

On Agency and Interruption: An (in)complete response

Young Lungs Dance Research Residency: Fall 2021
By Cierra Bettens

STUDIO I

What makes something incomplete?

I met Meryem Alaoui and Sasha Amaya on a windy autumn Wednesday. Their temporary home for the week was located at a dance studio nestled on the west side of Portage Avenue.

Alaoui and Amaya are working around the theme of incompleteness. In many ways, the theme coincides with the circumstances that brought the movement artists here. In March 2020, when Alaoui first embarked on the research series, the pandemic forced the project into an extended state of incompleteness. For over a year, Alaoui and Amaya worked solely in the virtual realm, dreaming up ideas and sharpening them as time went on. I was lucky enough to join them at the tail end of their journey.

The visual metaphor of incompleteness in Alaoui and Amaya's work lays its foundation in a cardboard rendering of an unfinished mosque in Rabat, Morocco. Constructed in the 12th century, the unfinished mosque of the Hassan Tower had ambitions of being the largest mosque in the Islamic world. Its construction was put to a standstill after the death of its commissioner, the sultan Yaqub al-Mansur.¹ Today, its unfinished pillars kneel below the shadow of a minaret. It serves as a visual reminder that the incomplete may be sacred, despite its perceived shortcomings.

There are a myriad of conventions that dictate completeness. You, the reader or listener, recognize this sentence as complete because it includes a subject and a predicate. It begins with a capital letter and ends with a punctuation mark. It's not something you or I think about very often; we know it intuitively and feel a sense of unease when these rules are broken.

In Western music theory, completeness tends to be dictated by a cadence, bringing a sense of resolution to our ears.

In dance, completeness is expressed through isolated movements that rhythmically dictate beginning and end.

Or is it? This is one of many questions Alaoui and Amaya have been asking through their research.

"Why is that not a complete movement?"

"How do we define a complete movement?"

¹ Martin Frishman, Hasan-Uddin Khan, and Mohammad Al-Asad, *The Mosque: history, architectural development & regional diversity* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002).

“Who defines a complete movement?”

STUDIO II

*Who has the agency to define what is (in)complete?
How do we interrupt?*

My second studio visit with Alaoui and Amaya mainly consists of observation. Before that, however, Alaoui introduced me to the concept of somatic movement. If you welcome stillness, silence and awareness in the body, you can trace the delicate movements of the fluids and organs that keep you alive. The body speaks in its own language: hunger, thirst, pain, relief. If we listen with intent, we might begin to learn it too.

Alaoui and Amaya’s rehearsals are never merely about movement; they’re a constant, ever-evolving conversation. Ideas percolate: some are preserved, while others are negated. Visualizing the incomplete is no simple task.

“How do we interrupt?” is another question Alaoui and Amaya ask through their movement research.

“How do we disrupt the notion of beginning and end?”

Exploring this through dance, I learn, necessitates careful attention to all aspects of the mind and the body. Interrupting familiar movements requires drafting new pathways through muscle memory. This is further complicated when attempting to sync two different bodies. How do we communicate with our backs turned against one another? How do we send a cue without the aid of our eyes?

Questions about interruption bring forth questions about agency. In thinking about the idea of completeness, we may ask, does completeness require mutual recognition? Do I have the agency to say something is complete? Do you?

In 1965, a man named James Hunter crossed paths with the portrait artist, Alice Neel. On that day, Hunter agreed to sit for a portrait that would later be titled *Black Draftee*. Hunter, however, never returned for the following sitting; instead, he was drafted for the Vietnam War. What remains of the portrait is a charcoal ghost of a body, juxtaposed against the colourful animations of the face.²

Neel however, declared the portrait complete: signed the back, dated, named, and later displayed it in a collection at the Whitney Museum of American Art. In a way, the *Black Draftee* is a testament to the ways that the aching void of incompleteness compels us to declare completeness.

Other scenarios demonstrate the opposite effect: the complete becomes incomplete.

² The Metropolitan Museum of Art, “*Black Draftee (James Hunter)*”. The Met, accessed Nov. 20, 2021, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/656757>.

In Toronto, a network of lost rivers whisper under the bustle of concrete and commerce. Residents find them hiding in the shadows of bridges, in bodies as large as creeks and as small as holes with the circumference of a coffee cup. Over the years, Toronto's rapid urban growth emerged as a contradiction to the organisms that called its waterways home for millennia. Today, local environmental groups are working to rehabilitate the hidden waters that once flowed with ease.³ Though buried into incompleteness, these rivers are not forgotten.

