

Virtual Democracy: Online Ballet and Contemporary Dance Classes During the Covid-19 Crisis

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Abstract

This article considers the politics and dynamics of online ballet and contemporary dance classes during the Covid-19 lockdown on geo-political, economic, and cultural implications of dance classes in digital media. Using a post-colonial lens and popular dance studies, this research analyzes the effect of the online ballet and contemporary classes colonizing digital spaces and the effect of this phenomenon on creating a more democratic and participatory access to dance that has built a more global and inclusive engagement with the arts for geographically peripheral spaces. This essay investigates the kind of common created by kinaesthetic experience of the dancers teaching and participating in the classes in digital media providing a key strategy to analyze the participatory embodiment of dancers as a radical, material, corporeal challenge to the hierarchies of the dance world, and furthermore, the economic dynamics that shape it.

Keywords: Online Dance Classes, Digital Democracy, Access and Inclusivity, Popular Dance

In our anxiety-stricken state and looming sense of loss of freedom, on March 18th of 2020 my husband and I took a Graham class in our living room in Cyprus with Martha Graham Dance Company dancers Marzia Memoli and Alessio Crognale¹ streamed directly on Instagram. We had both trained heavily in Graham in various conservatories and universities in the UK, Canada, and the US, and we were thrilled to be able to take a class and disrupt our everyday routine about panicking how to teach dance online and home school our child, our parents' exposure to the Covid-19 virus and mental health, and the overall fear that permeated 2020. We wore our Graham T-shirts with black trousers and positioned ourselves on the floor to start with the bounces and breathing. After struggling with technology and trying to figure out how to stream Instagram on a laptop, our frustrations grew as we were running out of time, we gave up and followed instructions from a small phone screen. The cats decided to join and swish their tails across our heads and chest with every contraction, spiral, and undulation of the spine. We filmed ourselves doing Turns Around the Back, having to constantly adjust our



positions to avoid hitting each other and the persistent cat. The experience helped us escape the uncertainty of the situation for a while, allowed us to finally look at each other and laugh, made us emotional, and happy to gain access into a world we had been missing since leaving the US after completing our studies a couple of decades ago. As always, Graham technique provided a familiar physical ground to be emotional with its glorious high lifts and indulgent spirals, which I had not allowed myself to feel or show to my family during this time. We posted different videos on Instagram and the Graham Dance Company reposted it, giving us giddy joy as we felt recognized and seen in our geographically remote position in comparison to the US.



Screenshot: The author (right) and Alexander Michael (left) taking a Graham Class in their living room in Cyprus, 18 March 2020. Credit: @alexander_michael_

The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic crisis commanded lockdown across the majority of the world, bringing various sectors of the professional dance world to a sudden halt. In March 2020, the world witnessed closing of theaters, dance studios, and training centers that put dance artists, educators, and students out of their ability to continue to practice their art. In Cyprus, where I live and work, a strict lockdown was imposed only allowing us to leave our houses for essential reasons accompanied by an SMS text message sent to the government carefully monitoring the movements of the citizens. I teach and run the Dance Programme at University of Nicosia, which shifted all of its instruction online, challenging me to lead the faculty and students through an alternate pedagogical and

learning period. At this time, impromptu online dance classes began to appear in variety of dance genres by world-famous dancers and dance companies. As Laura Regensdorf writes in *Vanity Fair*, as schools, theaters, and restaurants had their last sittings, “there was a first: the debut Instagram Live class from the Merce Cunningham Trust, led by program coordinator Jennifer Goggans.”² I was delighted that dancers from some of the major dance companies began to offer free online dance classes on various digital platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. At a time when the performing arts are in an extremely precarious position,³ celebrity dancers, including Isabella Boylston and James Whiteside (principal dancers with American Ballet Theatre), Tamara Rojo (Artistic director of English National Ballet), Tiler Peck, Megan Fairchild, Ashley Bouder, (principal dancers with New York City Ballet), Adam Boreland (Orlando Ballet), dancers of the Paul Taylor company, Akram Khan Dance Company, dancers from the Graham company, Gaga people, and the Merce Cunningham trust,⁴ interrupted the stillness of lockdown imposed onto the dance world by introducing a new way to engage with movement practice, demonstrating the dance community’s resilience and ability to adapt.

While the strict lockdown in Cyprus took hold, the online dance classes by some of the world’s great dance artists offered relief and a way to engage remotely with the UK and US dance scene. Sometimes I took class, at other times I just watched classes trying to make sense of the new dance presence in online dance world. As a popular dance scholar with a particular interest in screendance, I am used to watching dance online, but the Covid-19 pandemic shifted what kind of dance exists online and how it is distributed and consumed. This essay seeks to discuss the phenomenon of online dance classes in ballet and contemporary dance during lockdown and its effect on politics and economics of dance. I purposefully focus on internet-based classes in ballet and contemporary dance, since this trend seems specific to pandemic culture, as opposed to social and popular dance, which has a strong presence in the media and digital landscapes. In particular, this article seeks to explore two junctures: the co-optation and implication of popular screendance aesthetics by concert dance forms, and the postcolonial positioning of the global North within living rooms and bedrooms across the world. The changing online dance scene prompted me to question the politics and economics surrounding the new dance presence online and what these online classes might signify during a pandemic in terms of democratization of dance through popular dance methods and aesthetics, and geopolitical implications of access to Western dancers and dance institutions for dancers in marginalized and peripheral places. The discussion centers the cultural, economic, and geopolitical effects of traditionally concert dance forms shifting to digital spaces, such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, skillfully occupied by popular dance practices and the new (more global) dance community emerging out of these generous offerings. Furthermore, I seek to explore the politics of access that have altered for geographically marginalized places, using my particular position as a dance educator and practitioner who resides in Cyprus.

