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## Volume 25, Issue 5 - On Diffraction

### Dancing Diffraction: many bodies make light work in Sasha Milavic Davies and Lucy Railton's *everything that rises must dance* (2018)

#### Abstract

*everything that rises must dance* (2018) is a dance performance produced by Complicite, premiered as part of Dance Umbrella Festival and created by choreographer Sasha Milavic Davies, composer Lucy Railton, dance artists Antigone Avdi, Makiko Aoyama, Amanda Dufour, Valentina Formenti, Jennifer Irons, Camilla Isola, Ciara Lynch, Gabrielle Nimo, Claudia Palazzo and Inês Pinheiro and 200 volunteer performers. This article focuses on the collaborative choreographic processes used with the volunteer community cast of 200 women residents of London, as a way to think through the term diffraction as employed in the works of feminist theorists Karen Barad and Kathrin Thiele. Barad (2014:168) reminds us that 'Diffraction owes as much to a thick legacy of feminist theorizing about difference as it does to physics'. She argues that diffraction is a material-discursive practice that can be employed to trouble dichotomies, explaining that 'Diffraction is not a set pattern, but rather an iterative (re)configuring of patterns of differentiating-entangling' (ibid). With *everything that rises must dance* (2018), Sasha Milavic Davies and Lucy Railton aimed to produce a response to the city of London, a 'living archive of female movement'. This article examines the ways in which the volunteer performers involved in the project engaged in an iterative process of observation, embodiment and (re)configuring of patterns to create a complex dialogue between their bodies and performance site. I argue that the concept of diffraction allows for a critical reflection on how the choreographic strategies employed in *everything that rises must dance* might open up radical ways of being together, bringing our attention to others experiences, and of asking us to think about the dominant discourses that currently exist around how we share urban spaces and to invite us to think about ways to question, challenge or resist these.

## Diffraction as a choreographic strategy

Addressing the nature of feminist solidarity, writer Lola Olufemi (2020:136) reminds us that:

‘Solidarity has multiple dimensions: the symbolic, the practical, and the aesthetic. Symbolically, it is represented in the protest image or the song or the poem or the speaker that tries to direct energy and attention away from themselves and onto someone or something else. Practically, it means sharing strategies – seeing how tactics that were successful in one context, might work in another. Aesthetically, the beauty that arises from instances of solidarity evokes emotive responses that make us feel like it is possible to change the world as we know it’.

This article explores Sasha Milavic Davies and Lucy Railton’s *everything that rises must dance*, produced by Complicite and premiered as part of the Dance Umbrella Festival (2018), and the collaborative choreographic process used with a volunteer community cast of 200 residents of London, as a way to think through the term diffraction as employed in the works of feminist theorists Karen Barad and Kathrin Thiele. The concept of diffraction allows for an important opening out of a discussion about how collaborative performance practices might offer radical ways of communities being together and sharing spaces. In the current international socio-political landscape, Kathrin Thiele’s (2014: 202) thinking around ‘how to live a world of difference(s), a world in/as ongoing differentiation, in such ways that the outcome is not ever more separation and antagonism, exclusion and the fear of others, but so that new senses of commonality are envisioned?’ comes into acute focus. London, cities in the UK, and cities around the world are becoming increasingly diverse. Our urban experience and its inclusion of ethnically and socio-economically heterogeneous communities could provide increased opportunities for discourse and inter-cultural dialogues, resulting in progressively nuanced understandings of others’ experiences. In actuality, though, we are seeing a rise in conflict rather than consensus, and Schreiber and Alexander (2016: 123) remind us that ‘socioeconomic polarization and spatial segregation have become prevailing trends in cities worldwide, with adverse impacts on quality of life’. At a time when we are seeing the hardening of borders in Europe, the US and in many other parts of the world, the rise

of the far-right, rising incidents of xenophobia, spurred on by a political and populist backlash against migration, how might collaborative performance practices reject acts of separation and antagonism and offer a new sense of commonality and / or as Olufemi asks make us feel like it is possible to change the world as we know it? Put simply, how might collaborative performance practices offer us radical ways of being together? In a world where it could be argued that language on its own is failing to help us to negotiate our shared use of space, leading to fragmentation, disconnect, exclusion, and even violence, what are some potential strategies for new senses of commonality? What might dance, a form that Akram Khan in conversation with Royona Mitra (2015) described as being a form that can connect people 'at a level beyond oral language', be able to offer as a way to invite people to come together to envisage new ways of being together and new understandings of commonality?

