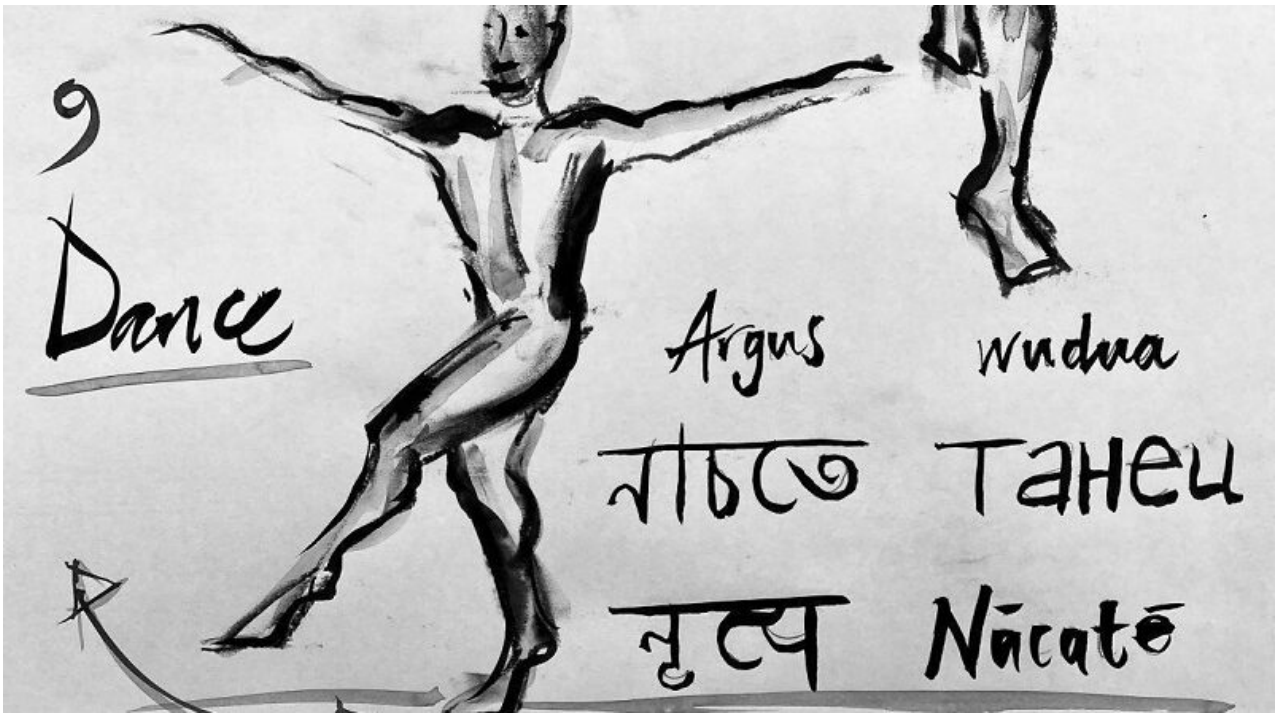
Movement through Disorientation: The De-stress through Movement Activity Pack Created for Music in Detention

critical-stages.org/23/movement-through-disorientation-the-de-stress-through-movement-activity-pack-created-for-music-in-detention/

Jane Munro June 6, 2021



Jane Munro*

Abstract

“Movement through Disorientation” is a visual essay that presents images from—and discusses the co-authorship of—the activity pack De-Stress through Movement. The essay is a reflection, sometimes through interview format with a co-facilitator, on the images developed and drawn for the activity pack. I discuss how those images echo the practice facilitated in the detention center. I point to how we attempted to confront the impossibility of navigating the hierarchies within movement practice. I consider the decisions we made to navigate these hierarchies and how the different identities of my co-facilitators made that possible. I reveal the stories within the images that tell of the dancing and the fraternity established in the workshops.
Keywords: dance, movement, detention, socially-engaged art, deportation

This essay offers a reflection on my recent practice in creating the *De-stress Through Movement Activity Pack* for the charity Music in Detention (now called Hear Me Out). The work I discuss here formed part of a community dance project connected to the fields of socially engaged art. The project was intended as an intervention to support resilience in a time of crisis. Composed of a series of exercises, its objective was to use dance and movement to echo the strength and release that typifies the music projects more

commonly run by Music in Detention. It was offered to detainees held at six government Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs) in the summer of the 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participating detainees were due for imminent removal from the country.

To offer an explanation of the policy for immigration and detention, detainees are kept at the British Government's seven Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs) for the purposes of "removal" from the United Kingdom. Formally, this process is known as either Administrative Removal or as Deportation. Twenty-three thousand people each year are held in immigration detention in the U.K. Administrative Removal occurs because the individuals concerned may have overstayed their permission to live in the United Kingdom, had their application to stay in the country refused, or have broken the rules of their visa or leave to remain. Deportation is for foreign nationals who have completed a prison sentence for a substantial criminal offence (Citizens Advice).