Dancers in peripheral places or economically disadvantaged communities that had no access to dance classes have been learning dances from screen throughout history of dance on (home) screens. My first experience of learning American popular dance forms was by watching musicals and repeatedly rewinding them to learn the jazz choreographies from VCR tapes of Bob Fosse's *All That Jazz* (1979) and Michael Bennett's *A Chorus Line* (1985). I grew up in Yugoslavia and Soviet Russia where I trained in ballet, which was the only style of dance classes available at the time, and learning jazz from musicals provided a fun experience that was vastly different from Russian training in ballet. Like Melissa Blanco Borelli, who discusses learning dance material from Janet Jackson's 1989 album *Rhythm Nation 1814*,⁵ I along with my friends learned dances from music videos and VCR tapes of various film musicals. In a similar vein, prompted by the pandemic, online dance classes in 2020 allowed me (and presumably many other people) to participate in classes with some famous ballet and contemporary dancers due to the fact that they shifted to digital spaces and employed similar methodologies that far-reaching popular dance has done successfully for decades.

Ballet and Contemporary Dance in Popular Dance Spaces

Prompted by the 2018 edition of Dance Studies Association's *Conversations across the field of Dance Studies* on how popular dance "is often *the* innovative site where so many of our everyday relationships with local, national and global politics gain visibility"⁶ and how the practice of corporeal politics acts as a mode of resilience, I seek to analyze the political effect of online ballet and contemporary dance classes during the 2020 lockdown. By engaging with popular dance scholarship, I am interested to explore the dynamics of geo-political, economic, and cultural implications of free dance classes by elite dancers and dance institutions. Dance forms, such as classical ballet, contemporary, and post-modern dance, ordinarily reserved for big theaters, dependent on large financial grants and donor support, and formal academies, shifted to digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube during the Covid-19 pandemic. Ballet and contemporary dancers have responded to pandemic-related loss of work by offering dance classes across various digital platforms in order to stay current, relevant, and physically active, employing popular dance tactics which Theresa Buckland argues exhibit a "tendency to innovation"⁷ to meet demands of the market. Inspired by popular dance, which occupies various digital media, ballet and contemporary dancers have been forced by the extreme social and economic situation to innovate new ways to work and attract an audience and keep the arts in the public eye. This allowed them to reach a potentially global audience through online spaces so often utilized by popular dance forms.

Online dance classes have created a new form of screendance that is particularly site-specific.⁸ The movement sequences for the online classes are created specifically for the camera that captures the instructor and for the home screen on which they are watched. Furthermore, they are created specifically for home practice and thus take into

consideration the constrained, furniture-laden environment as a site for the practice. The online dance classes in question, such as ballet classes taught by Isabella Boylston and James Whiteside, Graham classes by various members of the company, or by the teachers of the Merce Cunningham trust are mostly filmed on personal smart phones with minimal technical support, such as basic selfie ring lighting like the Spectrum Aurora used by YouTubers and Instagrammers. Most of the classes are taught from instructors' living spaces. For example, Jennifer Goggans of the Cunningham Trust taught the class from her living room, keeping time for the exercises that were sometimes interrupted by her young son. I followed her class, adjusted for the limited space that she had to move in, which made it easier to follow the class in my limited space. This called for a different kind of class in Cunningham technique, which was concentrated on complex footwork and back movement sequences, rather than delving into space exploration and large traveling combinations.

After many years of not taking ballet classes, I had chosen to do a ballet *barre* during the lockdown often late at night in my pajamas. I would hide in our bedroom, hold onto the moving office chair as my make-shift *barre* and mostly try to psychologically reconcile with the images of stunning dancers on screen and my fast-diminishing turnout. Given the lack of space and the inadequate *barre* support, much of my class experience was preoccupied with adjustments to the chair and myself in relation to surrounding walls, the desk, and pets. I tried a variety of the classes and observed some trends. The ballet classes offered online varied in style aimed at different audiences and adjusted to the aesthetics and demands of the social media, and thus popular dance. Adam Boreland of Orlando Ballet offered classes on Facebook that used social media catchphrases, such as Monday Motivation ballet and Sunday Funday ballet.⁹ In order to make ballet attractive and fun, he would introduce themes and wear various costumes encouraging his class participants to do so, such as Spiderman ballet. Isabella Boylston and James Whiteside employed multiple themes for their classes, including Star Wars, Vintage Ballet Looks, and Harry Potter, making their classes fun and relatable.¹⁰ In their attempt to keep dancing and working, some ballet and contemporary dancers offering online instructions employed certain aesthetics that characterize dancing in quarantine in home settings but also popular dance ideas, such as using well-known music in order to make the classes fun and having a peppy tone to their teaching style. Tamara Rojo, on the other hand, continued to teach a formal ballet class albeit from her kitchen.

