Weights and Pressures: Migration, Pandemic, Precarity, and Democracy's Legislative Subjects

When Sarah Black-Frizell and Karen Gallagher announced *Our Dance Democracy* in 2018, the idea that an art form, constituted in ephemeral moments of live performance, could speak to and embody democratic aspiration appeared straightforward, even obvious. In the Global North, many dancers were experiencing fallout from the emaciation of inherited public institutions, by decades of deficit culture and bureaucratic managerialism. The liberal ideal of equal citizenship before the state – Western democracy's core mode of belonging – has demonstrably been eviscerated by the conditionalization of rights and entitlements. In these circumstances, *Our Dance Democracy* provoked questions about an institutionalised system of social governance which itself condemned dance and dancers to shaping and mediation by bureaucratic forms wholly inappropriate to the development of artform, artists, and innovative artefacts. As Rosemary Cisneros, Simon Ellis, and Rowan McElland put it,

> The abstract concept of *creative industries* was constructed to make sense of—and indeed simplify—the (arts) world through a particular fiscal lens, and in turn becomes concrete through institutional use and repetition. The values that are oriented towards economic benefit and the exploitation and accumulation of intellectual property through market-based rationalizations thereby infect how the lives and work of artists are felt, seen, and understood.

How, the conference organisers asked, might dancing interrogate these forms and processes; how did the social fact of dancing already model alternative enabling structures? A wide range of contributors to that initial gathering made it clear that dance and dancing could indeed model democratic social organisation, not least because collective, collaborative, and inclusive practices are central to the artform and its contemporary iterations. Some artists, and funding bodies commissioning them, had already embarked on explicit attempts to do just that, especially in relation to questions of diversity and social equity.[1] From this perspective, engaged dance works, the artists who create and present them, and the audiences who seek them out, present a kind of civil alternative to an accelerating degradation of collective forms that underpin democratic life and culture.

This themed *Forum Kritika*, 'Dancing Democracy in a Fractured World', includes contributions from participants in *Our Dance Democracy 2* (2022), an international conference organised by Sarah Black-Frizzell[2] and Karen Gallagher[3]. That event built on *Our Dance Democracy* (2018) and it is intended that it will be followed by *Our Dance Democracy 3*. The editors are especially pleased to include contributions received from practitioners and researchers in the Global South, especially the Philippines, in response to an open Call for Submissions, which stated,

> Artists and cultural workers perform a critical public role in exposing ideas and practices—whether novel or inherited—to examination and re-examination. In our hyper-connected and ever-changing global society, social media facilitates the circulation of opinions and prejudices rooted in frequently unexamined ideas of who's entitled—and who's not—to protection and opportunity. These are taken up, legitimised, and recycled as common-sense master-narratives across the discursive circuits of established media and political debate. A real expansion of inclusive public space is one outcome of this turn; paranoid introspection and white supremacist nationalisms, another. Both tendencies expose boundaries in human relations, always constituted—contradictorily—as zones of exclusion which are always also points of contact. Contemporary assertions of national and transnational states as bounded and

[1] See a special themed issue of *Animated Dance: current issues and practice in participatory dance* (https://www.communitydance.org.uk/DB/animated-editions/Spring-Summer-2019)

[2] Dr Black-Frizzell is Senior Lecturer in Dance at Liverpool Hope University, and directs undergraduate programmes in Dance.

[33] Karen Gallagher MBE is Director of Karen Gallagher Associates. Her MBE recognises her exceptional contribution to Dance in the UK.

> bordered territories, alongside movements to address gendered pay disparities, and decolonise university curricula, demonstrate that perceptions of (in)visibility, identity and belonging have real-world significance, and the importance of interrogating assumptions underpinning them cannot be over-stated.

Our Dance Democracy 2 explored the proposition that, because Dance lives by contact and reciprocation across boundaries, it has proven capacity to enable critical understanding of the human and historical contingency of even the 'hardest' borders and frontiers, erected in the name of immutable, traditions and beliefs, and non-negotiable value systems. While ritual dance can perform difference as historical defiance, our art form is also practised in creative ways that can name—and, therefore, expose to question—complex contemporary forms of oppression, not least by promoting and supporting social and political engagement. Our wager is that dance and dancers model, rehearse, and embody ways of living together for mutual flourishing. We argue, therefore, that this art form and its practitioners have the potential to reinvigorate democratic concepts, practices, and structures for a fractured twenty-first century. Transnational Covid-control measures created conditions of enforced domesticity that have explicitly shaped the work of our contributors, whose essays, provocations, and visual documents emphasise the energies of constrained yet communicating bodies, negotiating interpersonal relationships and the potential of found spaces. Taken together, they create a pervading sense that their dynamic reciprocations and engagement with sites of practice are alive with generative possibilities and broader political significance.

