

where to from here
Interview Transcript with Jes Res & Kym McDaniel
September 23, 2021

Jes: Introduce yourself, your name and pronouns if you prefer. Who are you, where do you call home, what do you call your art, happy to get to know you here.

Kym: My name is Kym McDaniel and my pronouns are she/her. I am an experimental filmmaker, choreographer, performer and teacher. I currently live in Ithaca, New York. I just moved here in July this year. I teach at SUNY Binghamton which is about an hour away from Ithaca. I had originally moved to Binghamton in 2019, and then the pandemic happened, so I moved back to Milwaukee where I had been living for many years and now I'm back.

J: It's like déjà vu or something right, like I think I did this already?!

K: Yeah, definitely.

J: Awesome. What do you teach?

K: I teach in the Cinema Department at Binghamton. I teach intro classes but also classes in Personal Cinema and Dance Filmmaking. They have a really great program in the sense I'm really supported in teaching classes that I really like.

J: That's great that you can take the skills and everything that you have passion in to inspire others and give them the anatomy as well to work in those areas. That's really cool. I love Personal Cinema, that's my favorite genre of film, so that's exciting. When did you start making film and video, what drew you to the medium? You mentioned you were also a choreographer.

K: I was majoring in dance in undergrad and had a head injury, that was the catalyst for transitioning into film. Mostly because I couldn't dance and choreograph anymore because I was in too much pain and dealing with aftermath from the concussion. Film was the way I could continue making art since I wasn't able to dance or choreograph. In 2013 I took my first film class and now eight years later I'm teaching it. It's been a wild ride.

J: So film has been a part of your recovery process as well?

K: Yeah. Once I had gotten into graduate school for film at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, I was working on a piece that wasn't really going anywhere and at the same time, I was in physical therapy for the head injury. I was working with a physical therapist that really triggered the hell out of me. It was a terrible experience that totally flashed me back to another experience I had after hip surgery in my early 20s.

I was really at this point of like, how is this possible that I keep repeating patterns? It had never been more clear to me the repetitious nature of trauma in my life. I made a film about it and received a lot of support from my mentor and grad school. By receiving the support and reactions to the work I realized there was a lot to dig out there about my recovery and psychology about myself...all in the attempt to heal those wounds.

J: And those are the Exit Strategies right, there's seven of them?

K: Yes...there's five and then what I call a coda. Normally a coda is traditional at the end of a ballet, there's a duet that comes back on stage. I made a coda to the five videos, but it's not meant to screen individually, only after the five precede it.

J: I love that. So we're probably going to jump around here a little bit. I know recently you had a screening in Minneapolis with Cellular Cinema. Were you able to show the Exit Strategies then?

K: Yeah, I did!

J: I'm so sad I missed that!

K: It's still COVID times! I had found out Kevin's plans had changed and he wasn't going to be around so much in Minneapolis for the semester and I was leaving to come back to New York so it was like alright we're still in the middle of the pandemic. I feel really grateful for the opportunity to have them screened in sequence but it's also this thing about COVID where it's like people are uncertain about attending, and I was uncertain too! Nobody really knows where we're at still. My students and I were talking about that the other day, I was like how is everybody doing?! And everybody had such different interpretations and feelings.

J: Yeah, I haven't gone or seen a film in person...even outdoors in a while. It's all been online. Moonplay, the microcinema screening, less than 40 people can fit in our space and there's no social distancing. It's such a tiny space. It's so difficult, isn't it? That's definitely one of the reasons why I wasn't able to make it...but was that the first time you were able to show them in a sequence like that?

K: It was!

J: It was! Oh gosh, wow. Inaugural screening. I hope you'll be able to have another screening. Maybe it's with Moonplay.

K: I would love that!

J: Yeah definitely. We were going to screen Exit Strategy #4, and we will at one point.

K: Thanks.

J: I have a question, you started using film, or transitioned to film from dance, but what drew you? Had you been interested in film prior? Tell me about that.

K: Actually, the funny thing is that I hated going to the movies growing up. Well, I got lice in second grade and I have this theory that I got lice from the movie theatres and from then on I associated the movie theatre with lice and... acne? I don't know, when I got to be a teenager everybody's hands are so greasy and the popcorn, I don't know. It was a paranoia.

J: You had an association you couldn't let go! Makes sense.

