

Tethered Across Distance: Choreographing with Motif Notation

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Abstract:

Motif notation is a powerful tool for creativity and community building, even across long distances. Heiland and Riggs Leyva's project called *Tethered* is a collaborative trans-national choreograph work created through motif notation, inspired by geographical separation while remaining tethered to one another through the main ideas, themes, concepts, and motif notation scores. They co-developed motif notation scores and compositional structures together in person before the choreographic process began. Then they separated, and they live 2,300 miles (3,700 km) apart. Subsequently, the creative process of staging the dances occurred at distant locations, in California and Iowa.

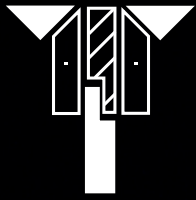
By guiding the dancers through the creation of two versions of *Tethered*, they developed a performance project using notation and dance notation literacy practices. Using qualitative research methods, they researched the dancers' experiences using motif notation as their key approach into dance making – an approach they had never used before – in addition to their experience with gaining dance notation literacy.

Keywords: dance notation | dance choreography | motif notation scores | dance literacy

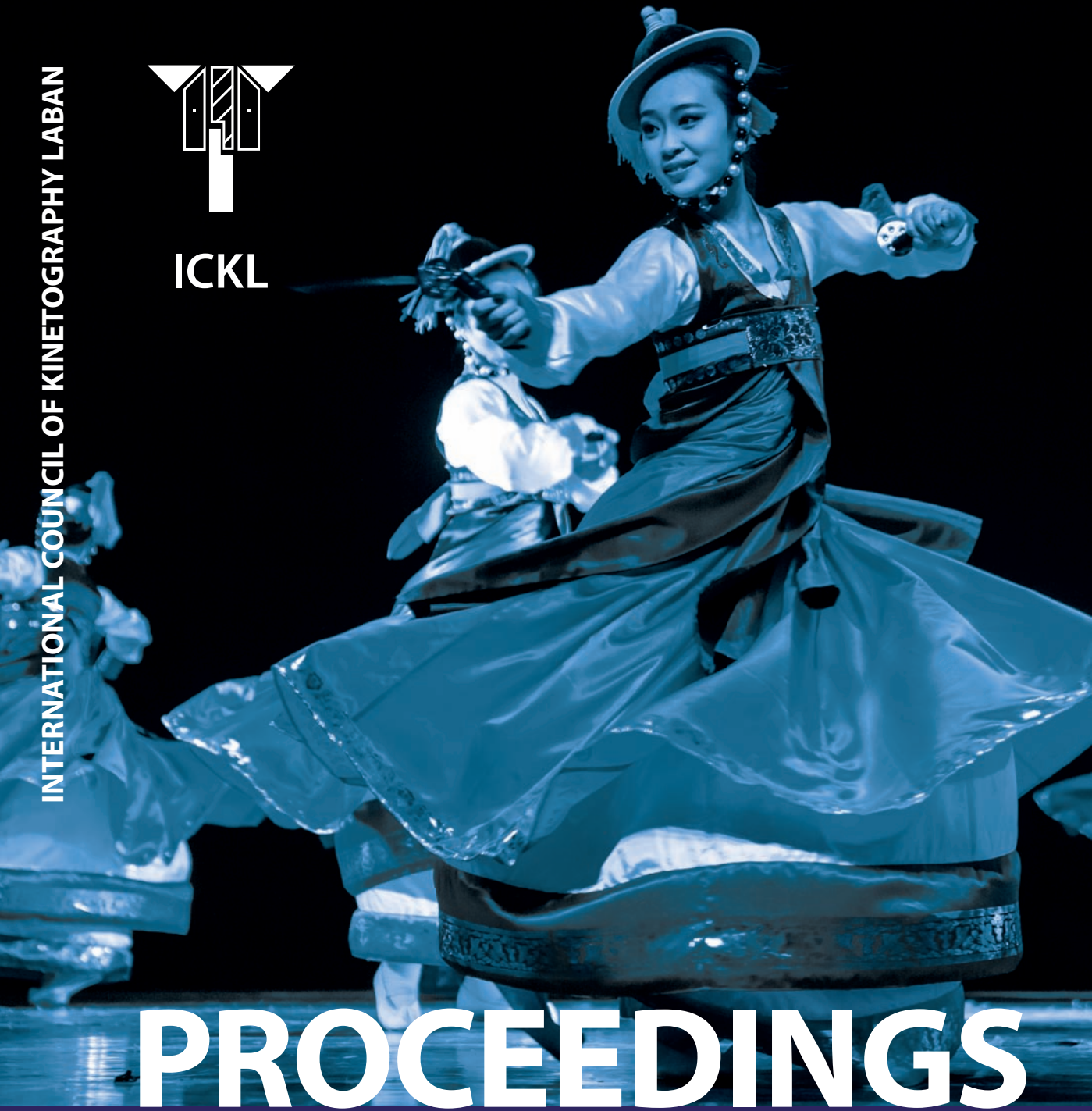
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L A B A N

