

# Introduction

Our political world is in constant motion. Our lives are continually shifting. Collective communicative structures which have held us together in various forms of communal life are relentlessly being challenged by new languages. Practices that have bound human beings together for thousands of years are transformed, gain new meaning and receive renewed significance. This book is a study of one such practice, dance.

The book intervenes in critical conjunctures in political theory, bringing together new reflections on the moving body, spaces of action and our interpretation of politics and political theory more broadly. Jodi Dean's careful examination of the Occupy movement in *The Communist Horizon*, in which, quite literally, bodies intervened in public spaces in order to reconsider distributive justice; Jane Bennett's crucial intervention into the humanist and language-driven world of political theory, *Vibrant Matter*; and Diana Coole and Samantha Frost's edited collection *New Materialisms* opened up a vista for scholars and theorists seeking new ways to consider the body in its relationship to the physical world it inhabits, as well as to understanding politics through the long-standing humanistic tradition in philosophy. However, the inspiration and galvanising force for embarking on my own argument comes from a question raised by Bonnie Honig in her reading of *Antigone*, which converses with numerous other readings of this play, from Hegel to Butler through Lacan, in her *Antigone, Interrupted*; she revisits an invitation to leave grief behind, dance all night and join the feast of Dionysus (Honig 2013: 119). Honig asks us to reconsider that invitation from the chorus; I follow her in reconsidering this invitation and yet show throughout the book that dance has served many people around the world for various purposes; it was never merely just a way to forget.

This book illuminates the power of dance to bring people together, as well as to separate them, in different moments in time as well as in different geographical and cultural locations. Throughout the book I argue that dance is a sustained method of communication that includes grammatical structures and units, just like verbal language; at the same time it is a method of intervention that brings new speaking beings into shared spaces. Dance has its own methods of interpreting values through symbolic structures. Thus dance provides interpretations of questions regarding human beings' political lives within its own system of signification. At times, these interpretations through movement challenge and transcend conceptual interpretations articulated in verbal language. Consequently, I read dance as an embodied method of communication which is a subversive practice. It challenges women's and men's perceptions of themselves as members of communities as well as their shared spaces and communal lives. Dance inserts new voices into existing communities; those voices are articulated through moving bodies.

Dance has been always been an essential part of human life. It has always occupied a central position in the manifold forms of shared human existence. Throughout time and space, women and men have expressed themselves through their moving bodies by dancing on stage, which, in turn, has moved other bodies, those of their audiences. Further, the bodies which have been moved have not kept still themselves; they have, in turn, affected other bodies and altered the way they have been perceived. Those bodies are, in and of themselves, political bodies. They are part of engrained symbolic webs that mould them and enable them to become what they are. Hence, dance and politics are always already intertwined. Dancing bodies affect bodies in the audience; all of those bodies are political entities.

Understanding dance as including linguistic and communicative features within it, as being part of a whole world, allows the study to expand into understanding issues and ideas articulated through moving bodies. In this book I show that dance indeed allowed moments of transgression and emancipation; but dance has also been used by oppressors and at times has darker sides to it than meet the eye. Thus the book draws away from the absolute alignment of the normative and emotive content that can be articulated in dance. Dance can be used to better and worsen human beings' lives. Dance can articulate joy and pain, anger and jubilation. The conceptual focus in the book is on moments in which dance has been used by moving subjects for the better. The first chapter shows the underlying conceptual logic for this focus; drawing on an assumption of equality allows me to argue that human beings utilised their bodies

when they were deemed unequal and achieved greater visibility within their communities. The concluding chapter of the book will push this thesis further, into the boundaries between ethics and politics, by examining this moment of subversion through the body operating within the normative-theoretical idea of radical hope; a new ontology that gives its subject the possibility to dance a world in becoming.