As concert dance practitioners took to teaching dance online and numerous examples of choreographed video dance emerged from moguls of ballet and contemporary dance, it became evident that dance artists have responded to this crisis situation with the creativity and innovation that characterizes popular dance, which constantly has to present innovative models in order to meet demands of the market. Similar to popular screendance culture, the online dance classes signify an adapting site for cultural tension and struggle between formal institutions and individual artist, stillness of the lockdown for the dance community, and dancer' need to engage in physical activity.

These actions represent an active response to the surrounding issues of the pandemic allowing an instant transformation of the dance culture, collective, and structures.

The supposed hierarchy in dance, which divides concert dance forms, such as ballet and contemporary from various popular dance forms has been brought into focus during the pandemic as dance forms usually confined to theatre stages took to digital landscapes to show and promote their work. Ballet companies have created a strong online presence in the last few years and entered popular spaces, such as cinemas, to screen full live or pre-recorded performances reflecting the shifting marketing ideologies. However, the bulk of their work, labor, and existence is in studios and stages reserved for a select local audience with a particular budget. For example, New York City Ballet has created short videos entitled “Ballet Trailers” and “Anatomy of a Ballet” for their YouTube channel and Facebook page, which feature dancers speaking about their experiences of preparing, rehearsing, and performing specific ballets, intertwined with footage from the dances to instigate interest in the NYCB repertory.¹¹ Royal Ballet (amongst many other companies, such as the Bolshoi Theatre from Moscow) screens full-length ballets in cinemas in various locations, including Cyprus.

Online dance classes have increased the popularity of ballet and contemporary dance and brought them into mainstream, popular culture. Ballet exists on the periphery for majority of the people who are more likely to be exposed to 15 to 60-second dances on TikTok and dances in music videos rather than full-length ballets at large opera houses. The presence of ballet and contemporary dance on digital platforms during lockdown therefore brought these dance forms into the mainstream of popular and online culture as illustrated below with the number of views for the online classes. Isabella Boylston’s Instagram post showing a video of herself and James Whiteside doing a section of the ballet *barre* in her kitchen on March 18th, 2020 reifies social media’s reach as she writes:

Holy Cow! Over 15000 (!!!!) of you tuned into #theCindiesBalletClass just now (emoji) that’s almost 4 times the capacity of our largest theatre, the Met opera house! Just think what we could all accomplish together! Cindy and I will continue to give live IG ballet classes, and next time we will be asking for a totally voluntary donation that we will give straight to the Dancer’s Emergency Fund.¹²

Out of all of Graham dance classes uploaded to YouTube by the Martha Graham Dance Company, the Graham Basics (beginner) Class with Anne Souder has the most views with over 34,000 views as of May 29th, 2021. At the time of writing this essay, almost all of Tamara Rojo’s (for English National Ballet) ballet classes that she offered from her kitchen have been removed. The only one that is still on YouTube has almost 200,000 views. Pacific Northwest Ballet classes on YouTube have upwards of 100,000 views. Tiler Peck’s ballet classes #turnitoutwithtiler uploaded to IGTV have anywhere between 2,000-41,000 views depending on her invited guests, which appear to increase the popularity of her classes. Terry Lovell’s suggestion that, “cultural products are

articulated structures of feeling and sensibility which derive from collective, shared experience as well as from individual desires and pleasures,"¹³ offers an explanation for the explosion and popularity of the online dance classes responding to the individuals' needs to remain active, stay engaged, offer a charitable donation, and create a new corporeal collective. Taking into consideration Dominic Strinati's idea that popular culture is viewed as a genuine expression of the people rather than an imposition by institutions¹⁴ allows for an argument to emerge that online dance classes represent the real need for dancers to move, engage, and keep the art form going, and that their popularity is evident in these numbers, which are in sharp contrast to the availability and accessibility of classes in exclusive studios in which these dance celebrities may potentially teach.

Shifting into popular dance spaces causes a social and economic power move for ballet and contemporary dance that gives it the dynamics of popular dance aesthetics, which Sherril Dodds argues has "the capacity to destabilize and transgress cultural norms."¹⁵ As professionals occupied amateur digital spaces, they shattered the hierarchy of institutionalism, geography, economics, and concert versus popular dance. By colonizing popular dance spaces of digital platforms, elite dance companies and individual dancers escaped the confines of particular places and thus challenged the Western notions of dancing spaces, including proscenium theaters and studios, by reaching into living rooms and kitchens across the world. Company dance classes, which are normally reserved for elite dancers trained within elite institutions became web-native content and, therefore, disturbed ideas regarding locations to dance, access to training, and the geopolitical position of dance styles and genres.

Access, Economics, and Challenge to Hierarchies

As previously mentioned, I live and work in Cyprus—a small sovereign island in the Mediterranean—so as a contemporary dancer who was trained in the UK and the US, I was excited to be able to take dance classes during the 2020 lockdown. I was allowed a unique vantage point to consider the online dance classes during the pandemic, as ordinarily Cypriot dancers do not have access to taking classes from Western dance institutions. Cyprus is politically and economically European, yet it remains on the periphery of the Western world geographically. Cyprus has endured Ottoman rule and British colonial rule, gained its independence in 1960, and has been divided since 1974 following the Turkish invasion into the Turkish occupied North and Greek Cypriot South. The history and political situation have shaped the cultural make-up of the country into a distinctively post-colonial island with a strong pull toward Western trends and development, yet keen to hold onto traditions. Stavros Karayiannis points out succinctly that "one effect of these historic turns is a profound crisis in modern Cypriot (both Greek and Turkish) identity,"¹⁶ which also extends to dance. The dance scene consists of an over-saturated market of dance schools, which mostly teach ballet and modern dance, and more specifically British systems, such as Royal Academy of Dance (R.A.D.) and

Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (I.S.T.D.), clearly solidifying the cultural need of the island to receive international (particularly British) validation; and a great number of schools which teach traditional Greek and Cypriot dances alluding to the need to preserve the traditional culture. Before I went to study in the UK in 1996, I had taken only two contemporary dance classes—not because I was not interested, but because none were available. Contemporary dance has been developing with great strides since the late 1990s in Cyprus. Now, a few decades later, the contemporary dance scene is growing and thriving with local festivals producing contemporary dance, established dance houses, a university program offering a BA degree in dance, and over 200 dance schools that offer a variety of dance styles. Yet, for local professional dancers (most of whom have trained abroad), classes are not available. Therefore, access to online dance classes from the UK and US proved thrilling.¹⁷

As a post-colonial country, Cyprus is still deeply reminded of the British imperial rule evident in the infrastructure—road signs that feature Greek and English names, and British military bases—and its citizens are strongly attracted to the West. As prominent Cypriot scholar Zelia Georgiou explains, defining Cyprus as simply post-colonial fails to acknowledge its complexity. She states, “by addressing colonialism as a historical phenomenon and defining itself as a critical metadiscourse, it can be argued that postcolonialism denies both existing colonialism and its own discourse implication in current webs of knowledge and power.”¹⁸ Western understanding of post-colonialism does not necessarily apply to the Cypriot model,¹⁹ which Georgiou argues continues to privilege “the western subject as the subject of reflexivity and atonement.”²⁰ As an ethnically divided country, Cyprus exhibits a strong anxiety to its national self. The growing multicultural population in Cyprus is experienced as an effect of global socio-economic change “rather than as a question pointing to the re-appreciation of our [Greek Cypriot] historical ethnic diversity and ethnic divides.”²¹ If the local subject in Cyprus is not a migrant, or of a different race or ethnicity, then what is their position to the imperial colonialism and how does the dance scene respond to this? As Georgiou argues, the position of the Cypriot is between two cultures: the post-colonial subject and national struggle and anxiety, arising from the contact of the local population with the colonizers, thus making identities form in and by their relations. What is clearly evident in Cyprus and its dance scene is that what has been “essential to the machine of colonialism had been the hinge between western imperialism and local, internal colonialism.”²² For contemporary dance practices, this means that most local dancers and choreographer practice Western styles of dance, specifically Release, Graham, and Cunningham with post-modern compositional practices, and largely ignore traditional dance and music (with a few exceptions), thus the ability to take classes from the largely recognized Western dance centers appealed to the marginalized dance practitioners in Cyprus.

The shared practices of having live dance experiences halted, and then resurrected through an online presence, has provided access to training that is rooted in ideals of

openness and inclusivity that challenges privileges of geography, economics, and access. However, they still may exclude individuals with the disadvantages of not having personal space to take class in, leisure time, or internet access. Set against the political control of the lockdown and the loss of personal freedom in the name of public safety, the classes provide a new sense of freedom and virtual democracy by extending their reach into geographically peripheral spaces, such as Cyprus, and beyond major metropolitan cities that house well-established dance companies. Online dance classes open access to dance training to various geographical locations that may not be able to train otherwise. The fact that a new community was forged may be indisputably fortified by my experience of taking class from my remote location in the relation to the US, yet it seemed to represent a vastly Western experience of offering classes in white, concert dance forms that appealed to a marginalized demographic seeking Western experiences and approval. Although Harmony Bench critiques Ramsay Burt's romanticized vision of contemporary dance practices in Europe, she still presumes that Europe as a concept provides equal access to dance training and producing.²³ The geographical definition of Europe is vastly different to its political one, which is amplified for dance with countries in Western and Central Europe holding a monopoly on contemporary dance in terms of training and choreographic opportunities. Although ballet training is widely available in ex-Soviet countries, as well as those adjacent to the communist phenomenon, more peripheral countries (such as Cyprus, Malta, and Iceland), have gained access to ballet and contemporary training in the second half of the twentieth century. The phenomenon of online classes may have been particularly exciting for dancers in geographically remote places who ordinarily do not have access to training with New York- or London-based choreographers, dancers, and teachers. My mention of these two cities is purposeful, as they are often seen as the epitome of dance training and performing, particularly in Cyprus. However, even people within the US, UK, and Europe who live and engage in dance practice in remote, rural places would possibly have the same experience as someone living on an island in the Mediterranean. The post-colonial pull toward Western trends makes activities from these regions additionally exciting for Cypriot artists.