TETHERED ACROSS DISTANCE: CHOREOGRAPHING WITH MOTIF NOTATION

TERESA L. HEILAND AND RACHAEL RIGGS LEYVA

Motif notation is a powerful tool for creativity and community building, even across long distances. Heiland and Riggs Leyva's project called *Tethered* is a collaborative trans-national choreographic work created through motif notation, inspired by geographical separation while remaining tethered to one another through the main ideas, themes, concepts, and motif notation scores. They co-developed motif notation scores and compositional structures together in person before the choreographic process began. Then they separated, and they live 2,300 miles (3,700 km) apart. Subsequently, the creative process of staging the dances occurred at distant locations, in California and Iowa.

By guiding the dancers through the creation of two versions of *Tethered*, they developed a performance project using notation and dance notation literacy practices. Using qualitative research methods, they researched the dancers' experiences using motif notation as their key approach into dance making—an approach they had never used before—in addition to their experience with gaining dance notation literacy.

The Open Work, Dance Devising, and Motif Notation Literacy Practices

Tethered is an open work, rather than a fixed work, so it can change substantially and purposefully each time it is created. Sara Rubidge's concepts of the open work and the "ontology of flux" represent the mode of intention for the choreography (205). The structuring and inclusion of sections can change, the substance of the movement phrases derived from the motif scores will differ, and the length of the piece is flexible. With each setting of *Tethered*, the group learns motif notation as they go through the compositional process, thereby developing dance literacy practices specific to the group. This process models ways in which literacy, specifically dance literacy, can

function contextually within the ecosystem of dance making and performance in a dancer's life (Barton 95–101; Heath 443–66).

To support the intention for *Tethered* to be an “open work,” Heiland and Riggs Leyva engaged in what Jo Buttorworth (178–88) calls a dance devising process of choreography, fostering a community in which the choreographer/stager is the facilitator and the dancers are the creators. As the facilitators, they provided intentions, concepts, and means for provoking movement stimuli, and the dancers generated movement content through social interaction, problem solving, guided discovery, and active participation. This method aligns with Steven Krashen's second language acquisition approach to gaining literacy, in which the level of literacy evolves based on what is needed for the dancer and the community to function and is flexible as is appropriate to their purposes. The dancers, who were not fluent in Labanotation or motif notation, would learn only the notation that was necessary and relevant to developing their version of *Tethered*.

During the development of the motif scores and structures, Heiland and Riggs Leyva examined several scores used for other creative choreographic projects: Remy Charlip's *Air Mail Dances*; Angelica Gerbes, *Event for Hoom*; and Angelia Leung and Ann Rodiger's *Cross Country Dance #1: la to nyc*. In addition, Heiland was also very curious how dancers might move using somatic, directional spatial pulls that came from inside the body, and so adapted organ symbols developed by Richard Haisma, such as kidneys, heart, and brain. See figure 1 for Haisma's organ concepts and figure 2 to see the resulting dance score using adaptations of these organ concepts.

