"Dancing Alone Together"[1]

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My experience of this pandemic began with bureaucracy. I want it to end with dancing.

On Friday, 13 March 2020, I presented, as Graduate Program Chair, the final draft of a proposal for a new Ph.D. to my colleagues in Simon Fraser University's School for the Contemporary Arts (SCA). Ours is an interdisciplinary art school in Vancouver, Canada: at the undergraduate level, theatre and performance are taught alongside dance, film, music and sound, production and design, visual art, and art, performance, and cinema studies. We also offer an interdisciplinary M.F.A. and an M.A. in comparative media arts. A Ph.D. that offers students the flexibility of choosing a scholarly or practice-based option has been a long-term goal. I don't remember much of the conversation about the proposal, other than that it was positive. What I do remember is that my colleagues and I were gathered in our school's 350-seat cinema rather than our normal fourth-floor meeting room in order to adhere to the recommended guidelines for social distancing. Following the meeting, at which the Ph.D. proposal was officially endorsed, several of us repaired to a favorite local bar, where we sat shoulder to shoulder. At a certain point, our phones pinged and buzzed in unison: a directive from the university's senior administration informing us that beginning Monday all teaching was moving online.

The next day, Saturday, 14 March, my partner and I went out to dinner in Chinatown, and then to a performance at nearby Left of Main, an artist-run creation and performance space that has been an important incubator for several of the independent Vancouver dance artists and companies I write about in my most recent book, at that point due for release in May. On this particular evening, however, we were attending a multimedia performance conceived by music and sound artists Robyn Jacob and Nancy Tam, the latter an SCA alumna. *Double Happiness: Detour This Way* weaves together original songs and video vignettes to tell the story of two families' separate but parallel journeys from Southern China through Hong Kong and finally to Vancouver. (The work's title pays homage to Hong Kong–born and Vancouver-based filmmaker Mina Shum's 1994 debut film, which famously launched the career of Sandra Oh.) It was the third evening of what was supposed to be a two-week run, and the material felt especially urgent given the pillorying of China in much Western media and political discourse and the consequent rise in anti-Asian violence, including in Vancouver. Little did I know that *Double Happiness* would be the last live, ticketed performance I would see as of this writing. On Sunday, 15 March, the province of British Columbia, like much of the rest of the world, went into lockdown.

More than a year later, I am still awaiting final approval of the Ph.D., and for theatres and other live art spaces in the city to reopen. Both are beholden to formal

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government sanction, which I'm currently wagering will not happen before I receive my first shot of the vaccine. In other words, anyone's guess.[2] I say this not to impugn the public officials in charge of both decisions, merely to point out how closely intertwined are my roles as administrator, teacher, researcher, and spectator with Vancouver's performance ecology. While one consequence of the pivot to the digital streaming of live and previously recorded performance content in the wake of COVID-19 has been to make physically distant global stages virtually accessible to quarantined local audiences, the corollary is that, amid all of the options for viewing, that which is most proximate can get lost.

This is one way in which I define my "professional" performance of social distance over the past year: worrying from afar about what is closest to me.

Much of that worry has manifested around money. Not my own, to be clear. Fortunately, I'm still getting paid. Finding extra pockets of funding for graduate students in our school is what has preoccupied me most during the past year: in order to give completing students, already displaying incredible ingenuity and resourcefulness in adapting their projects (e.g., a dance piece that becomes a work of mail art), one less thing to worry about; and in order to compensate incoming international students who, beginning their studies remotely, were unable to take up a promised TA- or RA-ship. In addition to now knowing more about Canadian immigration policy than I ever thought possible, COVID has also made me an expert in my university's financial accounting systems.

Of course, the flip side to this is that the pandemic has only exacerbated the neoliberal march of the university, with departments and individual instructors tasked with delivering the same educational product without a concomitant boost in our budgets. And over Zoom, no less. In SCA, we apparently did the job so well that we have now become the poster child for the rest of the university in managing a partial return to face-to-face teaching. Access to our safety plans has been requested by other units. We have been written up in *SFU News*.[3] Both the President and the Vice-President Academic have toured some of our hybrid in-person and remote studio classes. But neither asked what time it was in Tehran. Or offered to pay for a boom operator.