The removal process is the subject of considerable political contestation in Britain, not least from a group of non-governmental organizations that have developed to challenge and mitigate its effects. Amongst these, Music in Detention is a charity founded to bring some mitigation, through artistic practice, to the harsh and sometimes brutal experiences of Administrative Removal, its aim being to "[unleash] the power of music to help people held in UK immigration detention escape the distress of not knowing when they will be free" (Hear Me Out). While the work of organisations like Music in Detention cannot end distress, they can at least provide some humane comfort for lives feeling unliveable. Lamin, who has experience of detention, says on the Music in Detention's website, that the charity offers music as resilience and discharge of tension for detainees.

The uncertainty and dismal in-between-ness of an Immigration Removal Centre can be said to be a place of disorientation or lost footing, as detainees do not know how long they will be there in terms of time or in which country they will continue to live their lives. There is another sense of grounding here, that of not being allowed out, which also chimes with the detainees' experience and our global experience in the 2020 pandemic, but it is the uncertainty and dis-orientation and sense of lost footing that is addressed here. It is the small sense of the agency that this practice of grounding offer.

Processes of Grounding through Movement Practices

By no means is dance or movement practice a solution to the experiences of disorientation and non-belonging caused by detention centres, but it might be able to offer a moment of respite and a means of coping with the situation. The activity pack that I created with artist and performance designer Lucy Algar was, therefore, an offering of practice that works with disorientation and practises grounding.

Key in considering theorising the practice of grounding is the work of Ann Albright who considers the instabilities generated in the broader context of neo-liberalism on how we move. She considers the effects of neo-liberal policies of work to typically generate "losing one's 'footing' or trying to maintain or regain 'footing'" (42). This could be understood as a process of grounding. For Albright, grounding represents a stabilizing sense of counteracting the disorientations of the neo-liberal era through her improvised post-modern dance practices, so that:

> We can think about ground as a verb, a process of grounding ourselves, or being grounded—an active relationship that connects us with gravity as a stabilizing force, even in the midst of other kinds of disorientation, both spatial and social.
>
> *67*

Her own laboratory practice is most often with groups of young people who are beginning to learn post-modern dance practices. While they are challenged by the uncertainties of neo-liberal culture, they enjoy comparatively many privileges, including those of belonging and inclusion. In contrast, Music in Detention and my *De-Stress Through Movement* project works with people who are encountering the distress and destitution of not belonging. As Lamin says on the Music in Detention webpage:

> Detention centres are mental destruction. They're similar to prison, but it's worse than prison. In prison, you have a year and you're coming out. But in a detention centre, you don't know when you're coming out.
>
> *Music in Detention*

Below is an illustration that directly deploys Albright's practice, also adapted and included in the *De-stress and Movement Activity Pack*:

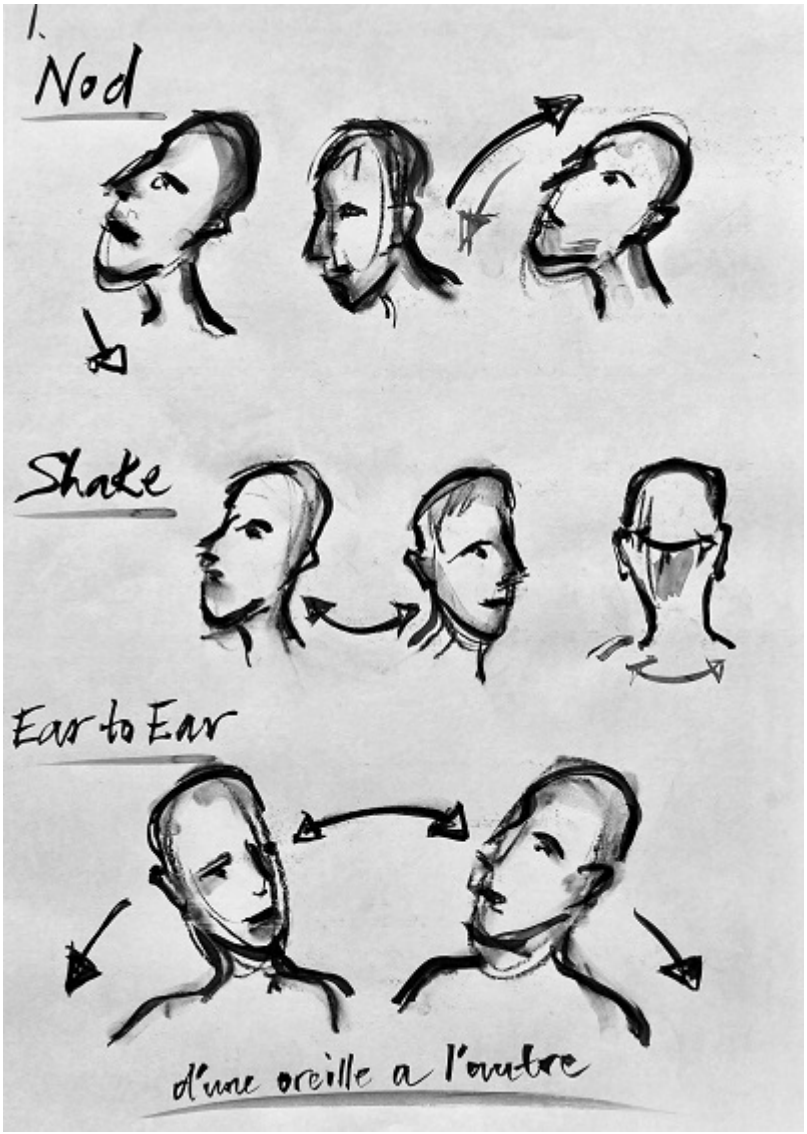


Image: Lucy Algar (2020)

Movement and Dance in Immigration Removal Centres

Responding to the disorientation of the IRC, my work on the *De-stress Through Movement Activity Pack* came as the outcome of an earlier, six-week period of working onsite for Music in Detention at the Immigration Removal Centre at Tinsley House, Gatwick, in 2019. This project, *Dance Works*,was carried out by a group of four practitioners: me (a dancer and mature, white British woman), Shammi Pithia (a male British Asian musician), Rebecca Bogue (a dancer, applied theatre practitioner and yoga teacher who is a white Brazilian/British woman) and later H Patten (a Black Caribbean male dancer, percussionist, choreographer who works with African and Caribbean dance, and music) joined the facilitators.

My own dancing practice works with somatic improvisation in both silence and to music. For shows, I often work with audience participation in dance. Frequently, I have worked with fellow dance artist Bogue. For these previous workshops, Bogue and I drew on our experience of facilitating audience engagement with participatory practices, such as ball games in involving getting people to move while catching balls. In our dance sessions Shammi Pithia, while an accomplished composer and lead artist at Music in Detention, worked as the deejay downloading and playing pop music—that which the detainees told

us they liked. This included Albanian pop, bhangra and a range of rap, which often inspired a transition from playing ball games to dancing in our 2019 dance sessions. Shammi also created some music live with the detainees. The activities in *Dance Works* and the *De-stress Through Movement* offer movement and dance that complement the usual work of Music in Detention. Often, music is offered foremost, and dance emerges in the process, sometimes music and dance are offered together. In these two projects, dance and movement were in the foreground.

Movement and dance seem suitable activity for some kind of well-being in detention as they might offer embodied skills of resilience, which has been the subject of substantive debate and contestation in the past two decades. The practice that informs my offering of release, finding of footing and retreat, draws from the suggestions of Albright outlined above. It is through my own embodied practice of somatic explorations into both improvisations and yoga that I have found ways through challenging times, although my difficulties have been within the privilege of belonging and not in the utter distress of immigration issues. My embodied knowledge of using movement to restore well-being informs how I engage and facilitate dance and yoga practices.

While working with dance and improvisation offered a way to acknowledge the dances of detainees, and helped navigate disorientation and seek grounding, it is also necessary to engage with the critique of dance improvisation practices that emerge from post-modern dance and specifically contact improvisation. It is this practice in which Albright's influential practice is rooted. Dance improvisation practice has taught me how to sense and respond to the movement of other people: often to copy it, add on to or contribute a contrasting element. This was undoubtedly useful when acknowledging detainees' dance moves.

In this context, it is, however, important to discuss how dance improvisation deals with race. This is particularly relevant for a white woman offering artistic practice to detainees who were sometimes white, sometimes European (Russian or Albanian) but often from the Global South, including South America, Asia and Africa. Dance writers Danielle Goldman, Ann Cooper Albright and Royona Mitra have each problematized the whiteness of contact improvisation. Natalie Zervou discussed her dance-performance work with Syrian refugees in Greece, in which she used dance improvisation. In this context, she acknowledges that, as well as giving space and framing for refugees' stories, hierarchies of privilege and training can be re-established within such dance practices. With this in mind, I consider how the drawings in the activity pack navigate hierarchies of movement practice and discuss the problems emerging in navigating these orders of power. Particularly, I draw on the work I had previously carried out with Bogue, Pithia, Patten and the detainees in the Immigration Removal Centre Tinsley House. The practice here was formed alongside the practices of Bogue and her experience of yoga, dance teaching and applied theatre facilitation. In addition, the influence of Pithia's music and H Patten's dance practice very much have their place in the selection and drawings of the activity pack. Yet, importantly, it might be learning a dance taught by a detainee that inspires the drawings and contributes to the co-authorship of the activity pack.

Below, I consider the practice that informed this activity pack, and I reflect on my co-facilitators' observations of the drawings revealing how the co-authorship occurred. This practice drew on what was shared in the workshops including Albanian folk dance, bhangra, tango, African and Caribbean dance, acrobatics and the contribution of Bogue, particularly yoga. Below, I reflect on gender and race when making the artistic decisions created in this project, specifically in the process of selecting the exercises and developing the details of the drawing and words on the activity pack.