Motif Notation/Organs
Richard Haisma/10-14-2010



















<u>Liver</u>		<u>Heart</u>	
<u>Lungs</u>		<u>Kidneys</u>	
<u>Trachea</u>		<u>Brain</u>	
<u>Stomach</u>		<u>Skin</u>	
<u>Spleen</u>		<u>Uterus</u>	
<u>Pancreas</u>		<u>Bladder</u>	
<u>Small Intestine</u>		<u>Gallbladder</u>	
<u>Colon</u>		<u>Prostate</u>	
<u>Rectum</u>		<u>Esophagus</u>	

Fig. 1. Motif Notation of Organs, by Richard Haisma, 10-14-10.

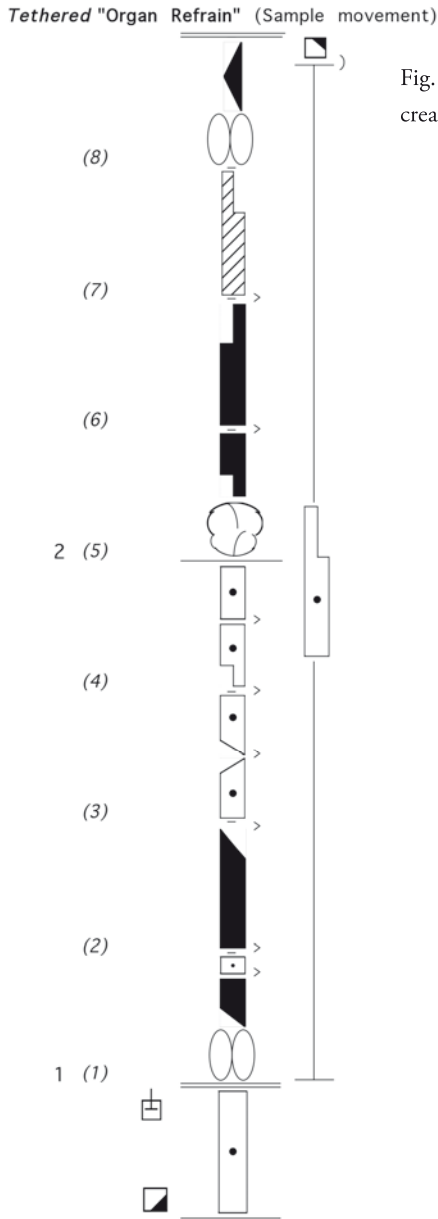


Fig. 2. Organ scores used to create one section of *Tethered*.

Methods

In April 2016, Heiland and Riggs Leyva co-developed motif scores with recurring movement themes and phrases. They also generated a collection of compositional structures and lesson plans or, rather, learning modules, designed to incite movement events that would be developed through improvisation and from the motif notation scores. Heiland worked with a music composer, Dina Macabee, to create music that aligned with the motif notation and themes of the dance. Riggs Leyva and Heiland shared and accessed all materials digitally from across the country. They created *Tethered* with two different dance groups, one complete work in California (October 2016) and one excerpted work in Iowa (February/April 2017). See table 1 for the sections produced by each group. They also conducted qualitative analysis using open coding and thematizing of dancers’ written reflective anecdotes and interviews. An Institutional Review Board granted permission to conduct this study. Pseudonyms are used herein to ensure participants’ privacy.

	Sections of <i>Tethered</i>					Zones
	Organ phrase, clapping	Hitch-a-Ride	Tether duets	Shape Recycling	Action Recycling	
Teresa's group	X	X	X	X	X	X
Rachael's group	X		X	X	X	

Table 1. Sections of *Tethered* in each of the productions stages by Heiland and Riggs Leyva.

Staging Methods and Score Samples

Megill & Company Cohort—California

Heiland worked with a dance company in Southern California called Megill & Company. While their director is literate in Labanotation and Language of Dance⁵, the company had never used notation to create any of their dances before. The director expressed that she uses notation in her teaching at university, but she could not imagine how to use motif notation to choreograph dances with or on her own company. Heiland's cohort consisted of 12 dancers, ages 14 to 42. The technical levels of this group varied greatly, from high school beginners to professional dancers. All but two dancers had experienced motif notation in some introductory way in the dance studio or community college setting, but had never used it to create a dance.

