetic from piece to piece.

What began as a cast of four dancers for this piece ultimately ended up being a duet due to cast scheduling and my vision for an even numbered cast of two or four dancers that could move within the "four square concept." I feel the decision to structure the piece as a duet was a strong choice that ultimately enhanced my conceptual development. I feel some of my strongest spatial patterns are seen in this section with the dancers circling one another in a synchronized dance, highlighting the social disconnect caused by six-foot distancing policies and masks.

"Pt. 1 Dissociate"

For this section, my five dancers and I finished four on-site rehearsals in the pool before filming the work the first time. I had dancers start by reviewing their phrases from "Pt.3 Remember" on land and providing each dancer with a personal prompt to adjust or add to their solo. Once we had devised a group phrase and fine tuned the solos on land, we began work in the pool. Dancers took turns exploring how the movement felt underwater, learning to calm their breath, relax their bodies, and focus on many things at once in unfamiliar circumstances. I "chunked" the choreography into one to two moves at a time to ensure dancers could confidently dance underwater without pressure to stay under longer than each of their individual lung

capacities or suffer through any discomfort. I wanted the choreography of this piece to be non-linear, chronological, and without a specific storyline.



Image 15. Soloist Marley Aiu dancing underwater in “Pt. 1 Dissociate

The pool happened to be more foggy than usual for all three filmings and I feel this contributed to the dark and ambiguous mood of the work. The fog made it difficult to discern surroundings and added a point of intrigue for audiences who might have found themselves squinting to see the movements or understand what is going on. I noticed in retrospect that the dancer appears to be in endless space, not proximal to any one thing or person. During quarantine, the isolation in our homes removed our proximal relationship to the people and things we valued or that shaped our daily lives. In this way, a sort of identity dissonance, resulted for many struggling to understand their relationship to self and others in the absence of physical interaction.

What I thought would be my easiest piece to complete ended up being the most difficult. Unfortunate events occurred throughout the filming and editing process that tested my adaptability to last-minute changes. What started out as a full cast piece with six dancers turned into a solo just days before the final show. Due to the lighting and poor visibility of the first round of footage, it became necessary to completely refilm. The videographer, Randy Villaver, and I checked the screen prior to filming but the colors and light appeared much different on the

small GoPro screen underwater at night than they did on a laptop during the day. There was no color correcting this footage, so a second filming was graciously obliged by the cast. Following this major misstep, there was accidental damage to my storage device which devastatingly corrupted all of my files. With the original footage gone, I reluctantly started over with just five days left before the show to refilm the piece and manage several rounds of edits. In the spirit of adaptability and adjusting to a "new normal" with a positive attitude, I decided to ask Marley to refilm one last time as a solo given the little time I had to work with. Each dancer had created their own solo using improvisation prompts during early rehearsals for "Pt. 3 Remember." The dancers then took these phrases and adjusted them for the water in "Pt. 1 Dissociate."

It felt important to honor the phrases of each of the original cast by incorporating one or more of each dancer's solo movements. These mishaps were stressful and understandably disappointing for all of the dancers involved given the time and commitment they invested in this piece and the lost opportunity to watch and share their performance in an underwater production. Although I am pleased with the eventual turnout of the show, I will spend the next month working to retrieve my lost files, with the hope of one day sharing the original works with my cast as a gesture of appreciation and respect for their talent and dedication.

I hoped in the creation of this piece that audiences would relate to the concepts of identity dissonance and isolation. The abstract gestures are meant to be reminiscent of a sudden punch in the stomach and reaching for something that is ungraspable. When quarantines were enforced in 2020 and 2021, many people struggled to feel like themselves. As humans we tend to subconsciously connect our identity to our daily routines, social circles, environment, and jobs.

## VIDEOGRAPHY



Image 16. Drone footage of dancers during filming of “Pt. 3 Remember”

I collaborated with Randy Villaver, of Illville Productions, for the filming of all three of my thesis sections. Iana and I researched local videographers and hired Randy after learning of his background as a hip hop dancer and after viewing some of his recent works with local dance company 24/7 Dance. In hindsight, one of my biggest regrets was not holding a full dress rehearsal with Randy prior to the day of filming. I feel this would have benefited the production creatively by generating a more comprehensive list of shots and needs for the day of filming. Instead of discussing shots in detail before the shoot, I came with a list of shots I wanted for “Pt. 2 Unapproachable” and “Pt. 3 Remember.” As the day progressed, Randy and I would discuss additional ideas or needs to create my ultimate vision of the work. Randy originally filmed “Pt. 1 Dissociate” twice but the footage was, unfortunately, lost. With limited time and resources, I refilmed the impromptu solo myself using a GoPro Hero9 generously donated by fellow MFA Dance candidate Carla Guajardo. The previous iteration of the work filmed by Randy was set as a completely stationary camera, however I was fearful that something could go wrong in the final filming and decided to instead hold the camera throughout. This gave me more control over the angle and distance of the camera, allowing me to keep the dancer in a hazy fog until the very last scene.