Again, the local/global dimensions—and discontinuities—surrounding these issues are what interest me, and in ways that likewise point to the complexly imbricated layers of my professional and performance publics. As a department, we made a decision last summer to divert funds we would have normally spent on the travel and accommodations of visiting artists working with our students into a cross-disciplinary speakers' series that ended up featuring an incredible roster of international artists and scholars, including Pablo José Ramírez, Bill T. Jones, Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born, Jeremy Deller, Tanya Lukin Linklater, Bertie Ferdman, Dylan Robinson, Crystal Pite, and Suzanne Kite. Streamed over Zoom and recorded and posted for posterity to our password-protected Vimeo account, this series was a unique opportunity for our extended community to listen to and learn from folks whom we otherwise would have been hard-pressed to book, let along offer a decent honorarium.

Contrast this with a request I received from Justine A. Chambers, a Vancouver-based dance artist and choreographer who had agreed to serve as External Examiner on an M.F.A. thesis from our school that was defended last

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summer. Justine asked if payment of her own (very modest) honorarium for this service could be delayed until later in the fall—because otherwise it would make her ineligible to continue receiving the Canada Emergency Response Benefit that she was forced to apply for in the wake of a year's worth of work disappearing in an instant.

Justine is one of the featured artists in *My Vancouver Dance History: Story, Movement, Community*,[4] which did eventually get released in August 2020. The book is a situated and inherently partial performance ethnography of my collaborations with nine different dance artists and companies in the city: from serving as an outside eye on or public interlocutor for their work, to dancing in their work, to having them set work on me or to plays that I have written, to cocreating work with them. By avowing the personal and expressly social connection I have with these artists and their material, some readers will argue that I forfeit the requisite degree of critical distance, which in turn impedes full analytical engagement with the work. I disagree. Given my close collaborations with these artists, it would have been disingenuous of me to claim to be writing from a position that is somehow above the work, rather than beside (and sometimes very much inside) it.

But now this particular bubble has been fragmented and dispersed and is accessible only digitally or via the occasional park hang. Written in the spirit of love for a local performance community, my book has arrived at a moment in global history where it is SO DIFFICULT to express the full measure of that love: either for me, as a spectator, attending a live dance performance; or for the dance artists I document, who have been unable, for the most part, to practice what they love to do—which is also their primary means of livelihood. It is no overstatement to say that COVID-19 has rendered much of the book actual history.

What, then, should be the archive of the terrible year that has passed? Refunded tickets and extra tax receipts? A ghost light above an empty stage? Screenshots of classes and meetings and virtual cocktail parties and famous actresses in their bathrobes? Homemade masks and hand sanitizer and clipped recipes and takeout containers and empty wine bottles?

> Phrases like "You're muted" and "I can't breathe."
> A virus and not enough ventilators. The weather and white supremacy.
> Nothing about him, though. Nor his Twitter feed.

Coincidentally, two of the artists I write about in my book engage in their practices with the quantum physics concept of nonlocal entanglement: that by observing one particle or object in one place, another particle or object—even one light-years away—will be affected and change its properties. Vanessa Goodman references this idea in the name of her company, Action at a Distance; and Lesley Telford explores its kinetic possibilities in her piece *Spooky Action*.

Surely that's what this last year has taught us. The ways in which we happen *to* each other. Together apart.

I still think "social distance" should more properly be the name of a punk band (debut album: *Quarantine*; first single: "Expectoration Blues"; sample lyric: "Can't spit / Can't do shit / Got the expectoration blues . . ."). However, reclaimed from its application in sociological discourse to refer to the boundaries between different

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social groups, and transformed instead into an act, a practice, a *technique* of collective care, the term for me charges the space we have had to place between our bodies with a compensatory energy, a sense of affective attachment—call it a shared feeling of obligation, of mutual indebtedness, of being beholden to one another. In the absence of actual touch, I hold on to this distal point of connection.