Barad (2014:168) reminds us that 'Diffraction owes as much to a thick legacy of feminist theorizing about difference as it does to physics'. She argues that diffraction is a material-discursive practice that can be employed to trouble dichotomies, explaining that:

Diffraction is not a set pattern, but rather an iterative (re)configuring of patterns of differentiating-entangling. As such there is no moving beyond, no leaving the 'old' behind. There is no absolute boundary between here-now and there-then. There is nothing that is new; there is nothing that is not new. Matter itself is diffracted, dispersed, threaded through with materializing and sedimented effects of iterative reconfigurings of spacetime-mattering, traces of what yet (have) happen(ed).

(Barad, 2014: 168)

With *everything that rises must dance* (2018), Sasha Milavic Davies and Lucy Railton aimed to produce a response to the city of London, a 'living archive of female movement':

We wanted to create a living archive of contemporary female movement and to celebrate its history and future. It's a political gesture, an anthropological

exercise and an attempt to locate the individual within the collective. When 200 women occupy a space we begin to ask - how do the gestures we make express our identity? Is movement - non-verbal communication - a hidden code to understand a culture, a society, our ancestry or our future? Quite apart from the larger political themes, the piece is a joyous communion, the creation of a new ritual.

(Milavic Davies and Railton, 2018)

Milavic Davies developed a choreographic process that was not trapped in traditional or hierarchical structures, whereby the performers exist in subordination to the choreographer who teaches them movement material, as if the creation of movement material could not happen in the absence of the choreographer. Instead, a process was developed that inverts this relationship and a collaborative process was employed that could be better understood through the application of the metaphor of diffraction. The 212 female-identifying performers involved in the project engaged in an iterative process of observation, embodiment and (re)configuring of patterns to create a complex dialogue between bodies and performance site.

Produced by Complicité and performed as part of Dance Umbrella Festival, *everything that rises must dance* was first created in London in 2018. It was co-created by choreographer Sasha Milavic Davies, composer Lucy Railton, dance artists Antigone Avdi, Makiko Aoyama, Amanda Dufour, Valentina Formenti, Jennifer Irons, Camilla Isola, Ciara Lynch, Gabrielle Nimo, Claudia Palazzo and Inês Pinheiro, and 200 performers, all of whom were female-identifying volunteers living in London at the time of the project. The 200 volunteer performers were invited to take part in a series of movement workshops exploring different styles of movement that ran alongside the work towards the performance, and that were delivered by the dance captains. The 200 volunteer performers did not receive a performance fee for the project, which does bring up range of concerns and is problematic, as discussed at length by scholars including Claire Bishop and Jen Harvie, adding a further layer of political and economic issues as part of the unfolding diffractions. Following a collaborative choreographic process, the piece was performed by the 200 volunteer performers in three different public spaces in London - Greenwich Peninsula,

Boxpark Croydon and finally at Somerset House, all of which are sites within areas of inner London (the most urbanized area in the UK), that are home to dense and diverse populations, and all of which have recently been substantially redeveloped with new homes, offices and businesses. All of the sites sit within areas of London in which housing and space are an issue, as the areas become increasingly expensive areas in which to live.

The 200 performers worked with the choreographer, the composer and the dance artists across two weeks of rehearsals in preparation for the live performances. Each of the ten dance artists working as dance captains on the project worked both with the whole group and with a smaller group of approximately twenty performers in order to rehearse and structure the movement material. Amanda Dafour (2019), one of the dance captains for the project explains that 'the volunteer performers were asked to prepare by observing people in their daily life and choosing 8 gestures they saw that were interesting to them'. Each of the 200 volunteer performers were asked to first observe other women in London, at home, at work, or at play, and then to select and embody eight gestures/movements performed by these women. Each performer threaded this string of gestures together and created a movement phrase that they then shared with the rest of the group. Working with methodical and mathematical choreographic structures to create movement scores, the choreographer, the team of dance artists and the performers then created a 45-minute performance made up of these observed and collected gestures. Dance captain Antigone Avdi (2019) explains that all of the collected gestures were configured and re-configured in several different movement sequences in preparation for the final performance; 'during the first week, the participants were asked to work on their own movement material copied from other women going about their everyday life, so keen observation skills were called for - later this was formed into a movement sequence which had to be memorised in all its mutations and variations'.