Additionally, online dance classes would have allowed various economically disadvantaged groups to gain access to training in elite dance forms that they may not have access previously. The pandemic has allowed a wider cast net for dance training and access for particular dance forms. Bench alludes to the importance of digital dance to ensure a more democratic access to dance as she states:

the digital media at the forefront of my own investigation reach farther and wider than the festivals and metropolitan theaters to which European dance artists might tour their stage-based productions. Furthermore, these media bring all possible dance forms into the flattening space of the computer screen, blurring distinctions among movement practices and communities and disarticulating them from their histories and cultural situations.²⁴

By shifting to digital spaces, ballet and contemporary dance allowed people to learn dance in the same way as many social and popular dance forms that appear in mainstream media. Free online dance classes disrupt the idea of who has privilege to train. Using Robert Gehl's idea of "YouTube's democratic, participatory nature" as a challenge to broadcast media,²⁵ I argue that free online dance classes may offer possibility to decentralize institutional dance instruction bound to studio presence and economic ability to pursue dance. Although streaming a class can in no way replace the experience of studio class with a teacher providing feedback and corrections, it does allow dancers with experience to continue to engage in daily practice. Some dancers offered instruction for beginner classes allowing access to a larger dance community. The disruption of privilege is crucial in the discussion of how to make strides towards more inclusive scholarship and curricula as it encourages participation in dance forms reserved for financially and geographically privileged people. Free online dance classes do not offer a long-term solution as dancers cannot financially and logistically continue to offer their skills for free, as well as the fact that "dance remains a social practice, regardless if one learns in a studio, on a street corner, or from a screen."²⁶

Online dance classes do not have an explicit function to promote, mediate, and circulate celebrity capital, yet they aim to keep the arts in the public eye, raise funds, and provide a social service in terms of free classes. They encourage a physical response to dance on screen and seek to engage the viewer to participate in an active way, rather than passively watch a performance. Through this engagement the dance landscape has changed as it has included geographically and economically remote dancers into a new community. Bench argues that "mobilized, dancing bodies reclaim and rechoreograph terrains that ought to exclude them"²⁷ thus by engaging with the online dance presence during the pandemic the dance world may have been altered to a more democratic and inclusive space. Ideally, online dance classes provide universal and democratic access to dance training, but I wonder if someone without training and background in ballet, Graham, or Cunningham could safely and effectively follow class, therefore continuing the disparity in dance training access. Isabella Boylston's ballet-inspired workout "My Bootylicious Workout" uploaded on April 28th to Instagram features a mixture of ballet- and Pilates-based exercises set to the music of Backstreet Boys, Destiny's Child, and No Doubt,²⁸ and is advertised as "no ballet training necessary" in the accompanying post. Although, Boylston tries to make the video entertaining with popular music choices, some of the exercises would be extremely difficult for non-trained dancers to do safely, such as the *en croix* series of *tendus*, followed by the lifting of the legs, whilst keeping the arms in high fifth position or single leg balances without the assistance of a *barre*.



Screenshot: Isabella Boylston in "My Bootylicious Workout ;-)" 28 April 28 2020. Credit: @isabellaboyston

Digital circulation of dance classes created for participation, rather than choreography designed to be observed, alters the way that cultural capital circulates as participants embody knowledge, traditions, and practices creating a corporeal wealth independent of formal institution in the given moment. Through this process, the ownership of dance material is questioned. Jayna Brown argues that searching for the origins and inceptions of popular dance is a difficult project since "with gestural vocabularies there are no beginnings, only continuation"²⁹ pointing to its unwieldy history and belonging to groups of people and communities. Ballet and contemporary dance, on the other hand, have belonged to institutions, dancers who gain the right to perform and teach the repertory, and certification programs that allow teachers to disseminate these established dance techniques. Anthea Kraut argues that unlike other commodities in a capitalist system, dance circulates through body-to-body transmission,³⁰ therefore, it is perpetuated and dependent on people engaging in physical practice. By offering ballet and contemporary dance online for free, the dancers have bypassed institutions as holders of traditions and knowledge, and distributed dynamics and hierarchies of dance ownership and training.

Dance artists of various backgrounds and experiences mobilized with the act of moving, teaching, and dancing to resist the stillness of the lockdown forced onto the professional dance world and ended up challenging politics and economics of formal dance training, institutions, and access. Responding to their own need to practice their art, as well as the need to provide a social contribution, dance artists offering classes online became independent creators of their art, and, thus, asserted their independence. Online dance classes challenge the idea of institutions, formal training, and hierarchy of master and teacher. By responding to the pandemic situation, artists, as autonomous producers of their art, assert their independence, thus, disturbing class distinctions and arbitrary divisions between concert and popular dance. Boundaries between public and private spaces blurred as dance celebrities opened their homes to online audiences. By doing so, professional artists by-passed well-established and sponsored institutions and created an anti-capitalist approach to dance from their living rooms and kitchens.

The online classes required a collaborative practice as professional dancers offered free online classes with learners participating with comments and videos tagging the teachers. The issue with this is that collaborative practice feeds into neoliberal capitalist notions of individualism requiring uncompensated labor as dancers offering their knowledge and experience for free in exchange for tags, tweets, and re-shares. Although, online dance classes do not explicitly promote a particular product, such as a performance or work of a company, they are immersed in economics of art promotion that depends on individual artists and repertory to attract audiences and donors, which follows Alex Harlig's argument that much online commercial content has moved even further towards obscuring their marketing intention while promoting consumption.³¹ In some instances, dancers promoted fundraising during their classes asking for charities that would support funds for dancers, dance companies, and various social causes. However, these practices may be only short-term offerings and will prove difficult to maintain as dance artists become further challenged with ability to gain an income and may choose to charge a fee as the Graham school did a few weeks into the lockdown offering classes over Zoom as an institution, replacing live Instagram classes by individual dancers. Generosity of online dance teaching on Instagram and YouTube facilitated gift economy, which Bench argues causes "the slippage between gift and commodity" and has little possibility to bring financial gain to the creators.³² As Regensdorf writes in standard magazine fashion "sudden flowering of dance livestreams has been less a concession than a gift. It's for nurses working night shift who need to shake off stress at a later time; for bunheads in far-away Portugal, France, Hong Kong"³³ relegating dance to a stress relief and re-affirming the US view that they are geographically positioned in the center of the Global North, from which everything is far away. The dancers' inability to perform has resulted in a creative and generous offering of dance classes in order to promote their style of dance, company they dance with, and their own persona. In the neoliberal capitalist economy, the responsibility to keep dance relevant fell to individual dancers who took on responsibility to promote