The verb, 'to fracture' conveys multiple meanings, 'to damage or destroy as if by rupturing; to cause great disorder in; to break up**:** FRACTIONATE; to go beyond the limits of (something, such as a rule)**:** VIOLATE'.[4] In all senses, then, a sense of fracture speaks urgently to the fate of democratic institutions built on hitherto unexamined fault lines in established social structures. The idea that our shared human world is fractured has been commonplace in the Global South for a very long time, but would have been regarded, until relatively recently, as a provocation in public discourse in much of the Global North. Its new visibility is due, in part, to a phenomenon astutely described by David Goldberg as 'a kind of creeping generalizability of the condition [of precariousness]'[5] in wealthy, liberal-democratic polities. He demonstrates a prescient grasp of current conditions in his argument that

> In the Global North, those living in a critical and precarious condition are just starting to realize that what will be required is an agility, a resourcefulness, a resilience relatedly to recognize the challenges and to respond to them creatively and critically – in short, to survive with dignity.[6]

It is a long time since Renato Constantino imagined democracy as a utopian dynamic of 'aspiration, response and action',[7] and the ongoing hollowing out of democratic states by a voracious neoliberal culture has degraded any prospect of the kind of popular enfranchisement which he envisaged. Constantino would readily recognise Darren McGarvey's critique of contemporary Britain, a poility in which, he argues, there is 'no functional state and […] no competent political class that can implement a solution.'[8] This is the macro-context which prompted Cisneros et al to conclude, that 'the system in which contemporary dance performance is made, performed, and toured was a type of *pre-existing condition* exacerbated by the pandemic'. Their research demonstrates how attention to forces

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[4] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fracture

[5] Interview with David Theo Goldberg, in Katy P Sian (ed.), *Conversations in Postcolonial Thought* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 41-42

[6] Goldberg, in Sian (ed) (2014), 42

[7] István Meszáros (ed), *Renato Constantino, Neocolonial identity and counter-consciousness: essays on cultural decolonization* (London: Merlin Books, 1978)

[8] https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2022/Reith_2022_Lecture3.pdf: 18

crystallising around the practice of one art form, may illuminate conditions in society more generally, and, even in a world order in which 'the assumption that help is on the way, is no longer a safe one'.[9] Democratic constitution, a taken-for-granted cornerstone of established liberal democratic societies and those that seek to mimic them, is revealed, as if anew, as a series of historical choices and institutional forms whose continuity, like their initiation, must be actively willed into being by common purpose. This is a profound challenge, raising questions as to how enabling qualities intrinsic to Dance might be mobilised to counter a trajectory toward social atrophy and entropy so recently exposed, and point instead toward human flourishing.

In *Performance and Power*,[10] Jeffrey C Alexander turned to the methodologies and critical insights of performance theory as a way of engaging with what he argues was a distinctive performative turn in contemporary political communication. In a world in which accountants and administrators project their mundane but consequential activities as forms of heroic struggle, bureaucratic managerialists have shown themselves adept at appropriating and co-opting the language of performance – including dance – as core legitimising tropes, deeply committed to forms of control: the restless phrase, 'going forward', conjures a notion of purposeful mobility to divert engagement away from concerns in the here and now. 'Choreography' itself, occupies a central place in the lexicon of 'expectation management', those strategies by which bureaucracies 'manage the risks' of democratic consciousness so as to ensure elite continuity. This appropriation references a popular caricature of a choreographer as a relentless overdetermining authority. Our contributing dance practitioners, by contrast, grasp choreography as a democratic practice gesturing beyond the immediate to a better, momentarily present, world; embodying, shaping, and animating shared communication and common cause. In Thea Stanton's words,

> As we move towards an immersive choreographic language that is process oriented, my need for control becomes less. […] I have begun to develop the role of a fluid choreographer, a figure who embraces the potential of borderlands, who can cross onto both sides of the performance (audience and dancers), and whose most important job is to nurture and cultivate an immersive choreographic framework of respect, dignity and a balance of power.

