Editors' Note: Assembly, Gathering and Being with Dance

Assembly offers an affair of appearance in which people find common ground in public view or private space. Dance, social choreography, protests, and other forms of assembly are marked by actions that index shared beliefs about the self, the group, and broader social conditions. Assembly might be interpreted as expressing self-determination and the sovereignty of a commons—an ephemeral consolidation of bodies made manifest by the mutual decision to show up for *something* (Hardt and Negri 2017). That said, although spontaneous gatherings or carefully planned political protests might signal shared values through acts of popular will, copresence is not synonymous with homogeneity. Thus, an interest in the complexities of group formation— the processes and politics of gathering amid dance—drives this special issue of *Dance Research Journal*.

Whereas assembly can be a strategy of turning the singular into the plural or the crowd into the collective, the practice of gathering—whether in a classroom, at a protest, or online—is rarely simple or straightforward. Sure, the presence of those gathered may be intentional, but a *politics of belonging* conditions the diverse experience of being together. Increasingly, gatherings are facilitated, framed, and disseminated by technological devices and artificial intelligence systems. We wondered, what are the technologies that allow assembly? How have those technologies been crafted, and how are they deployed by people engaged in critical movement, through and beyond? How do dance studios materialize, and what sorts of shared rhetorics of corporeal agreement/ disavowal are embedded in their operations?

Emerging out of the summer of 2020, the original idea for this special issue was inspired by the copresence of multiple global pandemics, including COVID-19 and anti-Black, state-sanctioned violence. We wondered how dance and dancing were impacted by the mandate to physically isolate. We asked how movement might provide an imperfect occasion to both express group grievance and practice future building. At the protest, for example, how do race, gender, sexual identity, body size, class, disability, religion, place, and age impact who is welcomed, affirmed, or protected once assembled? How might the time signatures and spaces of assembly provide both the occasion for new solidarities or openings for appropriation? Once the assembly disperses, where does that collective action go? How is it alchemized? Who was invited and able to attend the gathering in the first place? In our contemporary moment, in relation to all manner of previous events, how has protest continued to *dance*? We turn to the image on the cover of this special issue to mark some of the curiosities that mechanized our theme.

JJ: In the still image captured from a short video created by Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), a Black dancer is in midgesture. Weight shifted on their back leg allows the front leg to lift off of the ground. Arms raised in front of their chest, shoulders leaning back, the dancer grooves inside of a circle during a Black Lives Matter protest—the brim of folks gathered around cheering them on. This circle makes necessary space for itself within the forward-moving force of the march, reminding us that protest is neither unidirectional nor necessarily linear in its path and approach.

Threading together a string of protests from various North American cities, the video centers scenes of dance in its focus on the BLM movement. With Crime Mob's "Knuck If You Buck" serving as sonic background and rhythmic thrust, the video asks us to consider the significance of dance as its own alchemy within political movements to demand, protect, and honor Black people. Throughout, we see dancers vogue, J-Sette, freestyle, bomba, and join massive electric slide line dances. The image that graces the cover for this special issue embodies the time of this project's emergence. How can dance make community, become a means through which solidarity is expressed, and index the possibilities and limits of coming together?

EM: The protestors wear folded bandanas that mask their faces while others don the kind of fitted face coverings that became ubiquitous during the pandemic. In their aesthetic diversity, the masking devices express individuality and, in their functionality, the collective effort to minimize viral contagion—even as contagious energies of group assembly circulate. That tension reminds us that many felt compelled to gather together and protest during the pandemic and, as well, that many could not join for reasons of health. Beyond expressing individuality and solidarity, the masks can be seen as symbolizing those who were there in spirit.

TFD: Yes, we are more than one, and we are more than this moment in dance. The expressive gesture of assembly in protest animates the group beyond the stable sense of we here and now, toward the expansive possibilities of moving beyond the state or the family, beyond religion or caste, sex or sexuality, disability or place. Maybe gender pulls us toward recognizing a "man" here in this image, but the dance allows the dancer to exceed category: to obliterate singularities in the elaboration of energetic urge. They move in the image and we move with them, wondering what was next, maybe, or what came before, but mostly in affirmation that movements matter, that political movements are literally people in motion. Maybe dance, as an amplification of desire beyond language, tethers assembly to imaginative sharing beyond the event horizon?

The essays that follow take us down different paths—toward new horizons—than the ones we initially conceived of, and compellingly so. The conventions of proscenium dance performances, the interdisciplinary art of curation, the spiritual might of Black gathering, the relationship between dance, protest and the law, and the choreography of exclusive (white) sociality are explored with critical care and sapience. We acknowledge that this special issue draws much of its critical motivation from a North American perspective, even as international movements matter to the authors as well.

