

Peer Review Article

# Dancing Otherwise:

## New Assemblages for Pluriversal Practices

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### Abstract

This writing articulates praxis-led approaches arising from the co-authors' research network Dancing Otherwise: Exploring Pluriversal Practices, funded by the United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) from October 2023 to March 2025. It presents commentary on embodied modalities of reflexive enquiry employed by the network, which aimed to examine the structures and frameworks around which dance research is organised in the UK. This article explores how the research presents innovation in praxis within dance

studies and dance research, and contributes to an emerging inter- and transdisciplinary field of awareness-based approaches to systemic transformation.

## Keywords

dance, pluriverse, embodied relationality, horizontality, dance ecology, being otherwise

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## Opening: An Invitation to Move

It is November 2024, and nearly twenty people have gathered in Bath's city centre, in a spacious room at the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution. The event is part of a series of outreach activities programmed by the UK's Being Human festival, which celebrates humanities research through public engagement initiatives. Participants are mainly locals, including older adults, students, and a parent-and-daughter pair. They have responded to the Dancing Otherwise Network team's invitation to explore the "pluriverse" through movement, bringing a mix of dance experience and new curiosity. Guided by verbal directions, participants choose a place in the room to settle and attune to the invitation to arrive:

Allow your arrival to unfold into a gentle walk through the space. As you move silently past each other, notice how your pathway might shift and respond to the patterns created by others around you. You might find yourself caught up in the slipstream of someone ahead of you, or accelerate or decelerate to avoid a collision. Experiment with shifting your attention between consciously watching others and then sensing the experience of being watched. Can you toggle back and forth from one attentive state to the other? Can you simultaneously be watching and being watched? Allow your awareness to encompass your own experience, whilst also observing the experience of others. As we progress, see if you can build a common kinetic sensing, which allows the singular to become plural. (Michelle Elliott, Dancing Otherwise Network team, personal communication, November 2024)

As the subsequent instructions unfold, the group moves to make sense of the verbal directives by establishing new relationships between bodies, space, and environment. Everyone is invited to gather first in a circle, then stretch into a line, then divide into two, always in silence, so that the sensing of sight, sound,

and movement awakens with sharp clarity. The early, more straightforward, commands offer a sense of safety, which settles the nerves some participants experience upon agreeing to take part in the movement task. As the requests grow more intricate—a zigzag, a map, three distinct groups—individual pauses and hesitations are gathered up, absorbed, and woven into the collective gesture. Uncertainty feeds exploration and often results in unexpected configurations. A sense of complicity emerges, as it becomes clear that everyone’s skills and intuitions have a part to play. The task reveals that there are many ways to respond to the verbal cues, and that any one configuration the participants may adopt in the space is but one of several possible visualisations of the directives. The challenge of moving the whole group through the space while staying in close contact soon dissolves into laughter. Relationships emerge from the movement of bodies and, in doing so, constantly produce and materialise sets of possibilities. Choreography and moving together provide a space where a vital collective intelligence is exposed.

## Introduction

This article shares insights from the AHRC-funded network project *Dancing Otherwise: Exploring Pluriversal Practices* (October 2023 to March 2025), led by the authors—three dance researchers from Bath Spa University and Kingston University London. A pluriverse imagines a world of many voices, practices, and perspectives coexisting in an enmeshed manner (Escobar, 2018; Mignolo, 2018a). It thrives and survives through equitable exchange and shared endeavour. The aim of this article is, firstly, to articulate how pluriversal thinking informed our design of the network activities that engaged researchers, dance artists, and the public in round table discussions, workshops, and online webinars. Secondly, we consider how the activities led us to identify and propose modes of working, relating, and doing dance research that might develop a more equitable and sustainable dance ecology. Thirdly, the article offers reflection on how practices of embodied relationality, horizontal organising, care, and curation, central to the network’s activities, propose modes of being and doing “otherwise” to bring about systems change within dance research and wider fields of practice and enquiry.

The project was designed as an exploratory network which aimed to identify and challenge the systems and approaches to designing research across the UK dance community, and experiment with ways of being and doing *otherwise* (Akómoláfé, 2018). The research engaged with the following overarching question: What are the future directions for UK dance research, and how might the work of this network propose strategies and ideas for the development of a radical model of dance ecology—a pluriverse—to interrogate good practice and co-develop principles and frameworks grounded in awareness, equity, and critical diversity?