The Activity Pack

The second period of work with Music in Detention took place in August 2020. Following from my earlier work, I was given the opportunity to submit a proposal to design one of eight activity packs produced by the charity to be distributed as support to detainees at IRCs during the COVID pandemic isolation. The proposal was selected by a Music in Detention panel including former detainees. The panel stated it would be "highly beneficial" to detainees held in their cells 24 hours a day.

My work was placed as *Activity Pack #5.* Following the premises of Albright's principles of "grounding ourselves," the *De-stress Through Movement Activity Pack* was designed as a series of exercises. The practice was described on Music in Detention's Twitter feed as:

> Simple exercises and dance moves, to offer some physical relief from being confined to the same room for months on end #dance #movement #wellbeing #immigration detention.
>
> *@MusicinDetention*

Having carried out the earlier dance/movement project in Tinsley House Immigration Removal Centre in 2019, I had already gained some idea as to who might be present, what music they might like to dance to and what social dances they might know. There are mostly men in the detention centres and, in general, I met mostly young men who were of quite a strong and energetic disposition. Yet, physical strength does not necessarily mean emotional strength, and the challenges of the situation generated high levels of distress among them. Emotionally, these experiences were, given who I was and how I came to be there, very difficult. As a colleague remarked to me, "The next day, you're really drained."

To me, the fear and the destitution that seemed present in the men, the uncertainty of how long they would be there, and the dis-orientation of not being in their regular civic environment, was clear. But, with the experience of the dance sessions, the atmosphere seemed to be temporarily lifted. Young men made a point of joining us, teaching us their social dances, and their acrobatics showed their pleasure in the dance battles. "Showing-off" in dance, I observed, gave them a clearly needed opportunity to express their agency. I thought, consequently, that the detainees would be much more inspired to do the exercises by illustrations of men like themselves, and movements that were dynamic and strong, although this might be a stereotypical image of masculinity and to some extent could be seen as naive.

But, having hesitantly offered movement practice with face-to-face workshops, I had seen how dance led by male facilitators inspired engagement but also how simple exercises such as yoga were accessible and seemed to offer some humane support to help make the detainees find some grounding. I have also seen the younger men respond to dance competitions, with groups of men battling with dance moves, and groups of Indian men improvise for 30 minutes to bhangra music. For the dance competitions, we formed a circle, and Bogue, H Patten or I called in two people to offer a dance or exercise to the other. A culture of physical exercise is familiar within these institutions, and so the activity pack was designed with the cultures of physical practices that I had found to be accessible when working in the centres.

As stated, the pack was produced with the British female artist and performance designer Lucy Algar. Under COVID-secure conditions, I performed and recorded the exercises over *Zoom* for Algar. Her son (a dancer about to train at London Contemporary Dance School) learned the exercises and performed them, translating my movement to his male body, while she drew them. I asked Algar to aim to draw the images as not specifically identifiable as of any one racial identity. As a frequent dance and drawing artist, she confidently drew dynamic lines, depicting strong energy in the charcoal-and-paint images. I intended a series of illustrations of exercises to be drawn of moving in multi-directions, through collapse and verticality, to find strength and connect with the ground.

The completed designs (see illustrations) were then labelled. Given that the detainees whom I encountered in the previous project were from a wide variety of countries, and English was not the first language of the majority of them, words from a number of key languages (Bengali, Mandarin, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Portuguese and French) were used for their descriptive labelling. As detainees have no access to smartphones in the IRCs, the pack was created on A4 sheets of paper. It was produced with a simple cover, on which was written only a few words. I had noticed that although some detainees spoke English with proficiency, others did not. The movements and instructions distributed with the pack are described here with the images placed below:

De-stress Through Movement

Move the body and the mind follows!

Perform these exercises to relax and release tension:

Start sitting and just moving your head, then stand up and complete the moves. Do not forget to dance at the end and to draw a picture of yourself in your favourite exercise.

Hope it helps, from Music in Detention.

The first image (fig. 1), shown above, introduces a three-dimensional action of the head. The exercise was selected for several reasons: to release the tension of the neck and head, to offer attention to how we are in space in the looking side-to-side and up and down, and to fall away from orientation in order to re-find a balance in the ear-to-ear, following Albright's "Yes/No/Maybe exercise" of the head (23). Here, we see a giving-in to

disorientation, as Albright might argue, with a relaxing of the head which gives in to gravity, and maybe acknowledges the collapse of a body in the up-and-down action of the head. This collapse could be said to happen with the feeling of “mental destruction” that Lamin mentions on the Music in Detention website. He refers to a shattering mentality when discussing his experience of detention. Such a feeling of shattering, or of being shattered, might be eased a little by a practice that may counteract collapse and could be considered a process of returning to grounding. It also echoes the aims of Music in Detention of a releasing and strengthening practice that the detainees have stated they need. In addition, they are exercises that can be done alone in a small space and possible in this prison-like situation.

