

Editorial: This Is Where We Dance Now

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We write in May 2021 from the ancestral and contemporary territory of the Shawnee, Potawatomi, Delaware, Miami, Peoria, Seneca, Wyandotte, Ojibwe, and Cherokee (Harmony) and Lenape (Alexandra) peoples. We write approximately a year and a half into the global Covid-19 pandemic. Some members of our global community are experiencing the hope of a world opening back up as more people become vaccinated, while others continue to experience economic devastation and personal catastrophe. We wish to acknowledge both the many lives lost to Covid-19—an estimated 3.5 million individuals as of this writing—and the ongoing struggles for racial justice in the United States and around the world that have gained new urgency during the pandemic. We recognize that the uneven ways the global health crisis has unfolded reveals anew how the unjust legacies of colonialism and enslavement perpetually shape inequality on a global scale.

This special issue of *The International Journal of Screendance* addresses how the Covid-19 pandemic rapidly shifted where, how, why, and under what conditions we dance. As lockdown orders swept across much of the world in early 2020, closing down the theaters, clubs, studios, and community centers where dancers practice, we found ourselves in awe of a collective refusal to stop dancing, and indeed, what seemed to be the emergence of a whole new era of dance onscreen. In 2019, the screen was just one among many venues where dance artists and enthusiasts might view and participate in dance. In 2020, the screen was seemingly the only venue, and its logics of geography and access to movement communities across the globe suddenly shifted in ways that will likely reverberate for years to come. This journal has always maintained the position that screendance encompasses more than dance film, and this issue reflects a renewed insistence that, even while accounting for their different legacies, affordances, and inheritances, there is something both useful and urgent about gathering together the various projects of dance onscreen and considering them alongside each other.



This Is Where We Dance Now: Covid-19 and the New and Next in Dance Onscreen arose in part to document and account for how amateur, artistic, and academic communities pivoted to reimagine what it means to practice dance and screendance under what for most of us were unprecedented circumstances, when all dance became screendance. Further, the multiplicity of the screen itself was narrowed during Covid to primarily computer and mobile screens and online content, since theaters were largely closed and gatherings prohibited. A running theme of this issue, then, is how well our existing understandings of screendance—and indeed of our world as a whole—held up under the pressures of a heavily mediated and mediatized pandemic. The intense and collective (though not universal) turn to screendance and to the internet has revealed and accelerated extant politics, platforms, norms, and genres in dance, while also opening up space to reconsider the values attached to each of these.

Much of what we saw emerge from pandemic-era screendance had important precursors in such forms as online tutorials for both specific movements and pieces of choreography, magazine-style YouTube channels like Dance On, battle footage or event documentation such as the World of Dance competition series, and recordings of social dance occasions like weddings. Participation in dance challenges and viral trends were already visible on social media,¹ as were “react” videos, mashups, and recreations.² Commercial content such as excerpts of TV shows, movies, and live performances, music videos,³ advertising campaigns that also run on legacy media,⁴ as well as more conceptual YouTube-exclusive advertisements like Puma’s “Dance Dictionary,” or Diesel Jean’s “A to Z of Dance”⁵ had also carved out space online. Dance films, the genre of screendance most associated with the big screen, circulated through YouTube and especially Vimeo, alongside possible festival showings. For the most part, elements that defined internet-based screendance during the last year—dancing in homes, using outdoor spaces, sharing video on free platforms, and a strong “instructional force”⁶—all already existed.

All of this pre-pandemic dance online shows that in some ways, what has changed the most during this time is our perspective. We have long danced at home—in the US context, we can point to rent parties, dancing in front of television screens to *American Bandstand*,⁷ *Soul Train*,⁸ and MTV⁹; countless sleep-over basement choreographies, house parties, and of course dancing filmed for YouTube,¹⁰ Vine, Instagram, Dubsmash, and TikTok before the pandemic.¹¹ But home is a different place now, as the authors in this issue demonstrate. We have also long danced with, via, and through the screen, but the screen, too, may be a different place, now that being on both sides of the screen is a familiar and embodied experience. Indeed, as the pandemic wore on and what we learned to call “Zoom fatigue” set in, we were also reminded in ordinary and extraordinary ways that we are bodily beings. Thus, opportunities for further research into the detrimental effects of screen use on the body arose, as well as investigations of how the screen can activate and convey deep, embodied realities.¹²