Whilst situated within academic institutions, all three researchers are engaged with dance research initiatives, arts organisations, or artist communities existing outside the academy, and have, in various stages of their

careers, participated in regional dance development initiatives and public engagement activities. Michelle Elliott teaches choreography with a focus on improvisation as a dynamic tool for fostering creativity, collaboration, and embodied exploration; she is also research-active in the field of embodied cognition and serves as a dance promoter for Bath Spa University's Theatre, where she supports the integration of performance, scholarship, and community engagement. Victoria Hunter is a Professor in Site Dance; her research explores people-place relationships through movement and dance practice in non-theatre locations, and employs ideas of new materialist, human-nonhuman porosity to inform practice-led enquiry. Daniela Perazzo works in the fields of dance theory and performance philosophy to investigate the political potential of movement; through her academic work, collaborative projects, and public engagement activities, she interrogates how dance can envision new ways of attending to the increasing complexity of today's sociopolitical environment.

Over the eighteen-month period, the project team invited choreographers, artists, educators, students, and interdisciplinary researchers to contribute their ideas and perceptions of dance research structures and systems—who gets to research, where research takes place, what constitutes dance research, what is centred and what is marginalised, and what forms of knowledge-making are inherent in the practices they engage with. We invited guest speakers and thinkers from other disciplines (philosophy, ecology, social justice, economics) to participate in online webinars and share their insights on broader sociopolitical and ecological conditions that shape and inform how systems of knowledge production and power relations operate and circulate at the local and global levels. Members of the public were invited to attend the open-access events and public workshop activities that aimed to disseminate the research ideas and provocations further, beyond the academy and into the public realm.

As a project team, we reflected on what we perceived were systemic failures within the current system of dance research, both within the UK academy and within the wider cultural industries. We identified a problem with communication between the academy and industry, the systems in which research is circulated, and the funding structures and power imbalances that replicate neoliberal economic concerns for progress and individual project development. Within this framework, colleagues, artists, and researchers are forced to compete against one another for funding, and not necessarily engage in collaboration, discourse, sharing resources, and working towards a collective ecology or development.

This competitive dynamic sits in stark contrast to systems thinking, which emphasises interconnectedness and collective behaviour. In her writing on systems thinking and behaviour change, Donella H. Meadows defines a system as:

A set of things—people, cells, molecules, or whatever—interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behavior over time. The system may be buffeted, constricted, triggered, or driven by

outside forces. But the system's response to these forces is characteristic of itself, and that system is seldom simple in the real world. (Meadows, 2008, p. 2)

The Dancing Otherwise Network considered the patterns of behaviour common to the dance research field and the drivers or external forces that worked to shape and influence dance research systems. To do so, we looked beyond the centre-periphery binary to explore culturally diverse, environmentally-engaged, experimental, non-typical, and emergent modes of making, producing, and researching dance “otherwise” through pluriversal practices.

## Pathways to the Pluriverse

Predicated on inclusive and diverse approaches to researching dance and movement practices, the project drew on an interdisciplinary field of theory and practice to bring new perspectives to researching dance. Notions of pluriversality (Kothari et al., 2019) and of the non-neutrality of material histories and social configurations (Yusoff, 2018) were employed to shape the network's design, activities, and modes of engagement with participants and members of the public. Through modelling horizontality as a praxis, the network engaged dance practice-research with socio-political themes of inclusion and decolonisation to explore physical and conceptual border crossings between ideas, practices, and people to help us envision new and experimental assemblages of dance ecosystems.

The terminology of the pluriverse draws from Latin American decolonial studies and critical anthropology, that acknowledge Indigenous peoples' practices of social mobilisation and self-organisation that work to reimagine ways of being, organising, and relating. These practices challenge and resist the “colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo, 2018b, p. 91), and their discourse points towards “the existence of multiple worlds that are partially connected but that exceed each other in complex ways” (Fitzgerald, 2022, p. 353). Dance Studies scholars have previously employed notions of pluriversality to discussions that include Indigenous People's dance and movement practices (Castillo, 2016) and the development of de-colonial approaches to site-based movement practice (Demerson, 2024). In this article, we acknowledge these contributions and wider applications of pluriversality by scholars and practitioners in the field, whilst extending them to consider the implications for systemic changes to thinking and doing dance research differently.