Completeness can also be challenged; it can be rejected. For years, those with power have attempted to render the ongoing impacts of colonization as something that exists in the past tense: the tense of the complete. One of the ways we attempt to incite completeness is through apologies. Yet, between words and sympathies, the devastating forces of colonialism and displacement persist. In *Red Skin, White Masks*, Glen Coulthard rejects the notion that centuries of destruction through colonialism can be reconciled through mere acknowledgement. As Coulthard argues, "instead of ushering in an era of peaceful coexistence grounded on the ideal of reciprocity or mutual recognition, the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power".⁴

The vibrations of atrocities echo through generations; trauma carries intergenerationally. To render such things as complete suggests the subject at hand is a feature of the past. Just as Neel exercised agency by declaring her portrait complete, and as lost rivers out East continue to flow under the crushing weight of industrialization, those that bear the weight of colonization reject the narrative that colonialism is a word belonging to the past tense; the complete tense.

We pursue illusions of completeness through apologies, resolutions and conclusions. Yet, these processes are never fully complete—they're ever-changing and ever-evolving. We exist through them; we resist through them.

PERFORMANCE

This is complete because I say it's complete.

Our final evening of the Young Lungs Dance Exchange Research Series welcomes a circle of guests to the third floor of the Artspace building. Before the performance, Alaoui engages the audience in a somatic exercise. The audience is primed to feel incompleteness; it's uncomfortable, it's disruptive, it's out of sorts. The attentiveness to the body sets off small alarm bells throughout; in one's breath, in one's heart rate and in one's mind. The body longs for the familiar repertoire of its muscle memory. There is a sense of vacancy, a longing for closure, and a longing for completeness.

"How did you know the dance was complete?", an audience member asks.

As we sit in stillness on charcoal-coloured plastic chairs, I feel half tuned in to the inner workings of the dancers' practice and half puzzled at the same time. The audience member's question brings me back to an earlier conversation I had with Alaoui.

³ Michael Robinson, "Toronto's 'lost rivers' reflect how we've reshaped nature". Toronto Star, May 06, 2021, <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2016/04/29/torontos-lost-rivers-reflect-how-weve-reshaped-nature.html>.

⁴ Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the colonial politics of recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). pp.3.

“In a way, the only way to know if a movement is complete or not is that *you* know it’s complete,” Alaoui said to me in our first exchange.

This also brings me back to an earlier question: who has the agency to define something as (in)complete?

In 1992, political scientist Francis Fukuyama declared in his seminal work that we had reached the *End of History*; there could be no better system than that of capitalist, Western liberal democracy.⁵ History had reached its final era of ideological completion. Similar sentiments were echoed by politicians like Margaret Thatcher: “there is no alternative”.⁶ The debate had reached completion: whatever inequalities persisted in the globalized free market, there could be no better system than what currently exists.

Mark Fisher diagnoses this cynical, Thatcherite line of thought as capitalist realism. At the centre of capitalist realism is this very idea that there is no viable alternative to neoliberal economics. Seeking alternatives, therefore, would be foolish.⁷

Throughout the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, seeking alternatives has become a necessity. Against the harsh currents of isolation and precarity, mutual aid networks emerged, and community care carried us through a labour of love. As a journalist, I became privy to many of these efforts, reimagining what social relations may look like, resisting the idea that we exist in isolation from one another; that it is foolish to believe we can rely on each other.

As echoed in the late Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism*, Fukuyama and Thatcher were necessarily wrong; history was far from complete.

“The long, dark night of the end of history has to be grasped as an enormous opportunity. The very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalist realism means that even glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities can have a disproportionately great effect. The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism.”⁸

“From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again.”⁹

By pinpointing how incompleteness feels in the body through movement, we can begin to ponder its presence in other aspects of our lives. We can shift to a place where we find solace in our discomfort; where we may regain a sense of agency over ourselves and our bodies; where we may foster new connections, whether it be through our muscle memory or through our relationships with others.

To render something once deemed complete as incomplete is, in itself, an act of resistance. Resisting completeness takes many forms; to be unaccepting of an apology; to seek alternatives; to demand more than recognition; to demand redress.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1993).

⁶ Claire Berlinski, *There Is No Alternative: Why Margaret Thatcher matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

⁷ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009). pp.1-12.

⁸ Ibid, pp.80-81.

⁹ Ibid, pp.81.

The demise of the complete brings forth

(Re)birth

(Re)creation

(Re)vision

(Re)emergence

Resistance.