It is crucial to pause here and illuminate my use of the term 'world'. The use of the term world does not correspond to a known ontological space from the so-called 'canon' of Western political thought. The argument starts from an awareness that what has been termed a 'known' world in political theory will tend to lapse into a white, middle-class, male, Judeo-Christian world. My use of the term 'world' aims to do the opposite – to look at diverse subjects who have mobilised their bodies to create systems of signification out of their own environment. Thus the book starts from the recognition that human beings occupy separate worlds which yield different meanings and forms of life.

The first chapter of the book outlines the conceptual structure as well as the arc of the argument. The argument is structured as a three-dimensional argument that occupies a space of its own; it works within the space demarcated by its axes. This is never a metaphorical space, as the argument arises from the bodies of people who danced and from the stages upon which performances took place. The book does not only consider dance for the theatre; thus the use of the term 'stage' is representative of a space allowing for communication between two bodies: one audience member and one dancer.

The first of the three axes around which the argument is structured is the tension between contraction and release – the politics inscribed within the body itself as a space, and the politics generated from interaction between two moving bodies. The second axis is the distinction between the weak reading of political dance – the representation through moving bodies of ideas previously articulated in words – and the strong reading of political dance – the creation of a phenomenologically independent world which includes its own system of inscription and world of reception. The third axis is that of *sic-sensuous*. The concept of *sic-sensuous* looks at processes of intervention occurring between two sensed and sensing bodies, when meaning is transferred and sometimes creates new methods of embodied interpretation. I turn away from those narrating the story of the politics of dance – theorists and historians – towards the dancers and audience members themselves. I ask that we, as readers-spectators of the argument, become more attentive to the dancing bodies that have interrupted and transfigured our symbolic frameworks across

space and time. I have constructed my conceptual framework from a choreographic, critical reading of Jacques Rancière's concept of dissensus. Rancière sees the essence of politics 'as the manifestation of dissensus as the presence of two worlds in one' (Rancière 2010: 37). Dissensus is the collision of two worlds, one intervening in the other and reconfiguring what we understand as political life. Those moments of dissensus are moments in which webs of sensations are reconfigured and people who have been deemed unequal show that they are equal speaking beings. Elsewhere Rancière reads dissensus as a conflict between sensory presentation and the way of making sense of this presentation. Inequality for Rancière is not an ontological condition but rather a presupposition that only functions when it is put into action (Rancière 2009). Following Rancière, I cast the conceptual limelight on moments in which dance enables embodied enunciations to be perceived and received as equal to verbal language. In that moment of intervention dance interrupts those systems of signification that marginalise dancers and their audiences.

At the same time, many of Rancière's interlocutors and commentators have noted the problematics of understanding politics as interruption for our understanding of political space. Swyngedouw writes: 'the "people" do not pre-exist the political sequence through which it is called into being as a procedure of living-in-common (sic) ... It is this lack of foundation, the gaping whole (the void) in the social that renders its founding impossible and that inaugurates the political' (Swyngedouw 2011: 376). Lois McNay argues that Rancière's reading of politics is anti-ontological (McNay 2014). Bosteels writes: 'the whole purpose of reasoning in terms of such a gap or a distance ... lies in the capacity of a political subject to find a foothold in the void so as to move beyond, instead of merely denouncing an otherwise worthwhile undeniable lack of legitimacy revealed in this distance' (Bosteels 2003: 132). Dikec notes that 'for Rancière politics is all about creating spaces where a wrong can be addressed and equality can be demonstrated; re-configuring, in other words, the distribution of the sensible by staging equality, seeking a new distribution that does not deny this equality' (Dikec 2005: 674). Rancière yields a paradoxical reading of politics as redistributing space but lacking a space of its own, within which we try to find spaces for subjects to legitimise themselves as speaking beings while dissenting against wrongs that marginalise them. Moreover, the effort to engage Rancière's conception of dissensus within embodied practices shows the ontological contradictions within his work. Drawing upon Rancière's discussion of redistribution of the sensible as enabling new modes of appearance is appealing to those seeking to interpret embodied practices. Nibbelink makes this

astute comment: ‘Rancière’s distribution of the sensible hardly pays attention to the possibility of corporeal intelligence: knowledge that is present in affects and sensations’ (Nibbelink 2012: 418). Whereas Rancière asks us to focus upon the reorganisation of the sensible, knowledge conveyed through the sensed body, the actual body as the thinking and sensed organism of perception par excellence has very little conceptual room in this framework. Thus I shift the theoretical focus away from the ontological critiques outlined above.