While our work is not located within organisational studies or systems thinking *per se*, it is nevertheless concerned with change, specifically through the collective enquiry of the structures and organising principles of the dance world across the professional, academic, and educational sectors. Rooted in our research interests in the politics of dance and in interdisciplinary perspectives on knowledge systems, relational models, and practices of transformation, our

references for working with emergence and embracing otherwise ways of doing are located in somatic approaches and in their intersections with theories of unknowing developed by decolonial thinkers, queer theorists, and posthumanist philosophers engaged in the project of “staying with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016) while also imagining alternatives. Specifically, we traced the term “otherwise” to the work of Báýò Akómoláfé (2018), whose philosophy of embracing uncertainty and engaging with emergence—with what surfaces from unexpected places, cracks, and in-between spaces—represented for us an inspiring model for engaging with the complexities and contradictions we perceive and register in the dance world in the current configuration of industry, research, and pedagogical structures.

In dance practices, the notion of “being otherwise” embraces the idea that non-verbal sense-making is a cornerstone of the dancing experience. Dancers are well versed in the idea that not all knowledge can be accessed through the proxy of language, a concept which has been robustly explored by early dance phenomenologists such as Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (2015) and Sondra Fraleigh (1987). Many commonly held assumptions about knowledge, intelligence, and its relationship to the body have their roots in a deep and complex colonial history that has been distinctly “anti-body” (Claxton, 2015). Reductionist scientific positions frequently bypass tactile-kinaesthetic experiences and artificially separate out concepts, such as, for example, thinking and doing. Whilst verbal and written language provide deep, rich insights into complex phenomena, their symbolic nature means that they point to, and are a proxy for, the knowledge they seek to represent. As philosopher and scientist Michael Polanyi asserts, “We can know more than we can tell” (1966, p. 4). Such embodied ways of knowing invite us to reconsider the conceptual and structural systems that shape our field.

In this light, the project’s engagement with deep systems change reflects a desire to surface and reconfigure the often invisible forces that govern how we think, relate, and organise within dance research and practice. The ideas and paradigms from deep systems change proposed by Meadows and others align with the central concerns of this project, in which we sought to identify systems within our field (e.g., languaging, conceptual framing, and embodied relationality). The project aimed to reimagine alternative, more equitable, and inclusive futures for our sector of dance research through dialogue and practical enquiry. Similarly, in their editorial for the inaugural edition of this journal, Koenig et al. identify that:

*Deep systems change* implies a shift towards a social field perspective of systems change. This perspective emphasizes the source conditions that give rise to patterns of thinking, conversing, and organizing in systems which, in turn, produce practical results. By including the interiority of the system (first- and second-person experience), a social field perspective addresses the less visible dimensions of social reality creation. (Koenig et al., 2021, Footnote 1)

The social-field perspective they define directly aligns with the modes of intra-personal exchanges and methods of embodied enquiry employed in this project, through which we strived to explore how knowledge is produced, articulated, and valued through practices of embodied relationality central to dance and movement-based practices.

## Imagining Alternatives Through Dance

We envisioned the network as being for and with dance people—researchers, artists, producers, educators, students—while also aiming to reach outside of the field and explore the potential of dance to inform wider systemic changes. We wanted to acknowledge the different positionalities that are represented in the field and found it important to reflect on our own positionalities—as the research team—and, especially, on our own blind spots—although, of course, these are difficult to recognise. For instance, we have been conscious of the power that comes with our institutional positions, in an academic sector and artistic field that has been traditionally characterised by precarity and is increasingly affected by systemic precarisation. Aiming to reach widely and beyond our existing spheres of influence, we questioned our approach to issuing calls, our channels of dissemination, and our own engagement with equality, diversity, and inclusion agendas, which so often result in tick-box exercises. In planning events, we considered closely the relationship between our duty as facilitators to shape the activities and the risk that our own priorities may prevent other perspectives and needs from being expressed and explored. Whilst taking the role of curating conversations for the various events we hosted, we committed to letting the dialogues that emerged rub against our own preconceptions, push us outside of our comfort zones, and help us learn how we may see and do things differently. We were keen to learn how dissenting voices might be harnessed to envision alternative dance worlds and hoped to understand how to respond to crises differently, and work towards building alternative futures.

In this sense, attending to and celebrating the field and its people also meant engaging with care with its different voices and trajectories, asking questions, listening, travelling through areas that we (as the core researchers) may be more or less familiar with, asking more questions, pausing to get to know a new place better, to take in its energy, its roots, and its driving forces. We felt strongly that, to do that, we needed to move both within the field and outside of it, to try and gain new vantage points. Therefore, the opening event, *Mapping the Pluriverse* (January 2024), functioned as an online collective mapping exercise in which we began to open up discourse around the diversity of dance and movement practices in the UK and the hierarchies inherent in organisational structures that prioritise some forms of dance practice whilst eliding others. We invited contributions from UK-based dance makers, artists, producers, teachers, and academics, alongside international researchers from social and environmental activism, philosophy, and the environmental humanities. Over the course of two days, we curated presentations, images, videos, provocations, and conversations

employing a range of approaches to capturing their diverse practices, positions, and voices, and their intersections. Through this initial exercise we wished to identify and name the ways in which a range of different, even dissenting, voices may be harnessed to envision an alternative dance world.