In addition to these continuities, there are some important pandemic-specific trends that the authors gathered in this issue highlight. First is the sheer volume of participation and offerings, by lay people and organizations alike, made possible in part by the removal of travel as a barrier to access. Second, large, established dance institutions (such as Alvin Ailey, Martha Graham, the Cunningham Trust, Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane, and Jacob's Pillow, to name only a few based in the US) opened their video archives to various degrees for asynchronous online viewing, live-streamed performances to synchronous online audiences, created new screendance works by reimagining existing or yet-to-be-premiered repertoire, and developed other online content to maintain their audience connection. Third, in what may prove to be a prominent hallmark of pandemic-era screendance, is the impact of and visual reference to video-conferencing platforms in the arrangement of material, for example, the suturing together of choreography undertaken in multiple locations, individual bodies bounded by their own frames, and use of a static camera.¹³ Fourth, and one of the most significant trends for dancers, was the mass migration of studio movement practice classes to synchronous online instruction via Zoom and Instagram Live.¹⁴ In the early months of the pandemic, such classes were often made available for free, at a reduced cost, or on a donation basis, as studios recognized that performing artists were financially hard-hit by closures and were in need of the community that dancing together provides. Additionally, people facing restricted movement outside the home turned for the first time or returned to dance as a way to connect to their bodies and mobility. Accessed online, these classes were newly available to participants from anywhere on the globe with a decent internet connection, and not only those who lived nearby or who had the financial resources to travel.

As the end of the Covid-19 pandemic pushed ever into the future, with rolling lockdowns and return to quarantine with the emergence of new virus variants and subsequent waves of infection, it became clear that this particular gift economy, established through a recognition of mutual indebtedness and shared precarity,¹⁵ was not sustainable over the long-term. Yet, gift and market economies are not mutually exclusive,¹⁶ and while the economically precarious volunteered their time and labor to sustain each other during times of uncertainty, extractive capitalism remained largely unhindered during the pandemic. Turning to pre-pandemic models and developing novel approaches to re-establish some economic security, perhaps with a newly expanded audience of supporters, schemes for funding have re-emerged. Well-known Hip-Hop and Funk Style dancer-teacher-choreographers like Ian Eastwood and Mr. Wiggles finally adopted the audience-patronage platform Patreon, becoming the first major dance-related creators to do so, and festivals and studios began selling membership subscriptions for limited-access streaming content. Dancers who were working for free have returned to paid performance positions or, like Katherine Disenhof, who created and ran the widely used information hub Dancing Alone Together based only on donations until late 2020 when it ceased operations, have accepted administrative positions.

The academic world was also impacted by Covid-19, and we, too, shifted how we go about our business. Noting both the cancellation of academic conferences and the speed with which the Zoom video-conferencing platform became normalized as a way of gathering when physical co-presence was impossible, as editors of this journal issue, we decided to hold a symposium so that our contributors could share their work in progress. The symposium, held at no cost to presenters or attendees via Zoom on March 12-13 and 19-20, 2021, marked what for many of us was a one-year anniversary of living with Covid-19 quarantines and lockdowns as part of our new reality. As organizers,¹⁷ we were blown away by the response: nearly 300 registrants from around the world for the symposium's events. In addition to panels representing the articles and provocations gathered here, we also organized some roundtable discussions on specific topics of interest: TikTok and Short-form Screendance, Screendance Festivals and Online Audiences, and The Future of Screendance, which we have included in the journal in edited and condensed form (full-length videos are available on both the journal and conference websites: <https://screendancejournal.org/> and <https://u.osu.edu/thisiswherewedancenow/>). We are excited to introduce the roundtable format to the journal and hope that it will be a recurring feature where artists and scholars can gather around emerging trends and urgent topics. As a global community, it is difficult for the screendance field to regularly gather in person, and the burden to travel usually falls to those in the Global South. We hope that this symposium was the first of many more to come, and that the new possibilities and infrastructures that arose to support the pivots necessitated by the pandemic will enable us to continue to sustain an expanded vision of dance onscreen, one that is accessible across ability, economic status, and geography.