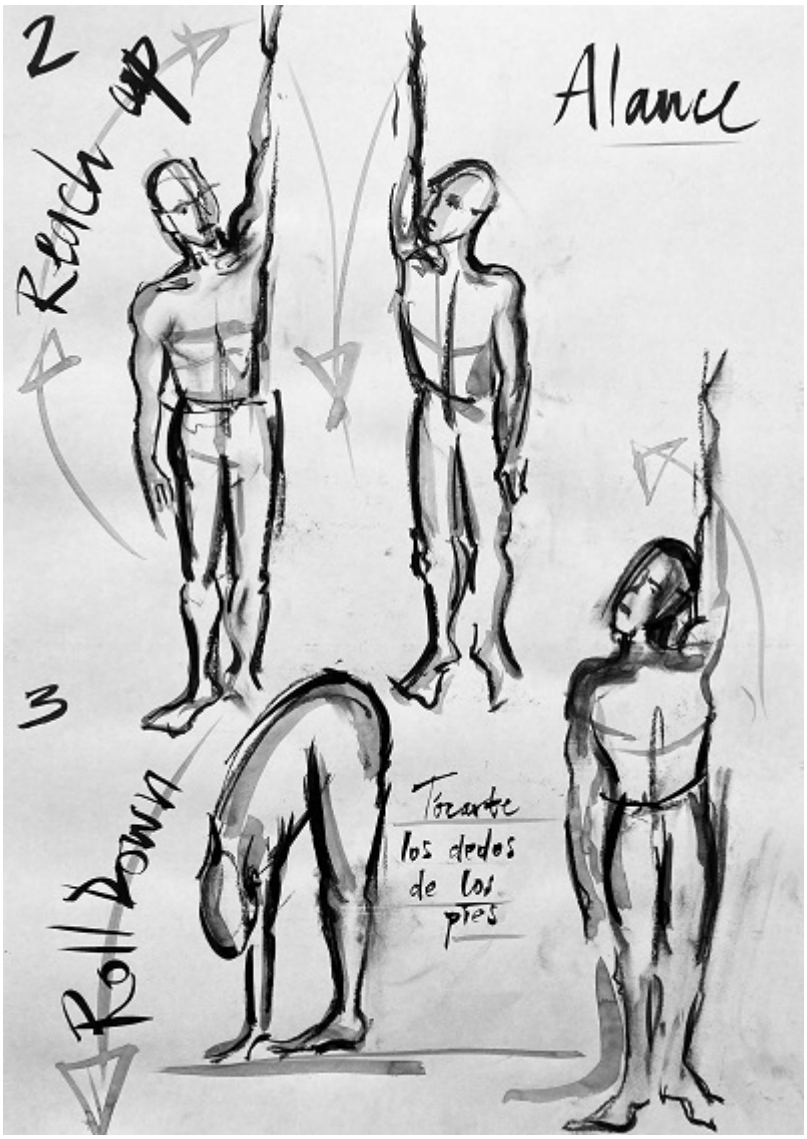


Image: Lucy Algar (2020)

The second page offers a series of exercises of reaching up and rolling down. These are yoga and contemporary dance-based actions that attend to the vertical access, which facilitates an attention to the ground through the feet, encouraging a connection but also the counterpoint away from the ground. During the previous project in 2019 with Pithia, Bogue and Patten, as stated above, some detainees responded to dance battles and showed us facilitators their social dances to their favourite music. Yet, others—usually the more mature detainees—often joined the quieter and on-the-mat yoga sessions. My co-

facilitator Bogue is also a yoga teacher, and she frequently led those parts of the workshops in 2019. This co-facilitation and knowledge of what movement appealed to the range of ethnic groups and led me to include the yoga practices in the 2020 *Activity Pack*. Through their input in the previous workshops, participants had co-authored the pack by showing us facilitators what physical practice they might respond to. They had engaged positively to these reaching-up and stretching-down exercises as well. It is also this understanding of these positive engagements with a non-Western heritage movement practices that led me to include the images in the pack.

In terms of the movement, the reaching upwards was offered as a counterpoint to the collapse and slump that I noticed in some of the bodies of men in Tinsley House. The illustration asks for an effort to be made and attention made to the present, which can maybe enable a sensation of strength or frustration to be experienced and somehow acknowledged in a safe way. In addition, co-facilitator Bogue significantly points out that the roll down exercise was concerned with the spine, which she describes as “having their own backs.” Bogue discusses the agency that detainees might feel from being able to engage with their own spines and backs. Gaining a sense of their bodies was offered here, as well as an opportunity to give in to the collapse and then finding their spine by rolling up vertebra-by-vertebra. Crucially, this sensing of their backbone was happening within a space in which the men have little control of their time and space.