their work, themselves as brand ambassadors for their companies, and dance in general, rather than having state support and prolonged economic support from various governments promising basic livelihood, similar to other industries. By shifting focus to actions taken by individuals, Bojana Kunst's idea that "the relationship between art and life is highly topical because their merger underlies the capitalization of human powers and their exploitation for the generation of profit"³⁴ has been solidified problematizing the relationship between art, dancers' labor, skill set and knowledge, and capitalist production.

The bold actions of dancers to offer online dance classes demonstrates the relationship between how the value of performers' labor and capitalism has formed. Like popular culture, which Andrew Edgar argues is surrounded by a distinct dichotomy which situates it within the capitalist system whilst simultaneously trying to resist it from within,³⁵ online dance classes present a contradictory economic system, whereby individual dancers express a neo-liberal responsibility to keep the economy going, yet present a strict challenge to the hierarchies of the dance world and its institutions. As Kunst articulates and online dance classes exemplify, "the capacities of human being, our cognitive, affective, and flexible abilities are part of the production of value and this is why the line between the labor and private time is disappearing,"³⁶ which was further exploited as dancers shifted from glamorous stage settings to their private residencies allowing a glimpse into the efforts needed to keep up the glamorous presentations on stage. In the time of classifying works and jobs into essential and not, artists found a way to make themselves and their professions "useful" by providing a "service" in the form of online classes revealing the materiality of their work by physically showing how hard dancers have to work to stay in shape. This corresponds to the Kunst's argument that the artist's relation to work "especially the usefulness and productive nature of that work, which affects every dimension of an artist's life (and therefore also comes across as a fusion of life and work)"³⁷ is essential to their ability to maintain a livelihood. The artist must continually update their skills and usefulness in relation to their productivity and thus capitalist network and with that "forever shift away from the possible nonproductive and non-useful site of work."³⁸ Even though the actions by individual artists to offer online dance classes clearly involve them in a capitalist web of productivity and usefulness, they also contest the idea that "the value of the labor of the performer is not residing in the labor of the performer herself/himself but it is only becoming visible through the institutionalized, economized, and highly managed initiatives"³⁹ as they assert their individual popularity, labor, and relevance.

New (More Global) Dance Community

Despite the problems exhibited by the post-colonial tensions that attracted dancers who live, work, and create in spaces that appear peripheral to the dominant West, online dance classes offered an optimistic idea of a unified dance community. As dancers were removed from their natural habitat of dance studios and stages, a new digital

community emerged with the presence of online dance classes that invited participation. A great deal of dance performances were released online that normally would not allow access beyond the exclusive theatre settings of cosmopolitan cities, however they could not create the same sense of community as the online dance classes, many of which streamed live, allowed live commentary and re-posted videos of dancers participating in their classes therefore confirming their involvement. Using Harmony Bench's ideas on the common as a site to negotiate, exploit, conserve and consume dance and its practices,⁴⁰ I am interested in what kind a new common have digital technologies produced during this particular time. The dancers offering and taking class became united by the situation created by the pandemic and formed an embodied reaction that contrasted the extreme stillness of the lockdown seen and experienced across the world. The stillness applies to the dance community and not the extremely stressful and demanding pace placed on the essential workers during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis.

Online dance classes require involvement and engagement creating a participatory type of common. As Bench argues, "by learning a dance, one corporeally manifests belonging to a social group—even if that group is constituted in online spaces or through shared media use rather than through physical proximity,"⁴¹ therefore, it is clear that the dancers enjoying these classes were united by their experience of taking classes during this given time riddled with similar concerns and fears. Engaging with online dance classes through physical participation, commentary, and visual images, dancers negotiated and contested their belonging to a community. Learning to dance as a process of belonging provided the participants with the optimistic opportunity to belong to a world unified by dance, rather, than one clearly divided by politics and economics. In thinking of the common as a global, online phenomenon enabled and perpetuated by the lockdown, I employ Harmony Bench's notion of "no-place" which has the political potential to create "a site deployed to erase location—a site that works to render itself invisible... Its very emptiness grounds Western dance practices and launches dancing bodies into new sites by erasing topological specificities"⁴² to understand the common created by the digital common of online classes created in response to this specific time and specific crisis. Opposed to the oppressive (albeit extremely necessary) restriction of movement during lockdown, this idea of a new space, of no-place offers alternative ideas to render a common "abstracted from built or natural environments that would situate their movement, bodies wander through space with an illusory freedom, unrestricted by physical or ideological barriers."⁴³ Grounded in and by their own homes, dancers offering classes are dis-located from studios and stages, thus increasing their reach and mobility, whilst restricting the literal space to move in. Participation of dancers in online dance classes spreads the dance forms across geographical, pandemic, and economic boundaries creating a "corporeal common,"⁴⁴ however raises alarming issues about colonization through globalization and promotion of Western dance forms, which may ignore cultural specificities of remote, peripheral, or marginalized places. The new more geographically inclusive,

digital common refers to Bench's idea of no-place as a new digital topography created by the circumstances of the pandemic that has political potential to disrupt physical, ideological privileges surrounding dance access and specificity of location.