This shift towards listening to the body is grounded in the understanding that the moving body, the flesh that learns and teaches to be mobilised and shifted, is never without weight and never without ontology. My reconfiguration of Rancière’s dissensus – together with his normative underpinnings – insists on the equality of human beings, even when this equality is not recognised in other formations or configurations. At the same time, my interpretation asks us to be more attentive to voices raised by moving bodies. I focus the first chapter of the book on the analytic-conceptual framework that generates the concept of *sic-sensuous*, which focuses on the sensed body and its potential to interrupt shared worlds.

This book is motivated by one central question: how can we expand our notion of what is political so that it includes dance? This question in turn is teased out into three intimately related questions: firstly, how can we expand who we consider parts of our political communities? Secondly, what do we consider a political enunciation? And thirdly, who do we consider a speaking subject? Accordingly, I ask four related questions: is dance seen as a legitimate avenue to express politics? When does politics occur in dance? Why does politics occur in dance? What conception of political dance does this interchange yield? Those questions will reappear throughout the book in various guises as they provided me with the theoretical as well as the political motivation for this investigation. Dance, I argue, has always been part of human beings’ lives, though it has not always been understood as a legitimate way to articulate their political self. It is in situations in which human beings started being considered as part of the community through their use of dance that I see the moment of politics in dance happening. This book explores moments in which people contest their marginal positioning through the use of their bodies.

This book focuses on moments in which those moving bodies have altered the way human beings have perceived themselves through other modes of communication. Thus this book carries a doubly critical message. It radicalises the way politics is perceived, away from formal institutions towards dance as a practice central to human lives

around the globe. At the same time, it probes into various political functions that dance carries which are not always elaborated within choreographic studies. The book asks us to reconsider what we perceive as political dance; and in this process to ask questions about definitions of both components of this concept – politics and dance. Throughout the book political theorists, choreographers, politicians, dance scholars, legal theorists, cultural theorists and philosophers will make entrances and exits into the conversation from its conceptual wings. They will be hovering at the margins of the text, asking to expand the discussion beyond disciplinary boundaries and across various realms in which human beings act as political and choreographic beings.

The book employs a triadic argument. First, it argues that dance is interruptive to politics enunciated in other symbolic structures – in particular, words – in that it shows the equality of the dancing subjects to speaking subjects even when this equality is not articulated elsewhere.

Second, this book argues that dance is a method of inscription; a system of communication that has a multiplicity of characteristics and allows its subjects to speak with their bodies. Thus by interrupting politics articulated in words, dancing subjects also affirm and develop their embodied methods of inscription.

Third, dance creates shared embodied spaces: between dance makers and dancers; between dancers among themselves; and between dancers and spectators. Those shared spaces are created by dance as a method of inscription; dance, in its communicative power, allows for people to share spaces in their bodies and provides choreographic characteristics that allow those spaces to unravel. In those shared spaces bodies communicating with each other are equal; when one body inscribes upon another it affirms the underlying equality that allows for this moment of sharing to arise. At the same time those moments of sharing also elucidate the differences between the bodies which partake in this visceral communication.

The argument aims especially to shed light on moments in which it is hard to create shared spaces in other methods of communication; when dance transcends other systems of signification that render some bodies privileged and others inferior.

The argument proceeds as follows. The first chapter presents the conceptual framework and the theoretical backdrop underlying the argument of the book. In this chapter I examine the assumptions and methods employed in the book in their intellectual context and problematise the conceptual structure of the argument. The first chapter sets the argument

of the book in the context of dance studies and the political theory from which this book draws.