Dance contributors offered reflections on how the body itself provides a lens through which to understand the notion of the pluriverse. Over the course of the two-day event, we recorded attendees' comments and questions that made us reflect on the material and social "pluriversality" of our bodies, the "murky and blurry edges of the body as a site of knowing," as one contributor put it (*Mapping the Pluriverse* audience member, personal communication Jan 2024).

Participants reflected on the inherent plurality and interdependence of the dancing and performing body, and on how this may result in a predisposition for care, empathy, and collective responsibility. The reflections we collected include: "There is no such thing as a solo; I exist in relation to you and to the world. Anything I choreograph or perform is never going to be singular, individual. A body is a pluriverse as a queer body, moving towards different identities but never identifying as any one in particular. The relationship with the audience is in itself an intersubjective and interactive relationship"; "I wonder whether a felt interdependence, the awareness of our own planetary materiality, can involve greater care, and whether care and a felt form of empathy will foster more responsible and sustainable action? How can such a way of knowing be trained, passed on, and how can it inform new fields within dance and movement practices as well as become relevant beyond the field of dance?"; "As makers, what is our responsibility in the pluriverse we construct? How might we soften and extend the borders of the creative works we make, to allow for multiple modes of entry and engagement?" (*Mapping the Pluriverse* collated audience and participant responses, Jan 2024, online)

To examine what models of coalition might inspire the dance community, and how we might respond to the crisis of the existing system by attending to and staying with what emerges, we reached out to colleagues outside the dance world and invited them to join our conversations, as we hoped their perspectives would help us draw a richer, better-informed, and more wildly imaginative map of the dance pluriverse—of its present and its future. We asked socio-environmental researcher and activist Katia Valenzuela Fuentes, environmentalist and post-development expert Ashish Kothari, and philosopher, writer, activist, and psychologist Báyo Akómoláfé to offer their own views of what being and operating in a pluriverse may look and feel like. By learning how activist groups organise, we wished to understand how dance could shape its community differently.

The idea of being and doing otherwise as a continuous practice was at the centre of Chilean sociologist and activist Valenzuela Fuentes' talk, which discussed activism as a horizontal praxis, one that involves both a horizon to walk towards and the continuous practice of walking. While we work towards a point of arrival, we also continuously enact the principles that make that horizon



possible—what Fuentes called “the fuel and backbone of autonomy.” In her analysis of the “politics from below,” based on the experience of Chilean autonomous activism (coalescing around the social uprising that occurred between October 2019 and March 2020), she identified the key ingredients of horizontal practice as: non-hierarchical and flexible structure; rotation of roles, tasks, and responsibilities; the role of spokespersons in speaking up for the group Valenzuela Fuentes, *Mapping the Pluriverse* talk, online Jan 2024). These are crucial features that support structures organised around consensus decision-making (which challenges liberal representative democracy), placing assembly at the heart of collective praxis and foregrounding the importance of exchanging information, knowledge, and experience.

In the context of our project, developing a dialogue with sociologists, activists, and agents of social change was not aimed at finding all the answers to complex questions. Rather, the network’s interaction with broader perspectives on social transformation enabled the project to engage with modes of awareness and attention that operate beyond individual and group processes (respectively the “micro” and “meso” levels in Theory U terms), thus exploring the potential of embodied pluriversal practices to effect change at institutional and global levels (respectively the “macro” and “mundo” levels in Theory U terms). In this sense, it was useful to reflect on Fuentes’ analysis of the challenges that structures that attempt to enact horizontality inevitably face, as some of these difficulties are mirrored in the dance world: interpersonal tensions, the narrow scope of self-managed actions, uneven levels of participation, unlearning dominant logics (based on vertical structures), tacit forms of leadership, asymmetries in political or organisational experience, financial precarity. In developing the project further, the awareness of these challenges formed the seed for follow-up dialogues we initiated with dance educators, programmers, and policy makers.