In performance, the women were asked to wear their favourite most expressive outfit and these (re)configured movement phrases inspired by the women of London moved between being performed in solo, duet and ensemble unison. At points, all of the women danced their individual movement phrases at the same time, at others,

they all danced the same gestures in unison. There were moments of call and response, sections when some of the performers sat and watched while others danced their solos and there were also moments of stillness before a ripple of gestures moved from one end of the group to the other. There was a huge variation in the gestures that were performed. Some of the gestures hinted at a private space, a small twitch, a nervous look over the shoulder, a quick inspection or pinch of the arm, a dusting off of a t-shirt, the picking up of a child, while others appeared to be collected from public spaces, expansive gesticulation, the smoking and stubbing out of a cigarette whilst waving, or looking up from a laptop to greet a friend. These more pedestrian gestures were punctured with a few moments of social, popular or folk dance (I recognised a few movements that appeared to originate from contemporary, breakdance, kathak, house or salsa dance styles). Throughout the performance, the performers moved between performing their own distinct movement phrases on their own, and moving in unison with small groups of women or the whole group. This composition of the movement material meant that in performance, the 1600 observed gestures entwined, overlapped and co-existed in performance. It was not possible to pick out one performer's collected gestures. The same one gesture was performed in several different sequences at several different times and each performer performed it in slightly different ways. The unison was never tight. Difference and differentiation were foregrounded and allowed to flourish as approximately 200 individuals moved in close proximity to one another presenting us with their own and, at the same time, several different women's physical lives in London. The 'iterative reconfigurings' (Barad, 2014: 168) of these 1600 gestures embodied by 200 women, who move in and out of unison, underscored the polyphonic nature of the performance site - the streets of London.

### **A diffractive reading of female gesture**

The choreographic and performance processes used in this project give prominence to multiple bodies, multiple voices, multiple movements through the same city. The participants were asked to communicate their own experience of the city through the observation of other women's actions. The audience are then presented with movement taken from 1600 different women across the city of London. These 1600 different gestures are then 'diffracted, dispersed, threaded through' (Barad,

2014:168) the two-week creation and rehearsal period and the final performance material is made up of these 'iterative reconfigurings' (ibid). And so in line with Barad's (2014) understanding of diffraction *everything that rises must dance* (2018) offers 'an iterative (re)configuring of patterns', and there is no absolute boundary between the gestures performed by these performers and the gestures performed by the women of London; there are no new gestures and no gestures that are not new. The gestures themselves are 'diffracted, dispersed, threaded through' the performance and the performance is performed on the streets of London where these gestures have been performed multiple times before and will be performed multiple times in the future. Therefore, the performance holds traces of the city's past, present and future gestures.

So how might this collaborative performance practice open up new senses of commonality? In her article 'The commons: Infrastructures for troubling times', Lauren Berlant (2016:395) reminds us that 'just because we are in the room together does not mean that we belong to the room or each other: belonging is a specific genre of affect, history, and political mediation that cannot be presumed and is, indeed, a relation whose evidence and terms are always being contested'. I would argue that *everything that rises must dance* is a site-responsive participatory dance performance that, through employing a choreographic framework of diffraction, is able to bring our attention to different and perhaps multiple experiences of the same city spaces, and in doing so resists simplistic or dominant understandings of belonging, citizenship and place and presents new possibilities of being in common. It is the inclusion of collaborative processes and polyphonic practices, such as movement originating from multiple bodies resulting in multi-authored work, which can be understood as processes of diffraction, that might mean that works such as *everything that rises must dance* are well-positioned to challenge current dominant discourses around place, belonging, ownership and citizenship, and instead bring our attention to the plurality of contemporary urban experience. *everything that rises must dance* is an example of a performance project that, from its inception, focused on the inclusion and presentation of multiple voices and bodies. The inclusion of movement collected by 200 women from a further 1600 women has the potential to de-privilege any one perspective in the project. Milavic Davies (2018) explains that her decision to have each performer collect and share their own eight movements