Not knowing in advance how everyone would experience the pandemic from their distinct locations and situations—how long it would last, how humanity might be changed by it, what dance would look like in a post-pandemic world—we determined to use our position as editors to represent as many voices and perspectives as we could under the auspices of this issue. The journal opens with several articles that address dancing, dance-making, and screendance-making during the pandemic. Archer Porter offers a historical perspective on what she calls the “domestic stage” to contextualize the sudden influx of home-dancing due to Covid-19. Porter takes the “homebody” out of the current pandemic moment to consider the ways that this dancing figure has always been in crisis. Francesca Ferrer-Best’s critical phenomenological autoethnographic account likewise unpacks domestic spaces to consider how “dance-space” impacts practices of dance, and what participation in dance classes via Zoom may portend for the future. Dara Milovanovic also offers an autoethnographic reflection on the experience of taking dance class in one’s home, and while she appreciates her ability to participate in far-away classes that social media platforms have made accessible, she troubles the rapid emergence of studio dance practices within online spaces where popular dance forms had laid the groundwork. During the pandemic, we have seen both dance classes and dance works adapted for screen when dancers could

no longer share physical space. Hetty Blades thinks through how scoring practices facilitated some of these adaptations to screen, and simultaneously supported a shared commitment to dance together. Callum Anderson proposes that such events, which have proliferated over the past year, might warrant a new category of analysis, which he terms “screened dance.” At the same time, he advocates for a greater investigation of possibilities for audience interaction within screendance practice. Siobhan Murphy historicizes some of the now-familiar ways that Zoom has become incorporated into artistic practices, and the kinds of relationships that can form at the interface. Claire Loussouarn further challenges the default static relationship to the Zoom screen and opens up new practices of moving with and for the camera in what she calls “moving selfies.” Rather than merely adapt existing movement practices to the Zoom platform, Loussouarn encourages us to develop “somatically informed” screen explorations that keep us connected to bodily experience. Kate Mattingly and Tria Blu Wakpa draw our attention to the possibility of employing digital tools to undo colonial patternings and amplify the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples, which they articulate as “screendance as survivance.”

The Provocation and Viewpoints section begins with a collaboratively authored forum of questions that came out of regular meetings among Elisa Frasson, Marisa Hayes, Marco Longo, Ariadne Mikou, and Katja Vaghi as they navigated their own dance and screen projects during lockdowns associated with Covid-19. Several contributions then focus on shifts in teaching movement and camera work. Maïko Le Lay reflects on the difficulties of adapting her culturally relevant pedagogical practice to reach online audiences via a commercial online platform, and Kathryn Logan offers the metaphor of “unboxing” to consider affective dimensions of dancers’ relationships to cameras and the political stakes of capturing and sharing images. Supporting the remote-learning of her children during lockdown, Sandhiya Kalyanasundaram engages them in screendance explorations to learn concepts from science, ecology, and environmentalism, and Diane Busutill works with a population of senior adults to keep them moving in small spaces and combat social isolation for this vulnerable group. Catherine Cabeen similarly emphasizes the importance of continuing to move to counter the traumas of the pandemic and as part of an anti-racist somatic practice of undoing cultural conditioning. Elena Benthaus reminds those of us who have only just turned our attention to participatory dance practices taking shape online during the Covid-19 pandemic that we should not elide the histories of the popular dancing publics that have been dancing in these spaces for “quite a while.” Rebecca Salzer similarly urges dancers and choreographers to learn the histories of the video practices into which they have suddenly stepped out of necessity rather than out of a guiding aesthetic vision. Offering a manifesto for the “secular” in screendance, Sumedha Bhattacharyya problematizes the exotic Indian dancer fixed in a colonial gaze and advocates for greater diversity of representation in dance films and festivals. Staged as a dialogue, Melissa Blanco Borelli and madison moore offer a tour of TikTok videos centering Black, Brown, and queer perspectives as they evaluate projects of critical

worldmaking within and alongside the problematics of algorithmic bias and caricature. Finally, in rhymes, Omari 'Motion' Carter asks where we go next as educators, artists, practitioners, and scholars.