The dates of filming were as follows:

“Pt. 3 Remember”	June 27, 2021
“Pt. 2 Unapproachable”	July 25, 2021
“Pt. 1 Dissociate”	September 19, 2021
	September 27, 2021

## EDITING

I edited the footage for my thesis show using Adobe Premiere Pro. I studied on this platform in multiple courses with Dr. Jhalak Kara Miller. In total, my edited thesis was sixteen minutes and thirty-three seconds long including credits. “Pt. 3 Dissociate” was four minutes and forty seconds in length; “Pt. 2 Unapproachable” totaled five minutes and twenty seconds; and “Pt. 3 Remember” was five minutes and ten seconds.

Editing my own work enabled me to more fully shape the intended message and mood of the individual pieces through the choreographic structure and musicality. My process consisted of cutting the desired footage into clips, arranging clips /phrasing, editing clip speed, repetitions, flips and reverse, adding transitions, adjusting framing, and color correcting.

I added transition sounds for each piece during the editing process to help stir memories and curiosity for audience members. I used clips from filming and rehearsal for “Pt. 1 Dissociate” and “Pt. 2 Unapproachable”. I had to download a royalty free sound clip to use for “Pt. 3 Remember” because the wind was far too strong of a sound in all of the remaining footage.

I noticed during the editing process that I had not gathered any secondary footage (also known as b-roll) which would have greatly added to my thesis production. B-roll provides further context for audiences by highlighting the details of a filming environment. Had I realized this ahead of time I may have decided to capture something like a wide shot of Koko Head mountain from our location on the water or grab a close-up of the texture of sopping, wet clothing on dancers’ bodies. I feel these were missed opportunities to more deeply immerse audiences in the scene and foster a greater connection to the movement.



Image 17. Dancers holding hands during filming of “Pt. 3 Remember”

#### COMMITTEE VIEWINGS

May 13, 2021	Zoom Meeting, Proposal review and approval
June 25, 2021	Email, “Pt. 3 Remember” Rehearsal Footage, Music, Costumes
July 14, 2021	Email, “Pt. 2 Unapproachable” Rehearsal Footage
July 21, 2021	Site Visit from Peiling Kao during rehearsal at Hamilton Library
September 16, 2021	Email, “Pt. 1 Dissociate” Process update
September 23, 2021	Email, Second drafts of “Pt. 2 Unapproachable” and “Pt. 3 Remember”
September 29, 2021	Email, First draft of “Pt. 1 Dissociate”

#### CAST RESPONSE

Cast member Marley Aiu shared with me how much they enjoyed the process saying, “My inner child felt happy playing in the ocean on a sunny day, doing anything but sitting still in rolly chairs, and doing tricks in the pool.” I later received a text from Allan stating how unique of an experience it was to perform in my thesis. He added that “what really made it special was the

connection between the subject matter and the experiences we were facing in real-time in the world. This thesis gave us all a moment of creativity and human connection in a time we were all truly missing it.”



Image 18. Post filming cast photo from “Pt. 3 Remember”

#### AUDIENCE RESPONSE

“I enjoyed your different motifs that you used in your choreography like the grasping hands and I also enjoyed how you used space to create different kinds of tensions and relationships between your dancers.”

- Madison Audette, email

“It was awesome! I loved how the movement connected through the different pieces.”

- Sophia Carter, text

“I especially loved the second and third sections. I appreciate your use of compositional tools. Great idea to use the classroom—that’s a first, and a great idea. Your third section is just wonderful.

Excellent drone usage! I appreciate that you were judicious in using it so that it did not overtake/overwhelm as happens in many drone dances. Terrific!”

- Betsy Fisher, email

“So beautiful, poignant, and relevant to the current state of the world. #allthefeels also, the underwater piece was amazing!”