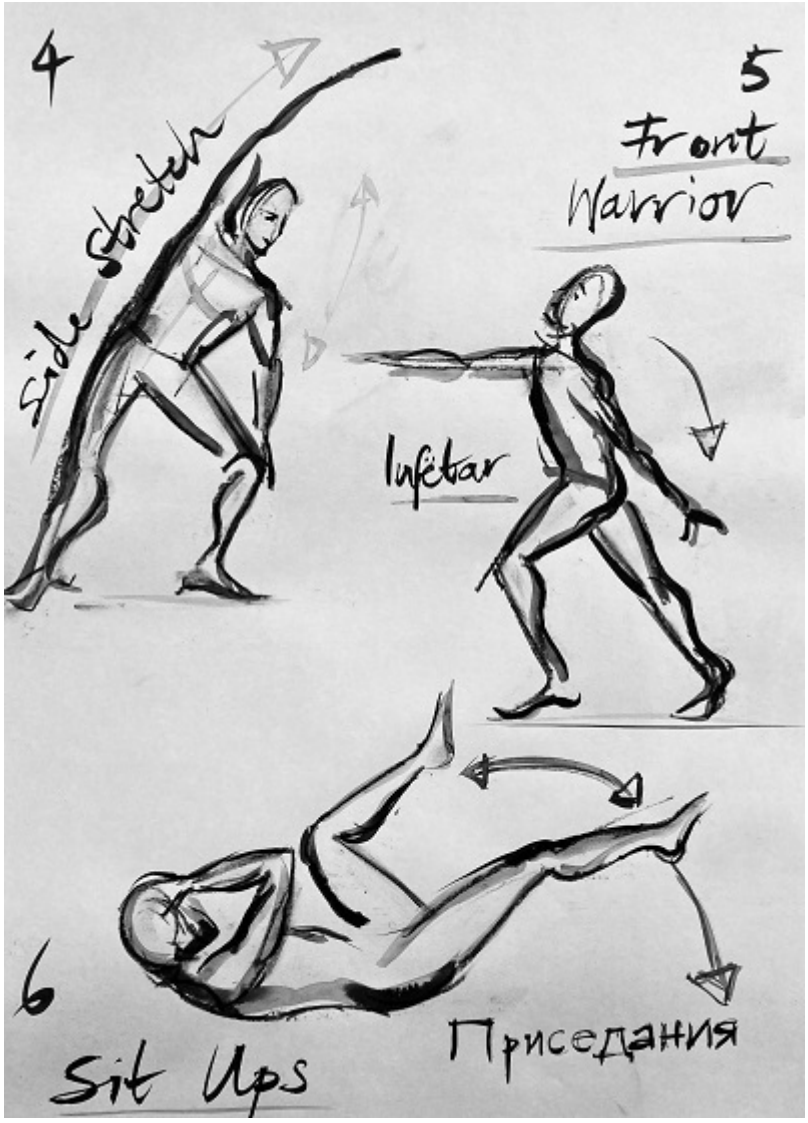


Image: Lucy Algar (2020)

In addition, side stretch and forward lunges are also drawn from yoga practices and particularly included because of Bogue's work in the earlier project. This *asana* is intended to extend the upper body away from the lower body while acknowledging the ground. In the side stretch image, the connection into the ground can be seen in the left leg while facial orientation is downwards to the earth below as the arm extends to the air above. What is evident in the images of side stretch and Front Warrior is the strength in the arms and fingers that reach out into space rather than soften. Here, there is a labour in this reaching in yoga that Stewart writing about yoga argues "can help people become more adaptable to other stresses" (qtd. in Albright 153). The exercise connects with Albright's "Unbendable Arm" task, which both acknowledges strength and gravity but reaches, with effort and resistance, into space. Bogue notes in relation to the Warrior and side-stretch exercises that the focus is on the dropped pelvis because of the bent knee. She says that "there's just something a bit more grounding in dropping the centre of gravity." Additionally, Bogue notes that "the pelvis is really important here," and, significantly, for Bogue and I, as female facilitators in a male detention centre, this dropping of the centre weight generates less movement in the pelvis than some freer higher movement of our dancing.

Importantly, Bogue points to Warrior yoga poses as exercises that more men seemed able to participate in. As facilitators, we seemed to feel more comfortable doing these exercises. The drawings also acknowledged the response to gender difference that I had witnessed in the IRC to the movement facilitation of H Patten, who was Afro-Caribbean and male. Patten's work was in dance, but his dance practice worked differently. He comments that "many of my African-Caribbean movements were performed with a low centre of gravity to ground the movements and increase the sense of strength and control." While I noticed the detainees wanted to dance with us or participate in movement games or held yoga poses, which were facilitated by us female facilitators, the detainees were able to enter into a copying or call and response with the dance moves that H Patten offered.

This different response to gender and maybe race inspired my request to artist Algar to draw images of men in the illustrations. I felt that particularly as this was an activity pack created and provided during COVID times, images of men performing the exercises would be inspiring in the way that H Patten had modelled. I wondered if H Patten's Afro-Caribbean-influenced dance was inspiring to the men from the Global South, finding less distancing hierarchy in his movement practice than in some of the movements offered by Bogue and I as white women.