K: Yeah! I think too as a dancer I always loved moving. Even before training seriously, I loved running and being really active. To sit in a theatre for hours was really hard for my brain.

I got hurt in May [2013] and that fall I was still trying to take dance classes because I was in undergrad and needed to graduate. That was hell because I was in so much pain and I really shouldn't have been trying to do anything at that point. But I was taking a movement and film class and that's where I met Cecelia Condit who ended up being one of my film mentors.

I remember at the end of the semester she came up to me and was like "Are you going to be around next spring? What's up with you? Where are you in terms of graduating?" I had actually been contemplating dropping out because I was in so much pain. She said if I was around I should take one of her classes because she thought I had ideas.

That was the beginning. I think initially studying film was really born out of love for the community and my relationship with Cecelia and how much she supported and inspired me, how my other mentors were supportive of it as well. I felt believed in.

J: Yeah, definitely! That you could find a voice in the medium, and that you have a voice in the medium. I know Hannah [Hamalian] mentioned Cecelia too, and you and Hannah went to school together, is that right?

K: Yeah, right.

J: Cecelia sounds pretty cool. I think you also mentioned the movement of dance and the medium of film and it's ability to express movement in a particular or similar way of dance? That you could use that to explore.

K: Yeah, the first film I made was a continuation of a dance I choreographed on four dancers. I've never really made as formal of a dance film ever since. It was my one and only traditional dance film and then apparently that's it. [laughs]

J: We might have some listeners who have no idea what dance film is or what experimental film is. Could you share a little bit about what dance film is?

K: Traditionally dance film looks at choreography on screen and how you can film dancers moving and highlighting different parts of the choreography by using the camera. There's that definition of it.

Since adopting a disabled identity, my definition is that dance film doesn't necessarily have to be choreography as we traditionally think about it, where you would see big movements across the stage, partnering, and these wild physical feats. My perception of dance film is highlighting individuality, the gaze and who is behind the camera, and that an individual gesture can be as virtuosic as somebody sticking their leg next to the head and twirling around. In my mind, there's a way of approaching dance film where maybe you wouldn't think right away "oh that's a dance performance" but I still consider it dancing.

J: Yeah. Definitely. I know you mentioned you're teaching now. Are you teaching full time?

K: Mhmm.

J: How do you balance your art practice? I know it's all connected because you're teaching in the areas that you create in, but I was wondering how you balance those worlds of teaching and creating.

K: Such a good question. I mean, during April 2020 I was offered this tenure-track position so I know I have a huge privilege of being on the tenure-track.

When my partner and I moved to Ithaca, I wanted to make sure we had a side room for my studio. But then of course we moved and realize we have too much furniture, and my partner teaches online and they needed a teaching space. So, I kind of gave the idea up because it was unrealistic. I looked for a studio space in Ithaca and was happy to find one, but I feel guilty because it's hard for me to go. All of my plants are there because my cat eats the plants.

J: I can relate to that. [laughs]

K: [laughs] That's the thing that makes me go twice a week because the plants need water. But the transition of teaching in person, choosing to have a commute, and dealing with the complexities of being in chronic pain - the ups and downs, appointments, acupuncture, doctors, the things I need to do on days I'm not teaching...then at the end of the day just being really exhausted. It's something I need to think about moving forward because I love the studio space and when I'm there I work and I love it. But it's hard to balance the job, health, relationship, and having another space to practice in. That's where I'm at.

J: I appreciate you connecting the piece to health as well. Even in my question, I didn't think about how it's not necessarily our work life that can contribute or add another thing in to the schedule, or what else impacts our time or concentration or how we're feeling.

K: How are you doing? I think I heard or saw that you had to give up your space because of COVID?

J: Yeah, I can connect and relate on different levels you mentioned. The first is the studio space. The room I'm in right now used to be my studio. I've converted it into my office and where I've worked remotely but also where I do all my admin as an independent artist.