Some of the reflections and provocations included here expand and nuance Alexander's critique of the aestheticization of politics, while others explore the politics of dance and related – notably domestic – aesthetics. The moving body is an abiding focus of dance scholarship, and, post-pandemic, the personal and social politics of stalled, confined, and regulated bodies runs as a significant theme. There is an existential aspect to this investigation, and Sarah Black-Frizzell and Angie Pierre-Louis, Gillian Dyson, Caroline Frizzell, and Suzanne Foellmer, tease out the consequences of embracing human performativity, not as either 'a biological nor an ontological given but a political concept and a material-discursive *doing*, not a *thing.'* (Murris 2021, 69, cited in Caroline Frizzell). Bodies stalled by a political economy rigged against human flourishing are the focus of Cisnero et al., whose research subjects are confined among boundaries policed by bureaucratic projections, such as 'creative industries', and its corollary, 'creatives'. Classification under such headings admits artists to the status of potential contributors to a 'knowledge economy'; a non-negotiable precondition for recognition and entitlement to work and/or be funded.

In this way, the precarity of the dance artist speaks to the contingency of the 'foreigner' in the corporate imaginary of the national security state. In her essay, Angela Viora reflects on her existence among webs spun out of paranoid state hostility to foreign Others. Mobility has been reconfigured, first by neoliberalisation, as the signature entitlement of the privileged,[11] and then by national security

[9] https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2022/Reith_2022_Lecture3.pdf: 14

[10] Jeffrey C Alexander, *Performance and Power* (New York: Polity, 2011)

[11] See Michael Cronin, 'Speed Limits: Ireland, Globalisation, and the War against Time', in Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (eds), *Re-inventing Ireland: Culture, Society, and the Global Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2002): 54-68

states as beyond merely transgressive, almost, in Jared Jonathan Luna's phrase, a form of violence. Luna's verse is a sustained meditation on the variegated poetics of the moving body: those who would dance democracy in the service of human flourishing must accept a responsibility to 'see beyond the beautiful' and announce both a critique of inherited bourgeois arts practices and an eruption of embodied presences in cyberspace. 'Violence', here, responds to 'fracture' as in, 'violate', and is not an uncivil spectre haunting polite society. Rather, it is a necessary insurgency of ideas that are new because they are formed among historical collisions between an inherited cultural and political dominant and inchoate – but urgent – emergent forms. It is the 'violence' of the crucible in which contiguous elements fuse under pressure and release energies and possibilities in unanticipated ways.

Foellmer analyses the "Fahrradstern", a performative protest held in Berlin under Covid restrictions in which, she argues, the incompatible forms of choreographic practice and imagination, critiqued by Luna, were set in tension with one another,

> Certainly, the organizers initially acted in a choreographically traditional sense as they arranged for a fixed script that then had to be executed by way of seeking one's own position in the image on site. However, participants had the [postmodern] opportunity to play with the task, that is, to shift position in order to make the image happen, which involves a certain amount of shared responsibility and authority – that however, in the end, prevented the star-shaped image from being created in the first place.

Foellmer argues that the experience and outcomes of this event validate an opposition to 'the idea of choreography as an orderly, regulated system' and a contrary valorisation of 'its unruliness and its intrinsic potential for rupture' (Cvejić and Vujanović 2015: 66) evident in a series of unauthorised events that took place on the day, on-line. Our provocation, the idea of dance as democracy, invites us to push her argument beyond the charge of project failure; foregrounding, instead, the importance of kinaesthetic empathy in moments of communal protest. The 'orderly, regulated' desideratum of the day's action, to superimpose a huge star made of motionless cyclists and their machines on the map of a city, did not simply fail, but was actively subverted, and produced what Foellmer describes as 'a kind of rhizomatic lump (fig. 3a and 3b)'.

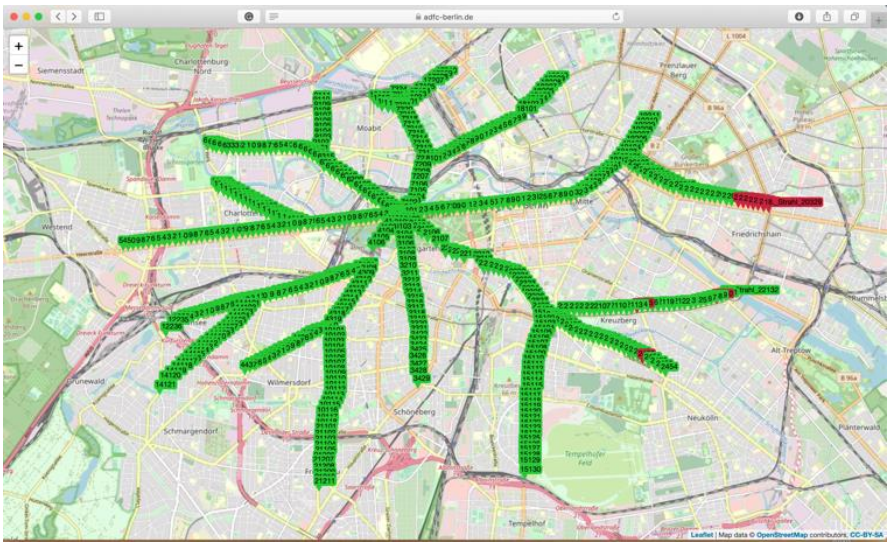

Fig. 2: ADFC "Fahrradstern" (screenshot web site)