The second chapter focuses on the work of dance pioneer Isadora Duncan. Isadora Duncan contested the hegemony of ballet as she argued that it did not express her subjective being. In her choreographic intervention Duncan affirmed the independent power of dance as a method of expression. The chapter argues that she legitimated herself as a speaking being and her system of movement as a method of inscription. The chapter focuses on moments of contradiction between Duncan's turbulent association with politics articulated in words and her re-articulation of dance as an independent system of inscription. It investigates the shared spaces she created in her intervention and the tensions they created with her politics as articulated in words.

The third chapter focuses on the work of Martha Graham. Graham responded to Duncan's intervention in modern dance. She had complex relationships with the politics of her time. She created a different system of inscription which created different unique opportunities for shared spaces. Whereas her political goals, articulated in words, claimed that her body can create shared universal spaces, her system of inscription allows for contradictions in her dancers' and spectators' embodied being to be performed. I show one such moment of intervention in which her system of inscription created a subversive moment in performance against the backdrop of the Cold War.

The fourth chapter looks at the communicative power of dance in political circumstances in which some subjects are not allowed to use words. I examine the gumboot dance tradition in South Africa; this arose out of the mining industry, in which the miners were not allowed to converse, and hence they developed a system of movement to communicate messages. The chapter shows how the method of inscription elaborated in gumboot dance created moments for embodied sharing between the miners when the legal and political frameworks of that time did not allow other forms of communication and sharing to occur. I show the contradictions between the subversive potential that gumboot dance entailed for its subjects and instances of the use of the dance to reaffirm the racial and economic inequality that created the conditions in which the dance developed.

The fifth chapter discusses *One Billion Rising*, a global movement founded by Eve Ensler that uses dance to protest against violence against women, to protest against the legal and political marginalisation of survivors of sexual violence, and to create a connection between the impact of violence on women's bodies and their reappropriation of public spaces

through the flash mob. I discuss the tension between the aim to create a universal shared space for subjects to reclaim their bodies and the response of individual bodies, grounded in specific political embodied languages, to that goal.

The sixth and final chapter discusses the relationship between dance and human rights. Throughout the book I show that dance has transcended the geopolitical boundaries agreed upon in verbal language. In this chapter I argue that by affirming universal equality of all speaking subjects, dance can allow us to assert the idea and ethos of the human rights regime. Using two case studies from Palestine and Israel I argue that dance is a way to affirm belonging to the human rights regime from below through embodied methods of inscription. I investigate the dabke, Palestine's national dance, which has created a shared space with a unique system of inscription allowing for shared Palestinian identity as well as singular languages to be articulated in motion. I also investigate an Israeli dance work which allows Palestinian subjects to protest human rights abuse without speaking on their behalf. I argue that the use of dance as a system of inscription in these two case studies allows for human rights claims to be made by subjects in circumstances in which legal-political mechanisms hinder articulation of those claims. I show that dance is a method of claiming human rights locally, through a dialogue between two moving bodies, and at the same time affirming the universal idea underlying the human rights regime, equality in dignity of relationships between subjects.

I then proceed to the book's conclusions, which draw on the sun dance, a dance performed by the Crow people, a Native American tribe. I argue that dance can offer a world-in-becoming; it builds shared worlds where they do not yet exist.

### **A note on method**

The main aim of the book is to highlight injustices and to show ways in which dance has attempted to combat them, either by illuminating the language developed by the dancer against their oppressor in a singular instance or to highlight injustice beyond that instance. This book starts from an honest effort to take more seriously – and to listen to – dancers' embodied voices. It is a quest to reincorporate them into our contemporary political discourse. Therefore, the book draws upon a few methodological standpoints which are intertwined in the argument.

First, the book tries to find instances in which dance goes beyond a delimited, defined audience. It seeks to trace moments in which dance



has also gone beyond its boundaries in the physical sense – beyond the boundaries of the physical space to which it was assigned. At the same time, the process of writing this book is doing exactly that – extending the scope of influence of dance beyond its more traditional areas of discourse. Therefore, whereas I have researched the danced examples discussed in many different sources – live performances, archives, interviews with dancers and choreographers – every danced instant I discuss is supported by a YouTube clip which the reader can easily access. My effort is to elucidate egalitarianism within dance; to do so, I am utilising resources that are doing exactly that.