Báyò Akómoláfé spoke of how, in these times of crisis, it is vital that we challenge what we think we know about being human, in order to expose the delusions our minds create about the present conditions. Specifically, he proposed that:

We’re co-participating in assemblages, in larger territories, in larger logics that exceed the idea that we are private, citizen subjects. That’s my way of beginning the idea that the human is territory...The actuality of how the world emerges and spills away from itself requires much more than our humanistic tropes of intentions and choices. (Dancing Otherwise Network, 2024, 2:51–57)

Considering UK dance research from these perspectives, it can be argued that researchers are incarcerated in realities that consist of many invisible patterns and deeply entrenched colonial narratives, and, through their (often unwitting) complicity in these systems, reproduce the very conditions from which many strive to escape. Akómoláfé referred to these types of repeating, reinforcing loops as “death spiral[s]” (Dancing Otherwise Network, 2024), but proposed that

this exhausting process, which challenges the neoliberal idea of productivity through its repetitive and unproductive nature, might allow us to transform and do things differently.

Similarly, the environmentalist and activist Kothari talked about the multiple intersecting crises of the contemporary moment as he saw them—namely, ecological, social, and political—and reflected on their impact on personal and interpersonal relations. He discussed development and its relationship to violence, which for him manifests as the religion of economic growth. Relatedly, he suggested that, in the contemporary moment, we have moved away from livelihoods (i.e., artisan, agricultural, and craftsmanship) towards mass-produced “deathlihoods.” Through his questioning, Kothari advocates for resistance movements that promote other ways of being, knowing, doing, and dreaming. These include youth justice movements, social and racial justice movements, and environmental activism. Proposing a post-development approach to pluriversal thinking, acting, and organising (Kothari et al., 2019), he asks if there are alternative acts of resistance that we might draw on or turn to, and how we might consider degrowth and horizontality in our own disciplinary fields and research contexts as modes of being and doing.

Over the two-day online event, perspectives on disabled dance, queer dance, multimodal performance, eco-somatic movement practices, activist dance, Black dance, political dance, embodied spiritual practice, and collaborative performance were framed around, and were in dialogue with, Fuentes’, Akómoláfé’s and Kothari’s talks on political activism, sustainable radical transformation, and emergent responses to the current polycrisis, which sparked debate and further reflection on what dance artists and researchers may need to become more aware of and be guided by in their practice. Dance contributors and attendees discussed, for instance, how dance’s relationship with audiences invites a constant negotiation of positionalities and a deep engagement with local knowledges, especially through community or participatory work. Some reflected on how the iterative nature of choreographic processes mirrors natural rhythms, offering a felt experience of the material consequences of interrupting them, while creative movement work that challenges conventional temporal models by playing with duration can invite a plural understanding of time and its effects. Others questioned how dance may be able to model a form of deep listening that engages all the senses, including beyond material stimuli, to build a connection with the spiritual dimension of ancestral layers and archetypes.

Building on the launch event, we developed a programme of research and networking activities that aimed at exploring themes, approaches, and contexts that the initial collective mapping exercise identified as important to understand how dance practice and research can serve as enablers for wider systemic transformation. The January 2024 event revealed the existence of a latent community of dance artists, teachers, and programmers invested in finding pathways for dance to capitalize on its ability to generate deep connection at micro and meso levels (through its capacity to build a felt sense of commonality

between individuals and among groups), and enter into more sustained dialogue with the macro and mundo levels of institutional systems and national and international frameworks. Moving forward, we envisioned the Dancing Otherwise Network as a catalyst for this potential, aiming through our activities to generate and co-devise tools for this shift to become possible. With this in mind, attending to the approach of our own hosting and convening practices became the next important step.

## Welcoming Vulnerability and Dissent: Conditions for Meaningful Participation

Curating the following events, we thought carefully about how contributors and attendees might relate to the material brought into the conversations and with each other. As a research team, we had all been previously exposed to, and actively involved in, different ways of convening dialogues and gatherings that emphasise inclusive approaches to presenting, frameworks for “safe” spaces or “brave” spaces. Accordingly, we were mindful of how guidelines around constructing inclusive spaces can often be co-opted by institutional narratives of diversity and equality. We were aware that what feels right, safe, brave, inclusive, or engaging is inevitably different for different people. With Elise Ahenkorah we also acknowledged that “safe spaces don’t exist for equity-deserving communities—or for those learning about identity and privilege. And brave spaces [...] negate the daily bravery marginalized communities need to display everywhere, to navigate everyday and common biases, discrimination, and microaggressions, in workplaces and society” (Ahenkorah, 2020).

Ahenkorah’s invitation to “embrace accountability” informed our curation of the events that followed: “Accountability means being responsible for yourself, your intentions, words, and actions. It means entering a space with good intentions but understanding that aligning your intent with action is the true test of commitment” (Ahenkorah, 2020). Adopting this approach, we invited attendees to join the network’s events with an open mind, with a respectful heart, and a willingness to listen with care and empathy. This aligns with processes of shifting the structures of attention central to Theory U’s approach to systems change, starting with an opening up of perception and developing a sense of 360-degree awareness of others, self, and context from which we can move towards a process of change.