As noted, current events have challenged us to carefully consider social factors that promote or hinder assembling. Because assemblies can destabilize hegemonic power, they are often constrained, undermined, or overtly suppressed (Butler 2015). Beyond issuances of state-sanctioned force, many of the public spaces that people have traditionally mobilized in have been rendered inaccessible. Also, those assemblies that find safe spaces are often viewed negatively as manifestations of mob mentality (Gotman 2017). Anna Jayne Kimmel considers these issues in "Crowded Choreographies: From Assembly to Association and Back Again." She begins with an analysis of a ballet solo performed during the 2019 Hirak demonstration, arguing that when Melissa Ziad danced *en pointe* in the streets of Algiers, she uniquely inflected the broader mass uprising against systemic corruption and elitism. Her dance of protest also provided a counter to sociological theory, which defines crowds as inherently irrational as well as legal doctrines that construe public assembly in terms of linguistically mediated (and, therefore, disembodied) associations. Kimmel argues that such tactics belie anxieties about the plural body, coordinated action in public spaces, and the formation of new political movements.

The capacity of assembly to effect social change is also constrained when it is framed in terms of neoliberal values. In "Crowded White Spaces: Dîner en Blanc and the Place-Based Contingencies of Choreography," Alana Gerecke examines a social choreography in which throngs of individuals dressed all in white gathered for a picnic spectacle on a public lawn in Vancouver, British Columbia.

The 2018 event fostered impromptu socialization and rechoreographed public space, but because it imitated an image of French high society, it was exclusionary in nature. Gerecke discusses how the Dîner's micro-choreographies facilitated a white, neoliberal sense of belonging and, after considering the event in light of more inclusive social choreographies, she concludes with the ethical argument that, because unceded territories of Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations were not acknowledged by the event organizers or participants, it contributed to a history of colonization.

In "Curtain Calls in Dance: Negotiating the Terms of Detachment," Caroline Sutton Clark analyzes brief moments of sociality fostered by the rituals of bows and applause. She advances a historical account of curtain calls in the Western concert tradition that shows them to be performative, organizing processes that afford expressions of social power as well as opportunities for liberatory improvised agency. In turn, her analysis of the embodied negotiations that performers and audiences enact in response to each other at the conclusion of performances fosters critical considerations of ways individuals navigate the process of disengaging from an assembly and returning to the routines of daily life.

Whereas the essays by Kimmel, Gerecke, and Clark focus on social factors that delimit assembly, Sarah Conn's "The Superfluid Curation of Darkness" and Whitney V. Hunter's "Ring Shout: A Conjuring of Black Togetherness" examine techniques of dance collaboration, curation, and performance that mitigate and resist oppression. Conn considers Ni'Ja Whitson's queer trans/mogrifying multidisciplinary futurist work—*The Unarrival Experiments*—which creates a third space of collectivity, ambiguity, interdependent sovereignty, and generative critique. Central to that work, Conn observes, is decentralized, interdisciplinary collaboration and attunement to fluid relationship between elements of the creative process (i.e., critical questioning, interdisciplinary collaboration, artistic experimentation, and outcomes). Conn also discusses Whitson's community workshops, their ceremony project that honors Black transgender and gender nonconforming lives, and the techniques they use to navigate white curatorial spaces.

Whereas Conn sheds light on the contemporary work of Whitson, Hunter weaves history, theory, and autoethnography to explore the Ring Shout as a sacred ritual technology that recuperates cultural memory and wisdom. Detailing its key aspects (i.e., its use of space, rhythm, and repetition) shows it as grounding embodied recall and intersubjective connections with dancers past and present. Whether African American slaves, Christian Gulla Geechee, or Afrofuturist dance artists, the Ring Shout fosters experiences of Black togetherness rooted in an intergenerational struggle for liberation.

Taking us to the proscenium stage, the outdoor venue, the black box theater, the street, the clearing, and beyond, the authors in this special issue expand our vocabulary around the meaning and mattering of dance assembly. Like the dancer in this issue's cover photo, we wonder together how a gestural accumulation moves beyond its immediate contexts. Assembled, we hope that this special issue sparks attention toward the political dimensions of dance enlivened by awareness of who, and what, we might be near.

<div align="right">Thomas F. DeFrantz, Jasmine Johnson, and Eric Mullis</div>

Intellectual Inheritances/Interlocutors

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