I had a loft attic studio in my mother-in-law's house and she lived in Duluth, long story. We moved her to St. Paul, she's older and also an artist. One of her requests was that when she moves, there's also a space for me, so I could have a studio space separate and where I don't have cats everywhere. [laughs]

I had been painting a lot, I was a filmmaker and when my mom passed away, I started painting. I had been drawing and painting and things like that, but I considered it more as process and not something I would show to the world. It was part of my flow as I was making films. I just needed better space. We found this cute little house and the attic was already completed and I had just started to move in. I got water installed, got some plumbing installed, then the pandemic. My mother-in-law is a lovely person and in her 80s and uh-uh...was not going over there besides you know, check in, mow the lawn, wave from outside. It was difficult. I was just getting into it, creating a schedule and then wham. That was a big adjustment. Then being furloughed for a while with my previous job, I had just moved all my art supplies over, it was so hard! I figured it out. I feel fortunate now, even with vaccinations when we're like are they still working or am I going to get breakthrough COVID?

But in terms of health too, I have a partial disability in my left wrist and working on the computer... I also just stopped doing a lot of film. There was a point I was making a lot of personal films and spending hours editing. I just had to stop because the pain in my wrist was so difficult being on the computer so much. With painting I use my right hand a lot.

K: I feel like the thing with having a disability for me is that it asks you to innovate yourself in a different way for your art. Painting has more options to work with the pain in a different way. I feel that.

J: I think about the ways our lives pull us in different directions and that it's important to remember our health. I think regardless if we experience or live with a disability, but it's evermore so apparent because it's on our minds and we move our schedules or structure our environment based on what our needs are. So I appreciate that we're having this conversation about it. It just brings to mind...on a day to day basis I think of what my needs are, but I didn't think of it when I asked you.

You did mention right before the pandemic hit you got a new teaching job and moved...what was that pause like for you? Were there projects you were working on?

K: Going into the fall of 2019, so even six months before everything happened...I was coming off of several years of being so overworked. I loved living in Milwaukee, but my last semester there I was teaching five classes and on overload. It was wreaking havoc on my health and relationships and it wasn't a way to continue living. I was hired at Binghamton for a lecturer position and moved there in the fall. Transitioning is so hard for me. Going from a place where I had lived for 12 years and had friends to going somewhere I didn't know anybody and it was really new. I guess I say that because when everything started shutting down, everybody was posting on social media "we're so isolated", "we can't see our friends", and the world was going through this grieving process, I was like hello....welcome!

J: Yeah like, I know what that feels like!

K: The more I thought about it too the more I realized that I had felt like this before moving. I feel like I've always had this chronic sense of loneliness due to trauma. I actually felt in community when I started realizing everybody was talking about [being lonely] now. Everybody was starting to realize what it felt like

to feel isolated. Back to this whole wake-up of ableism in a way, like for some people with disabilities this has been ongoing. And because we were able to transition online, I went to live with Hannah for a few months which was one of the best times of my life! To be supported and living with people who love you. She and husband were so kind, she called me up and was like “So...When are you coming to live with us?” [laughs]

J: That's awesome.

K: Yeah. I also feel like when I get really overwhelmed, I stop doing things you have to do as an adult. So, I hadn't paid my taxes in two years, and bills that I could pay but couldn't find the energy and time to sit down. Within a month of living with Hannah everything was taken care of. I felt like my brain was totally online.

J: I wonder if that's connected to just being in community and having that support system and not feeling alone.

K: Definitely...100 percent...and also a weird time too because there was so much grief and loss. The pandemic brought a lot of loss into people's lives and I was actually thinking this is okay for me, I'm not sick, I'm safe. I feel like everyone's COVID stories are different in so many ways. I feel really grateful for that time in my life. Then I went back to Milwaukee and met my partner. So there's been a lot of gifts that I have been given during this really bizarre strange time in the world.

J: Yeah, yeah I can definitely relate to the sense of grief, loss, and disconnection, and also this sense of reconnection or you mentioned gifts...I left a job I had been with running a program for folks with mental illness, I had done that for seven years and ran the studio as my other identity. Left that and now moving into a new job and changes at Moonplay, I feel like at first I was upset but when you have time to reflect and go through the experience and come out on the other side, I feel like there are gifts things that have happened over the last two years. A sense of appreciation and also taking a chance. It's okay to take a chance. It's scary, so scary to take a chance and do something different and make a change. But you need people in your life, like Hannah. I needed my partner to just be like, “Yeah, let's do it.” Gifts, for sure.

K: Yeah, I just finished reading Judy Heumann's autobiography. In her first chapter she's writes that she never thought she would write an autobiography because it's not just her story and there's so many other people who have written and helped her. So she goes on to write this beautiful autobiography about community and how community has supported her fighting for the ADA and disability rights.