When we listen empathetically, our perception shifts. We move from starting at the objective world of things, figures, and facts into considering the story of a living being, a living system, and self. To do so, we have to activate and tune a special instrument: the open heart, that is, the empathic capacity to connect directly with another person or living system. If that happens, we feel a profound switch; we forget about our own agenda and begin to see how the world unfolds through someone else’s eyes. (Scharmer, 2009, p. 12)

In this vein, we suggested that participants might allow some space for their own and other people's vulnerabilities, to an extent that felt manageable for them. We encouraged people to join us on their own terms and do what they needed to do to participate meaningfully from their perspective. We acknowledged the generative role that dissent can play in these encounters, "recogniz[ing] and embrac[ing] friction as evidence that multiple ideas are entering the conversation—not that the group is not getting along" (Ahenkorah, 2020).

This attention to intention, awareness, and accountability, and the acknowledgement of the importance of naming these approaches in the context of individual and collective explorations, appear particularly relevant in relation to Theory U's thesis that "behaviours within systems cannot be transformed unless we also transform (deepen) the quality of awareness that people in these systems apply to their actions, both individually and collectively" (Scharmer & Yukelson, 2015, p. 35). In this sense, while operating within the field of artistic and creative research, our dialogical and interdisciplinary approach towards imagining and building alternative configurations for the dance sector has mirrored (albeit not explicitly, but rather intuitively) Theory U's trajectory from "ego-systems" to "eco-systems" (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013), which maps the expansion of attention through developing stages of awareness that enable a shift from habitual patterns to open presence, which in turn becomes a space where possibilities can emerge.

## Choreographing and Dancing the Pluriverse

Our first in-person event was a two-day practical workshop at Bath Spa University, UK, in which choreographers, dance researchers, postgraduate students, and alumni came together to explore how it might be possible to choreograph from a collective and pluriversal perspective. The *Choreographing the Pluriverse* event (April 2024) revealed the complexities of pluriversal thinking and doing, as they played out through choreographic practice. The balance between choreographic and artistic ownership, whilst working in a dispersed and democratic manner, came to the fore alongside questions of dissent and managing multiple voices and perspectives in the studio. The Bristol-based Gather Up collective ran a group improvisation session led by dance artists Laila Diallo and Kit Hall. Participants engaged in a series of improvised movement conversations, exploring notions of creative generation and exchange. Dancers were first invited to listen and respond to their own internal impulses, and then to dance alongside—or with—the ideas of others that emerged. Participants were invited to "try on" each other's ideas, engaging as both witnesses and contributors in a spirit of open exchange that prioritized collaboration over transactions. By the final improvisation, the room felt charged with a shared focus and vibrant collective energy. Dance practitioner Alexandrina Hemsley, who served as a respondent for the day, offered these reflections on the workshop activities: "If everything I value about myself are things that cannot be taken

from me, then I can risk being porous without fear that another can diminish me.” The day’s unfolding revealed how choreographic practice can serve as a powerful site for negotiating plurality, and how openness, agency, and collective creativity can co-exist in dynamic tension.

This event was followed by a free one-day public engagement workshop at South East Dance, Brighton, UK, in which members of the public were invited to explore approaches to collective dance practice and embodied relationality through movement scores, talks, and exchanges. The *Dancing the Pluriverse* (April 2024) workshop activities opened up practices of moving together to a range of movers, both experienced and beginners, exploring how themes of equity, inclusion, and pluriversality are practised through dance. One participant offered the following observations on the event:

The experience was very powerful for me, as it is so rare to get a group of strangers to relate and care for each other and hold space together. It was really quite a unifying experience. The creativity of people was inspiring, and it was wonderful to see people happy! To give people space and to explore themselves, their bodies and others. To express their individuality but to also come together in unity and togetherness. (Participant A, 17 April 2024)

The activities engaged with the following questions: How do we co-create and dance with and alongside each other? What do we learn when we make space for multiple voices, bodies, and ways of being in the dance space? In response, the Brighton-based choreographer and founder of Communitas Dance, Anna Des Clayes, delivered a workshop based on forging connections through shared movement tasks and collective endeavour. Utilising the shared space of a communal circle, Des Clayes began the session by gently guiding the participants into sharing movement responses to simple tasks across the group. Through creative imagining, she then invited the participants to work in duets to explore collaborative responses to ideas and themes of identity and coexistence prior to extending this work into whole-group tableaux making (see Figure 1). Through these tasks and propositions, the group explored being together, picking up on each other’s rhythms, and collective, embodied decision-making through nonverbal means. In these moments, bodies rested against and moulded into each other, sharing weight and collectively working to shape into and out of the tableaux designs. Through tacit negotiations, participants managed and shaped space, time, and tempo as they relied on corporeal cues to navigate the group through the space together.