We have two interviews in this issue. Laura Vriend discusses the Zoom piece *Being/With: Home* with creator Nichole Canuso, and issue co-editor Alexandra Harlig engages with artist Tsiambwom Akuchu about his pandemic use of Instagram as a site of bboy practice and sociality. To conclude this special issue, Jo Cork offers a review of *TOM*, a work originally intended as an installation and reimaged as a dance film, and which captures the feelings of isolation and sometimes desperation that many of us felt during the pandemic.

As we draw these introductory remarks to a close, we are struck by a need to articulate just what screendance practice and scholarship contribute to our understanding of bodies and screens after a year and a half of experiencing their pandemic-normalized confluence. In her influential essay "Choreographies of Protest," Susan Leigh Foster poses questions to the scenes of protest she analyzes, which she suggests a dance scholar might ask, including "what are these bodies doing?; what and how do their motions signify?; [...] what kind of relationship do they establish with those who are watching their actions?; [...] and] how is the body of the researcher/writer implicated in the investigation?"¹⁸ In a similar vein, we might pose questions of the pandemic-era proliferation of bodies across small screens from the position of critical screendance studies, which takes the relationships between bodies and screens as a central concern¹⁹: whose point of view is represented in what is seen?; who is in front of the camera and who is behind it?; how is being onscreen both an act of self-expression and surveillance?; how are bodies framed and edited, and what are the implications of that framing and editing for how the images are interpreted?; how are images parsed so as to make bodies or bodily movements legible, and how is this legibility marked by perceptions of race and ethnicity, gender presentation, apparent class status, and so on?; what do environments, as *mise-en-scène*, reveal about people onscreen?; what is intentionally obscured from viewers, and what is the balance between privacy and transparency?; what bearing does that which is obscured or out-of-frame have on what the audience sees?; what is the interplay between the representational and the experiential for those onscreen?; how is the body of the viewer physically and even ethically implicated in the scene?

In a conversation with the editorial board, Claudia Kappenberg offered that "even though we are images, we are still bodies."²⁰ And we are in the midst of a period of deeply acknowledging embodiment, from human vulnerability to disease; to the uneven distribution of precarity along the lines of the violent legacies of colonization, enslavement, and genocide that continue to expose some to harm for the benefit of others; to the stakes of negotiating the freedom to move and the freedom to remain in place;²¹ to the use of motion tracking, surveillance, and artificial intelligence to aid governments, corporations, and institutions in interpreting, predicting, and managing

on- and offscreen actions. As the pandemic recedes, how will we critically analyze the body and screen practices that were normalized during 2020-21,²² and what new awareness will we bring to the practices we choose to retain, return to, or abandon? What do sustainable screendance practices look like post-pandemic?

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IJSD's volume 13 will combine an open call with a curated theme, *Choreographing the Archive: Interfaces Between Screendance & Archival Film Practices*, which will be guest-edited by Marisa C. Hayes and Luisa Lazzaro. The full call for contributions can be found online: <https://screendancejournal.org/announcement/view/70>. As a volunteer publication, we continue to seek sustainable and meaningful ways to serve the screendance community with timely provocations and rigorous scholarship. We hope that combining the open call and the curated theme will enable deep, focused discussion while continuing to make space for the important contributions that do not fall under a specific call.

We close with final words of gratitude. The pandemic is not yet over. Throughout, medical professionals have worked tirelessly to preserve human life, at great risk and cost to themselves. Activists protesting injustice have drawn collective attention to the many fronts along which struggles for liberation continue. And in moments of deep despair, artists and creators of all varieties have sustained us and given us joy. We thank all of those who dedicate themselves to world-building and imagining otherwise to create more equitable, more accessible, more inclusive futures—both onscreen and off.

Biographies

Harmony Bench is Associate Professor in the Department of Dance at The Ohio State University. Her research addresses practices, performances, and circulations of dance in the contexts of digital and screen media. She is author of *Perpetual Motion: Dance, Digital Cultures, and the Common* with University of Minnesota Press in 2020, and is at work on a new book on affect and kinesthesia in screendance spectatorship. For several years, Harmony has collaborated with Kate Elswit on bringing the digital humanities and dance history into greater dialogue, most recently with *Dunham's Data: Katherine Dunham and Digital Methods for Dance Historical Inquiry* (Ref: AH/R012989/1; www.dunhamsdata.org). From 2014-2019, she was co-editor of *The International Journal*

of *Screendance* with Simon Ellis, and is excited to be guest editing the special issue *This Is Where We Dance Now: Covid-19 and the New and Next in Dance Onscreen* with Alexandra Harlig.