Online dance instruction cannot replace the experience of dancing in a studio, sharing the physical experience with other dancers, amplified with music and ability to enjoy traveling through space, however, I am interested in the political power that online dance classes have offered to the instructors and participants through a phenomenological lens. The shared corporeal experience of dancing in spite of the quietness of the pandemic, the economic and financial uncertainty, and fears regarding one's health, acts as sign of resilience and resistance. Pointing to the importance of mediated popular dance, and furthermore, the subjectivity that occurs through embodied response of learning dances presented on screen, Blanco Borelli's argument that perhaps fans learning dance routines enables a phenomenological relation of corporeal relation enabled by the screen,⁴⁵ seems fitting in the understanding of the somatic experience of offering and taking online dance classes. Dancers engaging in online dance classes, improvisations, and choreographic experiments during the pandemic had a kinesthetic experience highlighting corporeality as subjectivity; dancers whose physical identities were articulated through dancing formed political, reactive, and reactionary entities that are able to contest boundaries of control. Blanco Borelli defines the relationship between popular dance and its spectators/consumers learning to perform the dances as she writes "for it is through the ubiquitous availability of such mediated performances that dance on screen becomes (corpo)real and tangible,"⁴⁶ which is an idea that has been transferred to the possibility of learning ballet and contemporary dance during the 2020 pandemic. As dancing bodies, united across screens, engage in kinesthetic experiences they form a collective physical action and a powerful experience of community in a world halted and divided by the pandemic.

The enforced physical separation and lack of dancing spaces has had a profound effect on how classes are designed for online teaching and home participation. The consequences of online dance instruction on the physical well-being dancers are yet to be determined but the political effect of expanded access to training in ballet and contemporary dance to people with a decent internet connection and smart phone (and some background training) has been profound. Dancers have been united through a shared, screened experience of dance allowing geographically and economically marginalized groups access to learning dance. Using Bench's observation that participatory commons "enabl[e] a contemporary discourse in which the commons signal open access, anticapitalism, and radical democracy,"⁴⁷ offers a possibility to look at the online dance presence during the pandemic as revolutionary in terms of economics and open access and as an alternative to neoliberal financial ideology that defines economics of the twenty first century Western countries as it challenges formal economics of institutions and geographic boundaries. The new geographic and economic challenge to dance democracy that the online dance classes during the

Covid-19 pandemic have introduced will re-organize dance practices and create new complex social relations that challenge the arts hierarchy. Ballet and contemporary dance classes entering digital media presents economic dynamics of popular dance that embody tensions between neoliberal capitalist incentives by the individual dance artists versus artistic establishment.

As dancers adapted to the new situation and shifted from physical spaces of studio and stage to digital spaces, they responded to current cultural needs and sought to create immediacy and connection that contradicts the separation created by lockdown. In a similar way to the function of the body in staged protests, as a key factor “in constructing both individual agency and sociality,”⁴⁸ the physical presence of dancers creates an individual and collective response in reaction to the emergency of the pandemic. Dance provides a political and social movement that challenges the economic and political stillness of the pandemic. The classes provided an opportunity to connect to one’s sense of physical agency, corporeal power, and a global collective united by dance practice. The very presence of dancers online serves as an act of resistance and their belief in the possibility of instigating change. By colonizing digital spaces of popular dance, ballet and contemporary dancers have created a democratic and participatory access to dance that has opened up a wider engagement with the arts. Through shared physical connection facilitated by dance classes the dance landscape has changed bringing traditional, classical dance forms into the twenty first century by occupying digital spaces.

Biography

Dara Milovanovic is an Assistant Professor of Dance and Head of the Department of Music and Dance at University of Nicosia in Cyprus. Dara holds a PhD in Dance Studies from Kingston University London, UK and an MA in American Dance Studies from Florida State University. Dara teaches contextual dance studies, dance research, contemporary dance technique and jazz dance. Her work has been published in books and journals, such *Perspectives on American Dance: The Twentieth Century*, *Peephole Journal*, *Dance Research*, and *Fifty Contemporary Choreographers (Third Edition)*. Her research interests include popular dance, musical theatre, screendance, and film phenomenology. Dara is an active contemporary dance performer in Cyprus.

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Notes

¹ See some of the classes uploaded here: <https://www.instagram.com/marziamem/>

² Regensdorf, "In the Age of Quarantine."

³ Two articles in the *New York Times*, "One Lost Weekend" by Michael Paulson, Elizabeth A. Harris, and Graham Bowley and "For the Arts in Europe, Lockdown Feels Different This Time" by Alex Marshall indicate the dire situation for the arts scene in New York City and Europe, which are indicative of many other places. According to an ABC news report published on 27th of February of 2021, the number of jobs in the arts fell from 87000 in February of 2020 to 34100 in April of 2020 in New York City. The same report states that arts, entertainment and recreation employment in December was down 66% year-over-year. Furthermore, according to a report published by Brookings Institution in August of 2020, based on their creative-industry analysis, they estimate losses of 2.7 million jobs for creative industries in the US with fine and performing arts suffering the biggest losses. In Cyprus, the arts scene has been off and on, with artists struggling to create, perform, and financially survive. For an article on the state of the arts in Cyprus see Gina Agapiou's piece "Cyprus arts suffer as performers cannot work."