J: Since we're on the topic of community and it's come up a few times, I always like to talk with other artists about the communities we have or need and don't have yet. Also, what are your needs as an artist? Needs, resources, and community are so connected.

K: Community is so important for me. But then, I need space. Interpersonal space. I need time away from people. It's a delicate balance of being in relationship with people as part of the process and also going away so I can think. That was one thing I really appreciated about my year right before COVID happened - I was alone. I grew a lot as an artist because of that. I had been working on the fifth exit strategy for two years at that point and couldn't get it to “click”. It wasn't hitting in the right way or communicating what I needed it to. Being alone and starting up my meditation practice again... I only meditate when there's nothing else for me to do... There's no reason to not do it. [laughs]

Going through questions and uncertainty about my future and having a lot of solitude helped me finish that piece. It's something I've learned about myself especially when I'm in partnership or relationship with someone intimately. I have to be really careful because there's an empathetic bleed that happens with them and it's important for me to carve out my own time and put the focus back on me.

J: In my last interview with Lyn Corelle, she mentioned time and space and how important that is, and how it comes up regularly. Time is so precious. For me, I need time and space, too. But I need the people

in my life to think about my art practice as important as it is to me. If I don't have that on board it's so hard to make that available as a resource.

K: I'm glad you said that. I totally agree. I've been in conversation with my partner about this because they're a scientist, an archaeologist. It was months into our relationship when I realized they were a *scientist* and I was kind of like ...wait... this isn't what I thought... You're not who I thought you were! But it's interesting because I feel like I've had to face this chip on my shoulder about people who don't work in the arts field or how I think other fields don't think of art as relevant. I think I project that onto my partner sometimes. My radar is so sensitive to not being supported, it's really about checking in with myself about the reality and realizing how supported I actually am.

J: One of the questions I've been asking people in this round, is what question do you have as an artist? When you show up or go into the studio, do you feel like there have been certain themes? I know you talked about trauma, personal cinema, making a series of works related to processing and recovering. I was just wondering, what are the questions that drive your work or curiosity?

K: I love thinking about this question. Two things come up right away, the first is Dani ReStack who teaches at OSU. I met her when I was in grad school and we had a crit. Dani had a screening at the microcinema in Milwaukee and she asked for "wicked questions" from the audience. These are questions you don't think you can ask due to the personal nature of the work. A friend, Ada, asked Dani what her wicked question was to herself. That will always stick with me, not just about art but about life. What are the parts of me that I should ask about? Or that I don't want to face or see? The tough questions for myself. Which is hard. But I think it's really necessary.

The other thing I've been struggling with over the last year and half is that I read this book at the beginning of 2020 that really changed my life, not to be too dramatic. It's called *Healing the Fragmented Selves of Trauma Survivors* by Janina Fisher. I've been in therapy for 13 years but this book taught me more about myself and modeled a therapeutic system more than I had ever learned in therapy. One of the concepts in the book is that you don't have to tell your story in order to heal from it. That really made me stop and think about my entire practice. I realized that some of the Exit Strategies, as much as they have helped me, some of the process of making them was retriggering. At the time I was just doing what I do, which is diving into the deep end not knowing how deep the water is... this is my approach to life. But, I would love to not retraumatize myself or audience through my works. I started realizing that I needed to start trigger warning my films with "memory recall". "Memory recall" happens when I read a memoir about medical trauma, all the sudden, I'm thinking about my medical trauma. It's a big question that I've been grappling with that is at the heart of what I made and something I need to find answers to in order to move forward in my practice.

The film I'm making now is avoiding what I've done before in terms of "this is what happened to me" in a very specific way. It's an experiment moving forward trying to integrate thinking about trauma and the personal without feeling the need to tell my story as part of it. At the other end though, being really explicit about the trauma in the films has helped me in other ways.

J: When you were mentioning moving forward, it made me think that we don't always have to make the same art over and over again. When my mom passed away, transitioning to painting was a form of healing for me. I did use film to explore, express, and heal. So much goes into storytelling as a way to reframe or reshape or distance oneself from the deeply personal and hurtful things that have happened, the trauma of the experience. Storytelling has shown that it has helped in that way, but you keep on revisiting it. How do you move forward when you continue to revisit? I think a lot about that in terms of exploring memory and nostalgia. All these curiosities feed into one another. I think it's moving you in a direction where you're exploring something similar but in a different way. That's growth.