Yet, our movement practice might seem a mere token of resistance in the crisis in which the detainees find themselves. As Zervou acknowledges, when discussing encounters between refugees and privileged Western performers, sharing of such movement practices with migrants can be a reminder of "hierarchies of discrimination and delineate new boundaries" (Zervou 30). Within this activity pack, the privilege of the yoga teaching is evident in the drawings, but yoga is frequently viewed as a practice that is offered to everyone, a practice that is not Western, and one that seemed appealing to many detainees who could be described as non-Western or from the Global South.

Therefore, the inclusion of yoga poses both reflected the practice that seemed to work in the previous face-to-face workshops and acknowledged the non-Western and accessible nature of this practice. Simultaneously, however, to attain expertise in yoga is a significant privilege as its association not only with the Brahmin (priest) Hindu caste but also privileged Western white people (particularly women) pursuing fitness and spiritual practice. The inclusion of yoga exercise in the pack was, therefore, an attempt to dismantle hierarchies within movement practice that Zervou discusses in terms of race and accessibility, but in doing so, yoga establishes another hierarchy in other ways. Altogether, the drawings acknowledge the process and discoveries of the previous practice in terms of our gender and race in these co-created small actions, but the problems of re-iterating hierarchies in the movement practices were not entirely removed.

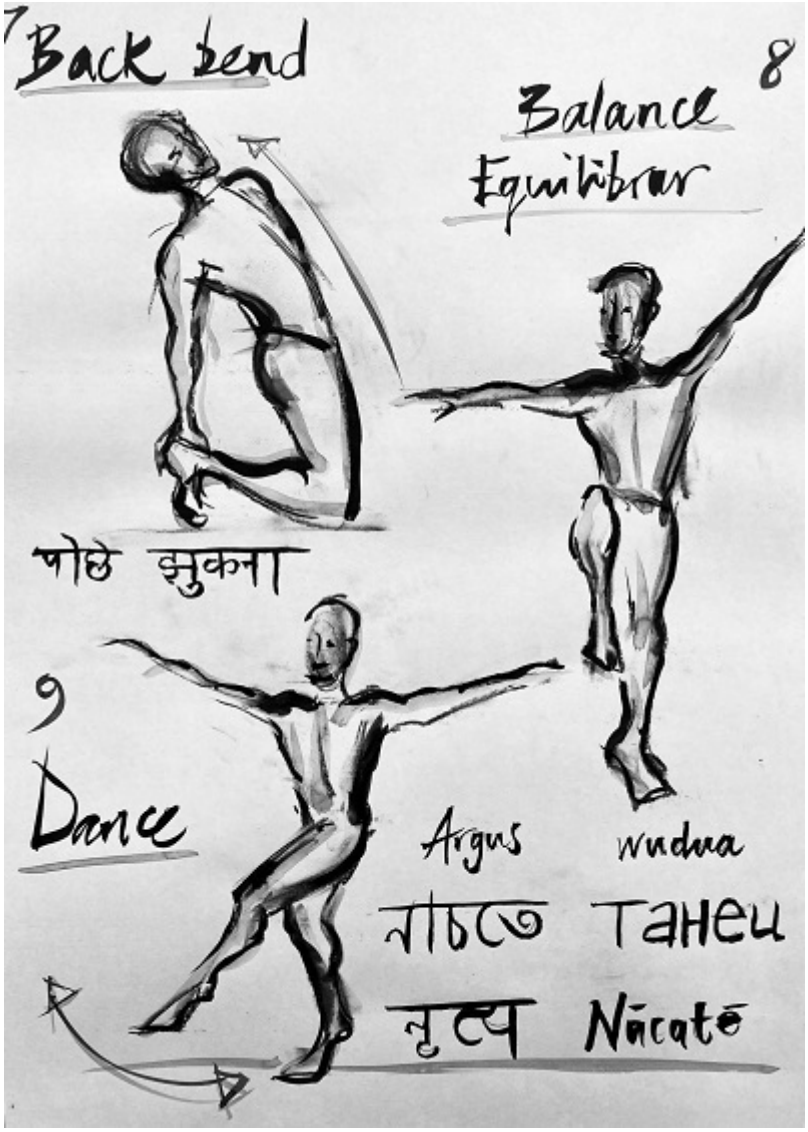


Image: Lucy Algar (2020)

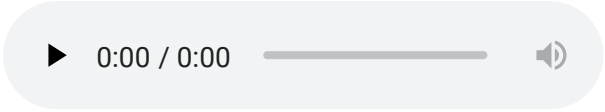
Balance or Equilibrar was an exercise that intended to facilitate a balancing on one, then the other leg. This borrows from contemporary dance and its fall-and-suspend actions and yet, importantly, acknowledges the many social dances that use a side-to-side leg lift: an action that was common in the many social dances the detainees taught us during our six-week project in 2019. The men taught us moves ranging from Albanian folk dances to thirty minutes of bhangra improvising. The multi-lingual references to dance in this image also acknowledge the folk dances we co-created that included a range of steps the different men taught us, and it became something we would refer to each week.