*Figure 1: Participants in Anna Des Clayes' workshop (South East Dance, Brighton, April 2024, image by V. Hunter).*

Charlie Ashwell, a London-based dancer, dramaturg, writer, and researcher, invited participants to explore the connections between dance, imagination, and magic. During the workshop Ashwell posed the questions, “What might be considered to be magical about what we have shared?” and “If dance is a form of magic, then what kind of magic is it?” The workshop tasks and movement explorations invited participants to play with ideas of conjuring things up and making things appear, and to explore the magic in moments of connection between individuals as they moved together. After participants had danced



together, Ashwell asked them to consider and explore further the traces they had left in the studio space, beginning with everyone's own trace forms and then picking up on the trace forms of others in the space. By moving in the space together in this manner, the group conjured up a thickness of atmosphere, collectively troubling and stirring up the dynamics of the studio space through shared improvisations and endeavours as they were encouraged to play with memories, images, and ghosts through the moving body. Following the movement tasks, participants sat with a partner and were invited to make a drawing that consisted of a single line; as they drew, they engaged in a process of shared invention infused by embodied traces (see Figure 2). The role of imagination was central to both the movement explorations and the collaborative drawing, as it enabled the group to disrupt realities, enact worlds which were not immediately present to the senses, and to experience the worlds of others.



*Figure 2: Participants in Charlie Ashwell's workshop (South East Dance, Brighton, April 2024, image by V. Hunter)*

At the subsequent roundtable discussion, Ashwell described how the “fuzzy” nature of these collective explorations dismantles borders between the singular and the plural, the individual and the collective. Reflecting on their experience of this event, one participant observed:

For me, *Dancing the Pluriverse* proved that integrating, listening to, and understanding many voices brings out new ways of thinking—the

open negotiation between what everyone in the room needed and the freedom to engage in your own capacity without judgement contributed to feelings of belonging, community, and togetherness. (Participant B, 17 April 2024)

## Pluriversal Perspectives and Horizontal Practices

Through the exploration of diverse practices and ways of moving in the gaps between spaces, places, and disciplines, the design of activities aimed to de-centre dominant frameworks and discourses (such as whiteness, ableism, heteronormativity, anthropocentrism). The network positioned pluriversality and dancing otherwise as knowledge-making practices central to the urgent project of re-imagining and re-shaping relationships towards more socially and environmentally just worldviews and developing practices of “ethical pluralism” (Cortes-Capano et al., 2022). Its design and ethos made space for challenging and, at times, difficult dialogues, acknowledging that diversity and equitability lead to better research, enriched by different perspectives. As a team, we aimed to create a space for dialogue with peripheral perspectives and pluriversal thinking, whilst acknowledging the inherent complexities and challenges of pluri-vocal exchange in which multiple voices, opinions, and positionalities share the same space-time. How to acknowledge and celebrate difference, messy complexity, and discord, and work otherwise lay at the heart of the endeavour.

Building on these experiences of interacting with a range of stakeholders and perspectives, over the course of the following twelve months, the project team continued to instigate dialogue with dance colleagues, academic partners from wider interdisciplinary domains, industry representatives, education specialists, and the general public. Later in the year, we held a three-day residential retreat at Hawkwood Centre for Future Thinking in Stroud, UK, for artists and researchers interested in pluriversal perspectives, ecological systems thinking, and embodiment, sharing practices and points of view. This event, which we called *Examining Pluriverses: Learning From Nature, Coalitions, Kinship and Care* (June 2024), enabled the network team to learn from other movement practitioners and researchers engaged with dance, ecology, social activism, choreography, conflict resolution, and ethno-botany, and to consider how organic systems might inform our thinking around an evolved dance ecology.

In November 2024, we hosted an online webinar with dance programmers and creative industry researchers exploring systems of producing, financing, and promoting arts and dance activity from pluriversal perspectives. In *Enacting the Pluriverse: Strategies for Organising Otherwise*, contributors and participants discussed models of producing and promoting dance performance and research—from practices of commercialisation and sponsorship to notions of gifting, de-growth economics, mentoring, and reciprocity.