- Keala Fung, text

“I really enjoyed the different ways you showed response to the pandemic, with solo, duet and group outdoors in the water! I recognized Paiko Lagoon and love that spot. I also liked being transported into the water and how the movement is more suspended and ethereal in that element. more reflective. dancing was beautiful too. It was an inspired response to covid restrictions and very relevant to what many of us are and have experienced. Once again I was moved by your choreography - it’s evocative.”

- Jill Guillermo-Togawa, email

“Stunning and brilliant! Excellent choreography and camera work with the movement and angles. Great backdrops and extraordinary talented dancers. Well worth the time to immerse yourself into something touching and relaxing. Serenity & Bliss.”

- Chad Hairston, Comment on encore showing YouTube link

“The choreography was so professional and compelling. It kept me closely watching the screen for each move. It was cool to see the dissociative tendencies working underwater. So neat to see how the message was easily expressed by the mirror imagery in “Unapproachable” while keeping them apart. The “Remember” segment was so well choreographed and it was fun to see everyone in sync with the various moves and expressions. Of course at the very end, when you all broke character to say "Yay! We did it" it was a wonderful ending to your segments.”

- Craig Hairston, email

“This was such a beautiful show! Your piece was so stunning, especially part 3 in the water.”

- Hannah Morrow, email

“Great! I could really feel the emotions in each part! And really enjoyed the last part with the beach and camera angles!”

- Kristen Thorne, Facebook Messenger

“The piece that your partner choreographed was super neat because I watched it while nursing my child to sleep. To hear all of the stories about grandmother's while nursing my child was awesome. And then yours! Being alone with a deployed husband while pregnant during a pandemic, I really felt all of that. I like how you labeled the parts because it really helped me get into that headspace so I could focus on the performers and not "figure out" what the meaning was. And the second part with the taped floor and chairs was a perfect representation of the past year and a half.”

-Cheyenne Tyska, Facebook Messenger

## REFLECTIONS

Having three completely unique pieces in my thesis was one of the most challenging feats to accomplish, but also the most rewarding. I feel that one of the biggest strengths of my thesis concert is the storyline arc I created using the distinct casting, location, formations, and perspective for each piece. As the symbolic timeline of the pandemic progressed in my work, the number of dancers increased to indicate a return to connection and community. The proximity and engagement of the dancers also increases from one piece to the next. Soloist Marley begins alone in a seemingly unending abyss with no signs of anyone or anything reflecting the isolation of quarantine. In “Pt. 2 Unapproachable,” Marley is joined by another dancer, Angela. Although the two now share space together, they remain separate from one another, keeping strict distances and avoiding eye contact. Transitioning into a "new normal", my final section opens with an aerial perspective that slowly introduces all six cast members. When the dancers are not moving together as a flock in the final section, they weave in and out of one another, testing the boundaries of sharing space, making skin-to-skin contact, and noticing one another again. My choice of venues also contributed to a gradual increase in light for each piece. Audiences are taken on a journey from the dark isolation in the pool to artificial interaction under fluorescent lighting and ultimately end with sunshine and community.

I am incredibly proud of the work I created with the support of my cast, collaborators, and professors. I feel a sense of accomplishment for the self-awareness and group connections that developed during rehearsals. The most valuable takeaway I gained from the production of my thesis was a renewed sense of hope for the future. I am humbled by the resilience of my cast evidenced by their positive attitudes, engagement with the material, and willingness to tackle such a deeply personal subject. My dancers and I shared many lengthy conversations and movement exercises together throughout rehearsals of all three sections regarding shifts in policy, shifts in our bodies, shifts in our education, and at the most basic level, a deep desire to dance in space with one another again. Our proximity to one another was never meant to be measured in feet, let alone measured at all. As the pandemic continues into 2022, my hope for society is a reclamation of the term proximity, redefining closeness to one another by the energy we feel and the memories we share.

### III. DOCUMENTATION

#### APPENDIX A: VIDEO ACCESS TO FULL CONCERT

Link: [Iana and Amanda's MFA Dance Thesis Concert](#)

Plain text: [https://youtu.be/oK870Tq\\_oi](https://youtu.be/oK870Tq_oi)

#### APPENDIX B: REGISTRATION FORM

Questions Responses **94** Settings

## Iana & Amanda's Fall 2021 MFA Dance Thesis Showing

Please select which showing(s) you will be attending (all are FREE), fill out your name, email address, and the # of guests in your viewing party below. Link to the online showings will be emailed approx. 24 hours before.