K: Yeah, Roxane Gay has talked about this, writing into the wound. How do you write in a way that is visceral but not retraumatizing people or yourself? I think what's hard too is some film festivals want the spectacle; they want the drama. My Exits #2 and #4 which are the most explicitly about a situation, those have been programmed the most. It's a question even about the system of film festivals. A part of me

thinks that films about trauma are so shocking, and they're programmed because maybe people are sitting in the theatre all day long and it will shock them awake or whatever. But why do we need that? Why is that part of the culture? Program my boring trauma film! My Exit Strategy #3 doesn't get programmed at all and I call it my boring trauma film. [laughs]

J: It's good to think about that especially as someone exploring trauma. There are so many great little things we're talking about. We only have so much time. We could talk forever, couldn't we? I know that you've had a few new things going on besides teaching. I know you're a candidate for the certificate in disability studies and it's something I've thought about for myself. Tell me about this path for you and why you've decided to go this route.

K: I'm so excited about being in the certificate program. It was something I was on the fence about applying for and then I talked to Hannah and she was like why don't you just try and see. Now that I'm in the class I love it. I'm learning so much and it's really supporting my embodied knowledge of things I had learned my whole life and after the injury. Now I have the theory to support the feeling.

My partner and I visited Ellis Island at the beginning of August and the museum is so small, they cram so much information into the small space and I was exhausted. I mean, I woke up tired. By the time we get there I end up having to sit out on the benches because I couldn't walk, I was just too tired to engage at all. I had this real moment there where I was like, oh my god my physical health has deteriorated so much where I can't go into a museum and enjoy this with my partner. I hadn't even started the class yet but I was reading Judith Heumann's autobiography at the time and learning how the medical model of disability is thinking that "I am wrong and this is my fault" versus the idea of like, why is this museum not accessible? Why is it so crowded that even if I requested a wheelchair, it would have been such a pain to maneuver throughout the museum? It was such a wakeup for me that *it's not me*- it's the system. It's how society has been organized to cater to an able-bodied audience. It was a click moment for me about reframing my life in regards to identity and disability.

I feel like I also wanted to join the program in terms of an insecurity. After reading the Janina Fisher book I realized maybe I was irresponsible because I didn't have the trauma knowledge before making my films. I think a part of the decision to pursue the certificate was about getting informed and being in a program that will hold me accountable and hold my internalized ableism accountable, too. As I move forward and make work thinking about disability and health, let me be confident that I know what I'm talking about more than my own embodied experience.

J: Yeah! I'm really excited for you. I think also how important this next step could also be as an artist. Within the arts community there is ableism but also there's not enough representation or services supporting those who are living with disabilities, from grants to spaces. Not that you have to be the podium or statue or whatever, or that you have to tell your story. But how important it is to have more artists talking about these topics and being open and saying hey! There's nothing wrong with us. It's actually our systems that are not set up to support us.

K: Yeah! And not only is there nothing wrong with us but that we have a unique perspective that people do not understand! What we were talking about earlier. Our disabilities have asked us to innovate and be creative in a way that gives us a perspective that is so individual and unique. That's what I'm really excited about. Nobody has my experience and also watching other artists with disabilities and their work, it's just so exciting because it feels like every work is fresh and unique.

J: I also think about how innovative you were when you experienced your head injury and that you didn't stop creating art. You found another way to keep going and I think that story is so valuable. So that's part of your *where to from here* I guess! What else is next for you? I know that question is so "bleh", please don't ask me what's next. So what's forward for you?

K: For some reason I always think about things in a series. The film I'm making now with my partner and negotiating our identities... As I was making the film I was like, I could see two more films after this- in a series of three! Why do I always think about things so episodically?!

J: It's because you're a writer!

K: Thanks, wow. I never made that connection before.

J: Film is a form of writing. It must be inside of you. It may not be linear storytelling but you're writing something. That's what I sense in your work.

K: Thank you!

J: Thank you for being part of this time in my Zoom room. I look forward to sharing our conversation, I would love to keep on talking and laughing. I appreciate that we might be able to do this again!

K: Thank you, thanks so much Jes.