Second, the case studies of the book vary widely. Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham are two of the most researched women in the history of twentieth-century dance. On the other hand, there is no substantial writing as yet about the One Billion Rising movement. There has been some anthropological research on dabke and gumboot dance, but no specifically political readings of these instances of political dance. Thus the chapters vary in the sources they draw upon. At the same time, I sustain the same chapter structure throughout the book: political dance through words, close readings of the choreographic works and a discussion of their reception. This is not only a methodological but an ethical point. My danced interlocutors occupy an equal position for my conversation, whether they have been subjects of multiple books or whether this is the first discourse to engage their movement.

Third, for the analysis in the book I draw on diverse experiences and dancing voices. My position towards all discourses is that of a spectator who is experiencing the pieces from the outside; at the same time I am bringing to light the dancers' voices themselves, speaking from inside their danced world. I place the reader in the space of the spectator of these diverse performances. The book is always sensitive to the conditions of production and performances of various dances, and, indeed, dwells upon some moments of cultural appropriation and silencing of voices by hegemonic discourses. Thus I invite the reader to view the performances I discuss in multiple theatres, to which they are invited through the argument.

Fourth, I use the concepts of performer and dancer throughout the book when analysing dance. This does not imply reducing dance to theatrical dance. I use these concepts to draw attention to the dialogical nature of dance, which is always relational, always aimed towards an Other.

The book's argument spills from the singular dancing body towards the shared space it creates in its method of inscription. In order to elucidate this process many sources and points of view are discussed: dancers,

spectators, politicians, policy makers, theorists and philosophers. The book uses reviews, interviews, theoretical works, commentaries and close readings of choreography. I aid the reader in shifting points of view and experiencing the manifold perspectives that constitute dance as a world.

Lastly, this book is a feminist text, whether it explicitly problematises questions of gender (as in Chapters 2, 3 and 5) or not. The book starts from the quest to redeem danced voices considered unequal and outside the public sphere; and from the awareness that those voices were quite often mobilised by women. The Cartesian mind/body divide which sees the female body as the 'other' of male rationality is constantly being questioned and unsettled throughout the argument. Bringing women's bodies onto centre stage – as equal interlocutors to male politicians and theorists – is not only a methodological act but a normative choice.

At the same time, the book starts from the awareness that there is a myriad of deep cleavages and divides to be overcome when writing about – and acting for – social justice in the name of equality. Gumboot dancers exploited by white bosses in South Africa; Palestinian dabke dancers undergoing daily human rights abuses at Israeli checkpoints; all these examples (which are more exemplars than examples) are inextricably linked to the feminist ethos of listening to voices deemed marginal. I illuminate phenomenological worlds of subjects seen as unequal, worlds that would not intersect, coincide or touch those who see them as inferior;<sup>1</sup> however, I show that those worlds can come into an embodied unique dialogue through the power of dance. Demarcations placed in words are transcended when two worlds clash and new communities are founded. Those communities are founded in multifarious interpretations of the power that dance gives human beings, wherever they are and whenever they dance – the multitude of moments of passion and commitment, dedication and, more than anything, life in movement.

## Note

- 1 I draw my ontology and epistemology directly from Eleanor Marx's 'The Woman Question from a Socialist Point of View' (1886) in which she writes: 'the life of woman does not coincide with that of man. Their lives do not intersect; in many cases do not even touch. Hence the life of the race is stunted.' In my methodology I examine many other worlds that, following Marx's intervention, still do not intersect and do not touch and leave our race stunted more than a hundred years since the publication of this foundational text. My reading is indebted in full to Rachel Holmes's radical rereading and re-examination of Marx's work and its significance for the twenty-first century (Holmes 2014).