Each rehearsal included a warm-up and technique class using motif notation concepts, which were followed by a 2-hour compositional workshop to develop the six sections of the dance. The group met once a week, for 3 hours, for 10 sessions. The final 35-minute dance was performed at a local theatre in Pasadena, CA, just north of Los Angeles. See figure 3 for an image of "Hitch-a-Ride," a section of the dance that uses Relating concepts.



Fig. 3.
The LA cohort performing the "Hitch-a-Ride" section of *Tethered*.

The Dancers' Edge Cohort—Iowa

Riggs Leyva's cohort, from Iowa, consisted of middle school and high school dancers from a competitive studio company, The Dancers' Edge. Their training prior to the project focused on high-level technical feats, clean unison lines and rhythms, and short 2 to 3 minute dances with linear stories and emotional narratives. They had minimal experience with improvisation and composition. Riggs Leyva spent two day-long intensives with the group. These dancers were aware of Labanotation and

motif notation from one of their ballet instructors, who is a certified Labanotation teacher and notator. The dancers, however, were nonliterate in notation. See figure 4 for an image of the dancers.



Fig. 4. Dancers in the Iowa cohort, who created and performed *Tethered* with Riggs Leyva.

Due to the truncated time frame for developing the Iowa version of *Tethered*, Riggs Leyva focused attention on choreographic sections that most directly used the motif scores and were designed to develop material from them in several ways. Additionally, Riggs Leyva simplified the Busy Phrase and Going Phrase scores (see figure 5 and 6), and limited the number of organ options to brain, heart, lungs, kidneys, fascia to streamline the choreographic and learning process.

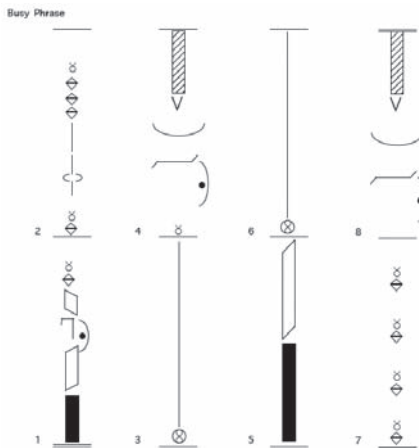


Fig. 5. The “Busy Phrase” used to choreograph one section of *Tethered*.

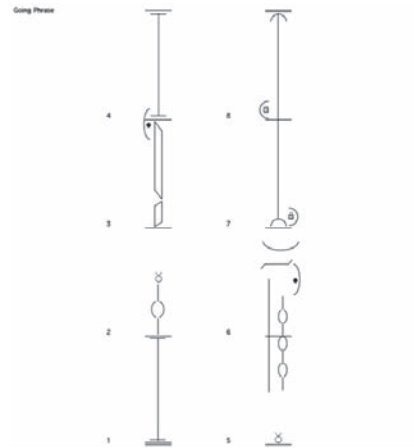


Fig. 6. The “Going Phrase” used to choreograph one section of *Tethered*.

Common Themes in Major Concepts of Meaning Making

The dancers' voices revealed varied experiences of engaging with motif notation for the first time in a professional rehearsal setting. These two versions of *Tethered* reveal how motif notation can be used as both a tool in the development of professional choreographic works and in developing creative agency among participants. Several themes emerged, including individual and shared sense of authorship, personal discoveries about dance-making, and creativity and freedom of expression through the use of notation.

Authorship

The *Tethered* projects were eye-opening for the dancers both in terms of using notation as a choreographic tool and dance-making through collaborative creative processes. Frequent expressions of authorship and agency occurred during rehearsal, interviews, and in their journals. Both groups of dancers had not experienced collaborative dance devising before and were not used to being responsible for creative phrase- and decision-making. Jess (of the LA project) said,

Coming up with movement from a score was different for me. It was new and a little frustrating at first. That was a breakthrough for me. Once I got it out of my head that it needs to be perfect or that it needs to be exact, it was way better for me. I felt like it came from myself more. (Jess, Interview, December 28)

Additionally, nearly every dancer in the Iowa cohort expressed that his or her version of *Tethered* was the first dance they felt they “owned” as choreographers and performers. Jamie said, “I feel like it’s more my piece...because we all spent the time to come up with the choreography and come up with our own interpretation [of the scores]” (Jamie, Interview, April). Using the motif scores facilitated these new experiences of authorship for the dancers. At the end of the project, when asked, “Who would you designate as the choreographer for the informal showing?” they answered, in near unison, “The dancers. All of us.” (Dancers, Interview, April).