collected from their observation of women living in London was an attempt to offer every performer *'a chance to express their individual instincts and to share that expression with a community'*. Milavic Davies (2018) explains that a major impetus for creating *everything that rises must dance* as a large-scale work with 200 dancing bodies was her interest in exploring what she describes as the *'dichotomy between individuality and the collective'*. She explains that, as a half-British half-Yugoslav woman living in London, she wanted the work to address the following question: *'How do you square your personal, deeply rich and varied identity with a general, all-encompassing, tick-box categorisation and stereotyping? Especially when your identity is in the minority, especially when it's a voice no one has really paid much attention to'* (Milavic Davies, 2018). She goes on to illustrate her own political intentions for the piece, by explaining that, for her, the visceral experience of seeing 200 different bodies moving next to each other, performing a series of collected every day movements, has the potential to provide the audience with a space to question *'the role of society, the image of [themselves] within it and its power'*. In line with Barad's understanding that diffraction is a concept that can be employed to trouble dichotomies, Milavic Davies hoped that this choreographic approach would address and trouble the dichotomy between individuality and the collective, leading audiences to question what opportunities they have to engage with people's varied and nuanced exploration and expression of their experiences and observations of the city, as opposed to being presented with narrow or stereotyped narratives of their fellow residents and communities of London. This project brought 200 women together to share observations, experiences and skills and to co-create a piece of live performance that foregrounded and celebrated that collaborative and diffractive process. To return to Theile's (2014:202) call to find ways *'to live a world of difference(s)'* while avoiding creating further *'separation and antagonism'*, Milavic Davies, by working with diffraction as a choreographic practice here and inviting each participant to collect their movement through their observations of other women, to share these observations with the other performers and to then weave all of these movements together into several choreographic iterations, created a process that rejects separation and antagonism while encouraging collaboration and co-creation.

I would argue that diffraction is a device that can be employed here to trouble ideas of commonality and belonging. In *everything that rises must dance* we are able to view multiple bodies, multiple gestures, multiple perspectives in dialogue with each other. The polyphonic and collaborative choreographic strategies used presents a dialogue between the 200 performers, the performance site and the audience. The iterative patterns of gestures were 'entangled' (Barad, 2007: ix) and there was no absolute boundary between the 'here-now and there-then' (ibid). Barad's concept of entanglement sees binaries become displaced as she explains,

'To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating'.

(Barad, 2007: ix)

In line with this notion of entanglement, in *everything that rises must dance* the performers' individual observations of the gestures performed by the women of London during their every day lives, the performance of these gestures choreographed and re-choreographed into multiple individual and group unison movement phrases, the process by which the performers met and shared the gestures with each other, and the streets of London that they are performed on are all entangled together. They diffract through each other to produce different material-discursive performativities. A process that began as a choreographer and musician's desire to produce a living archive of contemporary female movement, through the process of diffraction, allowed a site-responsive performance revealing traces of the city's past, present and future female everyday gestures to emerge. *everything that rises must dance* is not a finished piece of work that can be replicated, but a performance that is made and re-made during its performance and every time it is performed by new bodies or in a new site.

By presenting these entangled gestures, a space opens up to think about the individual and collective relationship to the site and a space to think about the politics of the site. At the time of the performances in 2018 in London (the performance site), following the 2016 EU Referendum vote, political discourse was dominated by

discussions of borders, freedom of movement and immigration. In 2018, residents of the city of London and the UK were (and still are) facing a 'hostile environment', with a dominant narrative that focused on the need to harden borders and to use deportation to reduce the number of non-British citizens living in the UK. During this time, it was possible to see a simplistic narrative being reiterated by mainstream British media and the Conservative government. This dominant and simplistic narrative was that the streets of London and the UK were dangerously full, that the UK government must focus on significantly reducing the number of migrants to the UK in order to improve the economy, the employment opportunities and housing conditions for current UK citizens (Conservative Party, 2017). The Conservative government repeatedly pledged to cut net migration to the tens of thousands in the UK during this time. In 2017, during her election campaign in London, the then leader of the Conservative government Theresa May stated:

I think that it is important that we do say and continue to say that we do want to bring migration to sustainable levels. We believe that is the tens of thousands...Once we leave the EU, we will of course have the opportunity to ensure we have control of our borders. We will be able to establish our rules for people coming from the EU. That is a part of the picture we have not been able to control before.

BBC News (2017)

Performance scholars Claire Bishop, Jen Harvie, Baz Kershaw, Shannon Jackson and others have long argued the value of performance analysis that focuses on the ways in which performance is inseparable from the political, social and historical conditions in which it is made and shared. As Harvie (2013: 16) argues, 'cultural practices such as art and performance do not exist in some kind of material and historical vacuum, hovering in an idealized realm outside of time, political signification, social relations and material processes and conditions'. Barad's notions of diffraction and entanglement helps us to think about the ways in which the performance processes developed in *everything that rises must dance* are entangled with the political, social conditions of the performance site. Barad (2007; 2012) uses the neologism ethico-onto-epistemology to assert the inseparability of ontology, epistemology and ethics. In line with her thinking around entanglement, as we intra-