This figure, emblematic of Deleuze and Guattari's radical decentring of postmodernity, is impertinently at odds with the project's desired aesthetic and declared political teleology toward a communal star-shape. It emerged and proliferated out of unruly acts of movement, when those who had originally accepted the terms of emplotted stillness, responded spontaneously to a felt pressure

arising from a sense of something missing. Their public transgressions generated radically unpredictable shapes, which, when combined, crystallised a will to movement itself.

The unintended consequences of bodies coinciding in space are congruent with Luna's declaration,

> While the structures of the concert dance tradition continue to perpetuate long outdated ideals intricately woven in performative gestures
> We choose violence.

At domestic level, Caroline Frizzell, lingering on hold on a public-service phone line, is 'suspended in the oppressive paralysis of trying to bring together disability support…I begin to wonder if anyone, out there, cares.' In her contribution, essay form collides with critical journalling, constellating somatic impressions of event, political structure, and critical consciousness. Like Viora, she experiences interactions with a cold and detached state bureaucracy as a suspension of being in which space to act shrinks, and time expands into emptiness. Her body, limited by the reach of her land-line cord, begins to stretch and flex in place, and her mind wanders, contemplating the resonance of her arrested state with her scholarly efforts 'to join the discourses of movement practice worlds'. Her refusal of stasis and disempowerment generates an epiphany in the form of 'a stark realisation that the self is a phenomenon implicated within a relational matrix in which we are only OK, if we are all OK.'[12] Suspended between lockdown and the expiry of her Australian visa, Viora reflects also on the power of bureaucratic institutions to define and police the limits of belonging in national democracies, raising questions as to on whom they confer, and to whom they deny, rights and privileges.

Both Frizzell and Viora engage with bureaucratic surveillance of persons isolated in intimate domestic spaces; the former stating bluntly that 'four walls and a closed door does not necessarily create safety', and the latter sees bureaucracy as, in itself, spatial, and asks, 'How do I dwell in it?' Dyson, and Black-Frizzell and Pierre-Louis, turn this question in on themselves as dancers confined to home, interrogating domestic objects and spaces, and documenting movements within and among them. Dyson ponders the uncanniness of dancing with tables as 'an inversion of the relationship between person and object, inviting the object to have a life of its own and communicate the absence of real human-to-human communication'. Black-Frizzell and Pierre-Louis are collaborators, now separated, each in her own home, jointly committed to documenting their parallel explorations of the potential of 'Offerings', a creative methodology.[13] The photo-essay included here is a 'visual investigation of being with one another, whilst never sharing the same physical space.' Its assertion that artists, though apart, continue to share and negotiate conceptual space, further nuances Frizzell's *cri de coeur* and suggests the presence of a covenant of care at the heart of Dance practice. In their practice-research, being-with across bounded space enabled that most private sphere, the domestic, to experience the energy of being-in-relation-to.

A further avenue of inquiry taken up in this *Forum Kritika* amplifies a pervasive sense of personal and social-historical worlds in aggravated counterpoint with violent, inherited contradiction. The essays by Daniel Celine Ramonal and Regina Slarana, Stanton's field reflections, and Gallagher's reflective conversations foreground dance and dancers as they strive to negotiate intellectual and actual spaces of somatic enunciation. They do so on terrain already colonised by predominantly Western epistemological discourses, which problematise and even dismiss Dance which manifests in ritual or

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[12] See Rowan Williams, 'No one is safe until everyone is safe – we applied it to the pandemic, but why not our economy?' (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/dec/31/safe-pandemic-economy-cost-of-living-crisis?CMP=share_btn_link)