Full Name \*

Short answer text

Email Address \*

Short answer text

Showing(s) I will be attending \*

Saturday, October 2nd 7 pm HST ONLINE

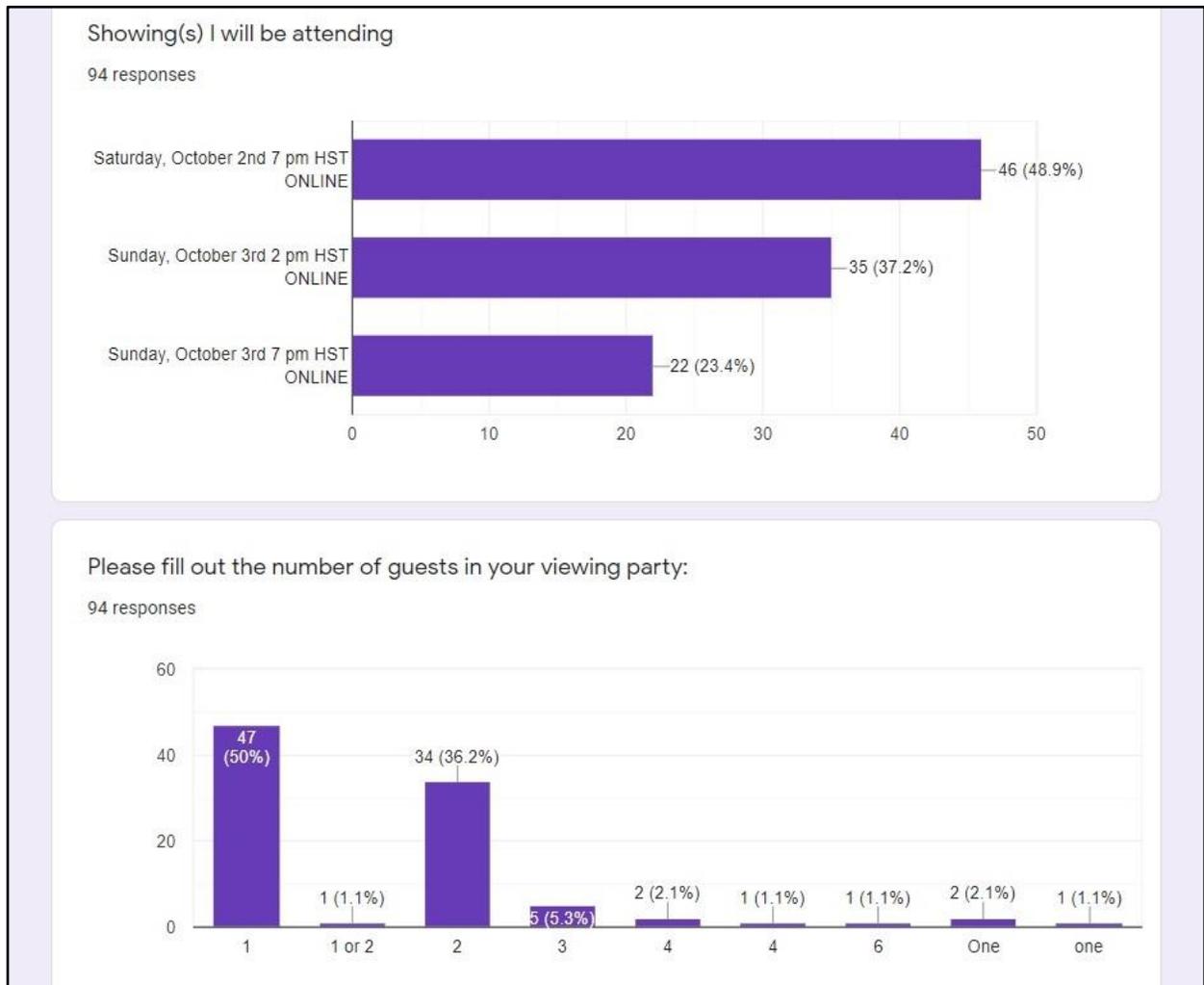
Sunday, October 3rd 2 pm HST ONLINE

Sunday, October 3rd 7 pm HST ONLINE

Please fill out the number of guests in your viewing party: \*

Short answer text

## APPENDIX C: REGISTRATION RESPONSES



## APPENDIX D: IMPROVISATION CLIP

Link: [Appendix D Proximity UHM MFA Dance Thesis](#)

Plain text: [https://youtu.be/AudaNRdzw\\_M](https://youtu.be/AudaNRdzw_M)

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