Another practice that acknowledged a range of dance cultures was the dance battle in which we stood in a circle and two men, or Bogue, Patten or I, would do moves to compete with one another. Sometimes, this would be dancing to the music playing, specific folk dance moves such as Cossack series of kicks and, at other times, performing acrobatic moves. It seemed to me to release some of the frustrations and tensions between the men. One of the centre workers commented that these men had been fighting the day before but were in a dance battle now. The encouragement to engage with the arts activity pack project is given by multi-lingual rubrics and acknowledges the

people of many different countries. The translation of “dance” here is, therefore, given in Bengali, Arabic, Mandarin and Russian. French, Spanish and Portuguese words are also included in the pack.

Here, I must acknowledge, as Patten noted, that there are no African languages included in that list. I too had noticed this and had thought of adding “ijo,” meaning “dance” in Yoruba, to the drawing—but felt it was not right to change the pack after it was distributed. When reflecting on the images, I had noted that the African men I met in Tinsley House were Nigerians (those observations were my method for selecting the languages I used). Of course, while English is an official language of Nigeria this merely reflects the recent colonial past of the country, and I might have thought further about the languages in my original decisions. This points to the reparative work needed when using colonial languages.

I would like to again acknowledge how important it is to work with facilitators with a range of heritages, including non-Western and non-white practitioners. I was the facilitator that got up and danced bhangra with the South Asian men, but I don’t think it would have been possible had Pithia not been there. He downloaded the music, played it through his equipment, and, crucially, he was in the gym helping to hold the space. I sensed that both I and the detainees were facilitated by his presence. Patten remarks, “Pithia’s presence was important as he is a young Asian man, but not distinctive in terms of religion and of a gentle nature, so in contrast to myself and alongside the female presence, offered a nurturing, safe space for self-expression.” Bogue, reflecting on this last image, comments that it is a more playful image, suggesting that this exercise seemed to allow for falling off balance and of reaching out for support in the dancing. She particularly comments that she sees the fraternity witnessed in the dancing in the IRCs as they reach out to others through the arms at shoulder height. Bogue’s comments on this drawing of dancing can be heard below:



Conclusions

The *De-stress Through Movement Activity Pack* was distributed in Immigration Removal Centres in the summer of 2020 as an attempt to offer some grounding through movement. It was only made possible as a result of the six-week experience gained in 2019 working on the sites. These workshops enabled me and the other facilitators to investigate strategies for inclusive practices, for avoiding “othering” and navigating hierarchies within movement practices. This activity pack, although devised by me, danced by Algar’s son and drawn by Algar via *Zoom*, also held the traces of this earlier practice and could be said to be co-produced by Bogue, Pithia, Patten and the detainees in Tinsley House, in autumn 2019. These practices included yoga, Afro-Caribbean dance and a suggestion of folk dance and contemporary social dances. The activity pack refers to these practices and attempts to find movement practices that hold less hierarchy but this is complex. As in the example of yoga, some hierarchies are dismantled while others

are raised. Dance and movement work with detainees is highly complex in terms of race and gender, and while this activity pack drew on detailed experience and reflections, the issues remain unsolved.

The selection panel at Music in Detention, including ex-detainees, believed, as one board panel member disclosed, that such exercises would help current detainees deal with the crisis of disorientation they experience in the IRCs. Counter to that crisis, the packs offer an engagement through movement with the process of grounding that Albright identified. It is hoped that they work because physical practice that re-engages with both disorientation and the ground beneath connects bodies with gravity as a steadying and calming energy, one that can release tension, despite massive uncertainty about the future. (These circumstances were made worse still by the COVID crisis at the time and enforced isolation of a number of the detainees). Bodily movements cannot counteract the crushing experience of the literal “dis-location” of removal from the country, but, nevertheless, attention to bodily practices designed to counter disorientation enables some support for detainees. In particular, the drawings from the last page of the outreached arms and the multiple languages hopefully convey, with clarity, the fraternal connections that echo the voices and dances of the men we met in Tinsley House.

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Murmurist (2016/2017), and recently created *Four Feet and Kitchen* with her 10-year-old daughter in the *Domestic* season in October 2020 for *Word of Warning.* Jane's current practice looks at participation and dance, auto-biographic practice as well as community dance. In 2019, she worked with *Music and Detention* with Shammi Pithea, Rebecca Bogue and H Patten to create the *Dance in Detention* project between an Immigration Removal Unit and a Psychiatric Hospital. In 2020, she has also created *De-stress Through Movement,* an Arts Activity Pack for Detainees for Music in Detention. Her article "Choreography Borders and Privilege"is published in *Choreographic Practices* Spring 2021.