⁴ This is not an exhaustive list of online dance classes offered during the 2020 pandemic and quarantine. As many of the classes were streamed live, they are no longer available however information can be found on following pages:

Isabella Boylston (<https://www.instagram.com/isabellaboylston/>);

James Whiteside (<https://www.instagram.com/jamesbwhiteside/>);

Tamara Rojo (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcT9uRJqCrE&t=406s>);

Tiler Peck (<https://www.instagram.com/tilerpeck/>);

Megan Fairchild

(https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=megan+fairchild+ballet+class);

Ashley Boudier

(https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=ashley+boudier+ballet+class);

Adam Boreland (<https://www.facebook.com/adamborelanddance>);

Paul Taylor Dance classes (<https://www.instagram.com/paultaylordance/>);

Martha Graham Dancers (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdSQpl_zUIU&t=682s);

Akram Khan Dance Company (<https://www.facebook.com/AkramKhanCompany/>);

Gaga Dance Classes (<https://www.instagram.com/gaga.people.dancers/>);

Merce Cunningham Trust (<https://www.instagram.com/mercetrust/>)

⁵ Blanco Borelli, "Dancing in Music Videos."

⁶ Blanco Borelli and Anamaria Tamayo Duque, "Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies," 7.

⁷ Theresa Buckland in Dodds, *Dancing on the Canon*, 48.

⁸ Douglas Rosenberg's argument that screendance is a site-specific form of dance fits well in analysis of online dance classes. See *Screendance*, 17.

⁹ Adam Boreland's Facebook page features many of the ballet videos that dancers can revisit. <https://www.facebook.com/adamborelanddance>

¹⁰ See Instagram profiles and classes uploaded here <https://www.instagram.com/isabellaboyston/> and <https://www.instagram.com/jamesbwhiteside/>

¹¹ See NYCB YouTube channel here <https://www.youtube.com/user/newyorkcityballet> and Facebook page here <https://www.facebook.com/nycballet/>

¹² Boylston, I. (@isabellaboyston) March 18, 2020.

¹³ Lovell, "Cultural Production," 543.

¹⁴ Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*.

¹⁵ Dodds, 3.

¹⁶ Karayiannis, "Anamnesis and Queer Poe(/li)tics," 240.

¹⁷ At this time, no serious academic study has been done on the development of ballet and contemporary dance in Cyprus, therefore the author relies on personal experience of living, performing, and teaching in Cyprus. Various websites, such as the Cyprus Dance Association (<http://www.cydanceassociation.org/>) offer information on dance ballet schools; Nea Kinisi Association for Contemporary Dance Groups, Choreographers, and Dancers (<https://neakinisi.com/index.php/en/>) offers information on the two initiatives led by them, including the Summer Festival and Visibility Programme; Dance House Lemesos (<http://www.dancehouse.com.cy/>) provides information regarding their programs and residencies; Cultural Services of Ministry of Education and Culture, which provides most of the grants for dance only lists the contact person and does not have information about the festivals and funding schemes it provides on its opening page (http://www.moec.gov.cy/en/cultural_services.html). Apart from very limited information available, none of these sources give an insight into the internal politics of dance on this small island.

¹⁸ Georgiou, "De-Scribing Hybridity in 'Unspoiled Cyprus,'" 241.

¹⁹ For example, Tuck and Yang address settler colonialism in the US in their article "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," which does not relate to the issues experienced in places like Cyprus.

²⁰ Georgiou, 242.

²¹ Ibid. 245.

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- ²² Ibid. 242.
- ²³ Bench, *Perpetual Motion*, 4.
- ²⁴ Ibid. 5.
- ²⁵ Gehl, "YouTube as Archive," 44.
- ²⁶ Bench, *Perpetual Motion*, 154-155.
- ²⁷ Ibid. 68.
- ²⁸ Boylston, I. (@isabellaboylston) April 28, 2020.
- ²⁹ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 7.
- ³⁰ Kraut, *Choreographing Copyright*, 180.
- ³¹ Harlig, "Fresher Than You," 59.
- ³² Bench, *Perpetual Motion*, 176.
- ³³ Regensdorf.
- ³⁴ Kunst, "Art and Labour," 116.
- ³⁵ Edgar and Sedgwick, *Cultural Theory*.
- ³⁶ Kunst, "Lust.rf. Lecture."
- ³⁷ Kunst, "Art and Labour," 120.
- ³⁸ Ibid. 120.
- ³⁹ Kunst, "Art and Labour."
- ⁴⁰ Bench, "Remarks."
- ⁴¹ Bench, *Perpetual Motion*, 160-161.
- ⁴² Bench, "Media and the 'No-place' of Dance," 37.
- ⁴³ Ibid. 37.
- ⁴⁴ Bench, *Perpetual Motion*, 157.
- ⁴⁵ Blanco Borelli, "Dancing in Music Videos," 53.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid.
- ⁴⁷ Bench, *Perpetual Motion*, 4.
- ⁴⁸ Foster, "Choreographies of Protest," 395.

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