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Notes

¹ See Bragin "From Oakland Turfs to Harlem Shakes" for a critique of the racial politics of viral dance videos.

² For analyses of dance fan production, see Bench, "'Single Ladies' is Gay" and "Monstrous Belonging"; Blanco Borelli "You Can't Outdo Black People"; Pullen, "If Ya Liked It, Then You Shoulda Made a Video"; Thomas, "Single Ladies, Plural; Kraut "Reenactment as Racialized Scandal."

³ See Jackson, "A Rhizomatic Revolution?" and Edmond, "Here We Go Again."

⁴ See Dunagan, *Consuming Dance*; Blanco Borelli, "Gadgets, Bodies, and Screens"; and Huntington, *Black Social Dance in Television Advertising*.

⁵ See Harlig, "Fresher than You."

⁶ For explanations of instructional force, see for example McAllister, *Game Work*; Miller, *Playing Along*; and Harlig, "Social Texts, Social Audiences, Social Worlds."

⁷ See Harlig, "Communities of Practice."

⁸ See Defrantz, "Unchecked Popularity."

⁹ See Blanco Borelli, "Dancing in Music Videos" and Bench, "Monstrous Belonging."

¹⁰ See Peters and Seier, "Home Dance."

¹¹ Popular internet-based genres of screendance that preceded the pandemic include: concept videos, which are non-music video popular dance-centric videos that have a theme, narrative, or strong visual aesthetic; class videos which render presentational end-of-class combinations shot at popular dance studios; street-based freestyle videos such as those pioneered by YAKfilms, which frame a dancer of any improvisational popular form freestyling in an aesthetically-interesting public place (See Bragin, "Shot and Captured"); and comedy or sketch dance videos which became popular on Vine and now also appear on TikTok and Dubsmash. See Harlig, "Social Texts, Social Audiences, Social Worlds," for a fuller elaboration. For histories of internet-based dance onscreen prior to the advent of social media, see Popat, *Invisible Connections* and Bench, *Perpetual Motion*.

¹² See Weber, "Moving Embodied Dance Practices Online."

¹³ A now-classic example is the music video for "Phenom" by Thao & the Get Down Stay Down, which was touted as the "first Zoom music video" (See Berkowitz, "The First Music Video"). Aesthetically, however, such Zoom choreographies are preceded by similarly structured screen layouts and static camera angles from late 1990s and early 2000s online hyperdances that displayed dancing images on a grid. See chapter 1 in Bench, *Perpetual Motion*.

¹⁴ Because classes offered through Instagram Live were only accessible for 24 hours, they leveraged digital media's "complex temporalities" to control access in a manner that retained an ephemerality resonant with the scarcity model of an in-person experience. On temporalities of digital media, see Chun, "The Enduring Ephemeral" and Bench, "'Complex Temporalities.'"

¹⁵ Bench, *Perpetual Motion*.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Many thanks to Lyndsey Vader, who also helped with event organization.

¹⁸ Foster, "Choreographies of Protest," 397.

¹⁹ Katrina McPherson in conversation with *The International Journal of Screendance* editorial board, 6 May 2021.

²⁰ Claudia Kappenberg in conversation with *The International Journal of Screendance* editorial board, 6 May 2021.

²¹ In a message to Dance Studies Association members in March 2020, Executive Director Lizzie Leopold reflected, "We began this year by publishing a [Statement on the Inviolability of Movement as a Right](#). 'As scholars and artists in dance we investigate, theorize, and practice movement in all its expansive meanings and possibilities. Therefore, this statement expresses our deep concern for those moving across borders who seek safety from violence, slavery, military occupation and poverty resulting from colonialism, disaster capitalism, and trans-border exploitative economic policies.' The realities of the COVID-19 pandemic force us to re-examine this statement and to understand anew the right to movement and the privilege of a safe stillness." <https://mailchi.mp/fee10d93cf87/reminder-malta-early-registration-deadline-may-1354608>

²² Ann Cooper Albright in conversation with *The International Journal of Screendance* editorial board, 6 May 2021.

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