Personal Growth Through Dance Making

Several dancers gained new understandings about dance-making and experienced personal growth as a result. June, of the LA group said,

To be able to be included in the creative process and to be able to bring in my own movement to [fulfill the] score was creatively fun, beneficial, and valuable for me as a woman, as a person, as a dancer, [and] as a choreographer. It was very inspiring. (June, Interview, December 29)

June has always been a dancer, but working in this group with motif notation supported her as a whole person.

Developing a choreographic work with the abstract thematic concepts that Heiland and Riggs Leyva chose was a new experience for the Iowa group. In their competition company, they typically receive a piece of music and a pre-determined story that is choreographed by teachers or guest artists. All movement choices are based off of a pre-determined story made of strings of movement that may not be developed. However, the “story” they read inside *Tethered* emerged unexpectedly through abstract representations in their actions, spatial relationships, dynamic qualities, and phrases. As one dancer noted, the whole *Tethered* staging process “[felt] like a lot of stuff I’ve seen adults do, like college students, or adult dance companies” (Corrine, February). Their entry into this way of working and subsequent discoveries about dance-making was facilitated by their unique movement solutions created through the scores, within a collaborative dance devising process of an open work. Now, as Corrine put it, they could see the creative, fascinating, and eccentric potential of dance notation literacy (Corrine, Journal Entry, April).

Creativity and Freedom of Expression

Dancers from both cohorts acknowledged an increased sense of creativity and freedom of expression when using motif notation. Ellie, from the LA group, particularly enjoyed using scores. She said,

[The] structure [motif notation brings] is liberating! I think it is easier to choreograph from a score than it is without one because you are given a map and are simply responsible for interpreting it. This highly structured approach to choreographing helps narrow down the choices you can possibly make in each movement so you can avoid ‘choice paralysis.’ (Ellie, Journal Entry, September 11)

See figure 7 for an image of the LA group in performance in “Zones.”



Fig. 7. The LA cohort, who worked with Heiland, performing “Zones,” the final section of *Tethered*. Photo by John Swain.

Similarly, Melody from the Iowa group, considered notation prompts as freeing her to experiment with, and to find more solutions within, the parameter of the scores (Melody, Interview, February). For Tara, another Iowa dancer, the mystery of improvisation was simplified through the structure of motif scores, and she no longer felt the pressure to “come up with all the genius stuff,” and instead she felt she was allowed to move simply (Tara, Interview, April).

The Future of *Tethered*

The Iowa and California cohorts were both excited and hopeful about doing more projects like *Tethered*. The use of motif scores and dance devising structures to create an open work facilitated the multiple discoveries and breakthroughs that the dancers experienced during this project. The excitement is, perhaps, best expressed by Sharon and Corrine. “Wow!” Sharon said, “I’ve learned this, and this is something that I can use. It’s tangible. I can read dance! It was really exciting” (Sharon, Interview, December 29). Corrine said:

Before this project, I knew only a little about notation. I knew it was a tool to write down ballet combinations, but I never thought of its potential to be used in other ways. I never could have imagined using it in a way as inspiring and creative as *Tethered* ... Now I see that it can be used in a variety of new, eccentric, and fascinating ways. (Corrine, Journal Entry, April)

So, where does *Tethered* go from here? Riggs Leyva is interested in repeating *Tethered* with other community groups in Columbus, OH; she is also interested in refining the parameters and developing this project so others can adopt it in their communities with or without Heiland and Riggs Levya being present. Heiland is interested in repeating *Tethered*, and she would like to do more projects that integrate the literacy practices with dance making that are geared toward performance. This project has also incited the desire to create a west coast Laban concert series to keep us “tethered” to each other.

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