It was in this spirit that I, desperately in need of some kind of mental and physical direction at the start of this new year, reached out once again to my dance-world friends. I asked them to consider sending me a series of movement scores that might help orient me otherwise, that, following the work of Sara Ahmed and Ashon T. Crawley,[5] might push me to explore pathways and possibilities not already prescribed by or subsumed within the phenomenology of my whiteness and my maleness.

As expected, the response was immediate and overwhelmingly generous, including from Lee Su-Feh, a dancer, choreographer, and certified Fitzmaurice instructor who teaches movement and voice for actors in our school. Su-Feh was just about to publish a suite of "Scores for Dancing across Distances," the culmination of a three-year residency with Dancemakers Creation Centre in Toronto that, as a result of COVID-19, had to move online. Su-Feh shared her scores with me and, from a distance, I close by sharing an excerpt from one of them with you:

> Start with your body.
> Follow openings.
>
> "Openings" are pleasure, curiosity, or desire.
> Follow openings.
>
> Yield to or soften around obstacles.
>
> "Obstacles" are pain, boredom, or resistance.
> Yield around obstacles.
>
> To yield is neither to push into nor to pull away,
>
> But to soften around the obstacle
> The way your palm might soften around a cactus
> In order not to be hurt by the spines.
> Yield so that the obstacle is not ignored,
> But is acknowledged, held with care.
>
> Observe the consequences of each action.[6]

Endnotes

1 I am beholden for my title to Vancouver dancer and choreographer James Gnam, who coined the phrase in relation to the dance piece *Digital Folk* (2016–19), a work collectively created with his company plastic orchid factory, and which now feels eerily prescient.

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2 I was right about this timeline. I received my first dose of the Pfizer vaccine on 11 May 2021. Our Ph.D. was formally approved by British Columbia's Minister of Advanced Education on 21 May 2021. As part of the second phase of BC's "Restart" plan to ease COVID-related restrictions, live theatres in the province were permitted to reopen with limited capacity as of 15 June 2021.
3 Mark Bachman, "In-person Instruction: Some Classes Have Already Returned," *SFU News*, 24 March 2021, www.sfu.ca/sfunews/stories/2021/03/in-person-instruction--some-classes-have-already-returned.html, accessed 14 April 2021.
4 Peter Dickinson, *My Vancouver Dance History: Story, Movement, Community* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020).
5 See Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8.2 (2007): 149–68; and Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017). Victoria Fortuna examines how dance and choreography can offer alternatives to the disciplining of movement patterns and bodily comportment in contexts marked by political violence in her excellent *Moving Otherwise: Dance, Violence, and Memory in Buenos Aires* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
6 Lee Su-Feh, "Openings and Obstacles," *The Capilano Review* 3.43 (2021): 12.

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Grace Is a Practice

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There was certainly much about the hurried switch from in-person to online teaching and learning in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic that inspired angst. The decisions that many colleges and universities made to halt on-campus activities and deconcentrate their communities left scores of us scrambling to pack up some of the things we hoped would help us withstand a few weeks away from our offices and classrooms. When I think back on those frenzied days, I often chuckle at how naive I was about the extent to which the pandemic would radically upend our lives, forcing us to rethink every aspect of our ways of being in the world. I was in the middle of leading a discussion on *The Tempest* in my dramaturgy course when the official word came down from university administrators that all classes would move online and most students would have to vacate their residence halls. A palpable feeling of dread quickly swept over the stuffy classroom. Students began to weep and to wonder out loud what the news would mean for, say, their senior thesis projects or the department's futuristic mounting of *The Tempest*, which would have to shutter before its second weekend of scheduled performances. I tried my best to remain optimistic, even as I too began to question what the

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