act with the world we cannot but ethically engage with that world. Central to Barad's thinking around ethico-onto-epistemology is acknowledging and taking responsibility for the fact that practices/ the way we engage with the world matters. The world is materialized through our intra-actions. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the performance practices that artists develop matter. Ethical considerations around the social and political potential of projects cannot be avoided. In line with Harvie's (2013:16) exploration of performance projects, I am interested in the ways in which *everything that rises must dance* may be able to 'offer challenges to hegemonic ideologies'. The choice to present this project as a site-responsive dance work across different, highly populated public sites in London could be read as an attempt to unsettle dominant discourses about the site- the streets of London. As site-specific performance scholars Gay McAuley, Fiona Wilkie, Victoria Hunter, Mike Pearson and others have detailed, site-specific performances in public spaces have the potential to disrupt the ways in which audiences engage with these sites and might invite questions surrounding the politics of the site. For McAuley (2006: 151), site-based performances enhance the audience's ability to engage with the social and political aspects of the performance site, 'changing the way people perceive places'. Milavic Davies and Railton (2018) describe *everything that rises must dance* as a 'political gesture' in the promotional material for the work, and while they do not go on to specify what that political gesture is, to return to Olufemi's (2020:136) exploration of the symbolic and aesthetic dimensions of feminist solidarity, perhaps this is an attempt to move in solidarity with women who currently call London their home, perhaps this is their protest dance. Maybe these women, British and Non-British citizens, from varying racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, dancing together on the streets of London entangled with the city's past, present and future gestures are moving in solidarity with each other, the women who came before them and the women yet to arrive, offering a moment of disruption or resistance to the Conservative Party's active policy and rhetoric that the UK needs to tighten its borders. Perhaps this performance might provide a moment for the participants and the audience to 'feel like it is possible to change the world as we know it' (ibid). Harvie (2013:10) reminds us that within the context of participatory performance practice 'participation is not intrinsically politically progressive', however I would argue that *everything that rises must dance* with its entangled gestures allows for critical reflection on the dominant discourses that currently exist around how we

share urban spaces and the project invites us to think about ways to question, challenge or resist these. If diffraction as a concept allows us to move beyond dialectics and binaries and can be employed to trouble dichotomies, to unsettle, de-privilege or challenge dominant discourses, then is it possible that in the political climate in the UK in 2018, which had contributed to rising incidents of racism and xenophobia, that this performance project by foregrounding the multiple experiences of the same place and bringing an audience's attention to the multiple, complex identities of 200 residents of London, might disrupt or challenge the simplistic dominant narrative being presented by the mainstream media and the Conservative government? Is it possible that this dance project by bringing 200 bodies into dialogue with each other and into dialogue with the streets of the city of London as the performance site might be able to provide a space in which to question the simplistic narrative that Britain was at risk from immigration and needed to harden and take back control of its borders? Can dance work that seeks to present complex and nuanced explorations of place, identity or belonging unsettle simplistic narratives of Britain's relationship with immigration?

For Barad (2016), 'Quantum Physics opens up radical spaces for exploring the possibilities for change inside hegemonic systems of domination'. Perhaps, what her work on diffraction can offer performance practitioners and scholars is the exploration of performance practices that invite individuals together to create through processes of diffraction, to create intra-active choreographies or intra-active stories and ways of working that might open up radical spaces for exploring radical ways of being together, radical ways that performances might challenge hegemonic systems of domination. The concept of diffraction allows for a critical reflection on how the choreographic strategies employed in *everything that rises must dance* might open up radical ways of being together, bringing our attention to others experiences, and of asking us to think about the dominant discourses that currently exist around how we share urban spaces and to invite us to think about ways to question, challenge or resist these. Of course, this article would be made richer by the inclusion of empirical audience research that collected responses from those who booked tickets or passed by these performances. While this is the next planned stage in my research, in the absence of these, I will end with my own reactions to the performances. Even though obvious it feels important to highlight that this is just one personal response

(and that of a performance scholar with particular interests) and I am in no way claiming that the way I experienced or made sense of this performance is the same or even similar to the way other audience members experienced or made sense of it. As an immigrant living in the UK watching the performances of *everything that rises must dance*, I saw complex entangled movement between multiple bodies and the performance sites and this acted as a reminder that just because these 200 women were dancing on the streets of London together did not mean that they belong to London or to each other, but it did mean that London was made by them. The layering of the multiple lived experiences of the city acted as a reminder to me that there is no one way to belong to London, but that London is constantly being made and re-made by the people in it and how we engage with each other. I would argue that that dance works such as *everything that rises must dance* that bring multiple bodies into dialogue with urban spaces have the potential to challenge simplistic understandings of place and belonging and to unsettle the idea that places belong to certain groups of people and not to others.

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