[13] For a full critical account of 'Offerings', see Black-Frizzell and Pierre-Louis, 'Creative Bodies' in Frizzell, C. & Rova, M. (eds.), *Therapy, Performance and Community. Research and Practice that Brings Us Home* (2023). London: Routledge *https://www.routledge.com/Creative-Bodies-in-Therapy-Performance-and-Community-Research-and-Practice/Frizell-Rova/p/book/9781032119809*

marginal practices. The occasion of Ramonal's research was an outbreak of Ebola in Sierra Leone, and its focus, the role played by tactile funeral rites and rituals in viral transmission. He revisits, here, his own published peer-reviewed work to restore to view 'the "human factor" in community relations', which he felt had been edited out of research findings in keeping with social scientific convention.[14] He felt that his report, as published, prompted 'a need to question and explain the construction of the findings', lest the norms and blind spots by which it was shaped pass unexamined. Ramonal made use of dance notation in order to expose movement back and forth between living mourners and ritual leaders and the bodies of the deceased. Dance notation illuminated the movement dynamics of funeral rituals, and pointed toward potential for viral transmission,

> However, the notation was best paired with the account about the field process and how the data were examined as they provided the interpretation of the movement patterns. Together, the ensemble not only made visible the embodied techniques that were stocked with cultural values but also made them relatable to outsiders. Lastly, the notation paired with these reflections explicated the neglected dynamics happening in the social field and therefore warranted greater significance as an avenue for discussion.[15]

This enabled him to counter an all-too-familiar insistence by international aid workers on 'applying western-modelled scientific measures in a non-western society'. Ramonal's rich field notes contained powerful testimonies of the cultural power of the rites themselves, which, although recorded during the research process, were absent from 'the published research because it was deemed unnecessary by reviewers albeit the critical role it played'. In writing back to scientific convention, he exposes and engages with profound questions of epistemology, of whose gaze author(ise)s and delimits a right to dwell in one's own place. This familiar clash of priorities and inscription of Western privilege is immediately visible in the interaction between, for example, an NGO and 'indigenous communities'.

Slarana's, "Magsama sama tayong panoorin"[16] is both a provocative companion piece to Ramonal and a point of connection to the concerns of Karen Gallagher's interviewees and Stanton's ethical interrogation of her own practice. Her work, like that of Ramonal, 'takes a critical approach to dance studies and an engaged and collaborative approach in ethnography'. Her project foregrounds the unhomed and unhomely qualities of Sama Banguingui women displaced to Manila, explicitly and addresses the position of the Bangamoro Muslim Other within the democratic society of the Republic of the Philippines. Counterpointed with Ramonal, Slarana prompts questions as to Western – and Western-derived – perceptions of the legitimacy of proto-democratic structures among Sierra Leone's distinct human polities; social groups which co-exist in a form of social and cultural 'multiplicity', to borrow a suggestive phrase from Gallagher's interlocutor, melisandre varin.

Slarana's account of identification as 'much like dancing, processual, contingent, and fluid, or even as sea-farers, constantly in motion', is taken up by Gallagher's interviewees, whose views complement testimonies elicited by Cisnero et al, in exposing the hard realities of zero-sum resource allocation among dancers. Their problematisation of sentimental notions of racial integrity echoes Slarana's caution against the seductive power, in postcolonial consciousness, of a nostalgic quest to recover living avatars of pre-colonial ways of life. Both varin and Yinka Graves (in Gallagher), and Stanton, inhabit identities forged among colonial inequities and iniquities, and life and dance practice is in constant tension with conflicting needs to assert and resist such inheritances as they live the

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[14] For cognate research which seeks to restore the rich texture of fieldwork conversations to sociological research, see Peter Clough, *Narratives and Fictions In Educational Research (Doing Qualitative Research in Educational Settings)* (Maidenhead, Berks., 2002)

[15] Daniel Ceeline Ramonal, 'Beyond Dance Movement Notation: Field Reflections as Key in Mapping the Ebola Virus Disease Transmission in the Funeral Ceremonies of Sierra Leone'

[16] Subtitled, 'A creative, collaborative and ongoing ethnography on what it means for Sama Banguingui women dancing their identity in the city of Manila'

implications of dwelling in a world created without them in mind. As persons othered by the bureaucratic gaze and its attendant protocols, processes and procedures, their dwelling is rarely infused with full citizenship rights; in Viora's telling phrase, 'the home-seeking un-homed appear in national democratic imaginaries as superimposed rather than integrated'. 'Dancing Democracy in a Fractured World' offers organic re-integration in the focus, energy, and multi-directionality of bodies which refuse emplotment, fixed positions, or stasis. Our contributors dwell, aesthetically, ethically, and politically, in dance moments, flourishing together – event when apart – and gesturing toward possibilities for more profound, variegated, multiplicities of life-in-common.