Our closing symposium, *Moving Otherwise: Making Change*, was held at Kingston University London, UK, in February 2025. It engaged dance researchers, activists, artists and students in sharing the project findings and



exploring learnings from the network activities. This event disseminated some of the ideas emerging from the network, whilst also inviting guest artists and collectives to respond to the themes of pluriversality through sharing practices and leading sessions. In this manner, the event illustrated the iterative nature of this work and employed a horizontal mode of organising and curating events to offer space to diverse voices and perspectives.

Participants and contributors commented: “What I sense is a commoning of the practice and a horizontal shift; something is unravelling in order to become the thread of a bigger cloak” (Participant C, 12 February 2025); “I found myself wishing that other conferences and symposia I’ve recently spoken at could have witnessed the unfolding of what you brought together. It was a testament to what is possible within an academic framework when critical inquiry is held with care, openness, and a willingness to embrace the unknown” (Participant D, 12 February 2025).

This curatorial approach invited unknowing and uncertainty into the space of the academy, often resulting in unexpected moments. These included a workshop facilitated by movement artist Manuela Albrecht, who invited participants to engage with mycelium as a choreographic act invoking human–nonhuman intra-actions, and a performance by the anti-racist art collective A Particular Reality, with artists Demelza Woodbridge and Alicia Graham, exploring themes of visibility, ecology, and care. The day concluded with Seke Chimutengwende’s improvised solo performance, blending dance, poetry, storytelling, and political–philosophical reflection in a moment of collective charge with the audience. The purpose of this curatorial approach was to disrupt and decenter dominant practices, make content choices open, malleable, and spontaneous, convene diverse practices and perspectives, and invite reflection from participants and the wider public on the network’s emergent themes.

## Dance as Radical Relationality

Building on the phenomenological research on which dance studies is rooted, the network events investigated how dance and movement-based practices can make the complex systems—both built and natural—that we find ourselves entangled in visible and tangible. This felt necessary as we attempted to expose and move beyond the inherited narratives that limit our ability to shift towards more sustainable ways of being. People often do not recognise the fictional nature of cultural narratives because they are presented as facts, or worse, act as an invisible doctrine that reduces our capacity to experience different realities (Monbiot & Hutchinson, 2024). Even ways of relating are culturally, socially, and historically mediated and, as Arturo Escobar, Michal Osterweil, and Kriti Sharma propose, we inherit patterns of thought and action that have a tangled colonial history:

There is a tight relation between the production of non-relationality and the historical processes of colonialism, capitalism, slavery, and

the genocides that accompanied them and that separated people from their territories, cultures, and communities, destroying and subjugating collective lives to logics of markets and development. (Escobar et al., 2024, p. 32)

Mignolo (2018a) reminds us that, even when these misleading stories are exposed, delinking ourselves from the constraints of Western universalism and its claims to superiority is an extremely difficult task. Akómoláfé (2024) suggests that exposing these patterns of thought and action, and the associated feelings of “stuckness” and being lost amidst the cracks that emerge as ideas and narratives collapse, presents possibilities for change. This is also proposed by Escobar, Osterweil, and Sharma, who suggest that “the planetary crisis is creating new conditions for thought and the possibility of other modes of relating, oftentimes lurking beneath capitalist modernity” (Escobar et al., 2024, p. 45).

During the activities of the network, we proposed that pluriversality, as a mode of attention, can provide us with tools and processes that afford an examination of the multiple relationships that exist between different human and nonhuman worlds, many of which may be beyond the reach of conscious perception. As Iain McGilchrist (2019, 2021) posits, what we pay attention to changes what we find in the world. Therefore, our attention, and what we direct it to, can help enact new realities. So, what might dance, as a particular form of worldly engagement, be able to offer these conversations?

The network events offered a direct, embodied insight into how dance practitioners are deeply attuned to the ways in which choreographic ideas and movement practices can heighten specific forms of attention and perception. Many of these practices invite an exploration of the attentional mechanisms that shape our relationships with ourselves, others, and the environments we inhabit. As such, dance is uniquely placed to help heighten sensitivity and awareness of forms of perception because it encourages a more integrated approach to the cognitive mechanisms that support perceptive processing. This, in turn, provides access to different types of information enabling people to be more vigilant and critical about what they are giving their attention to. An epistemology rooted in dance suggests that if we embrace the idea that anything we perceive might provide us with useful information to help us decide what we should do next, then extending our perceptual capacities should be a vital concern.

During our activities, we experienced how moving together can be a powerful form of network learning that offers transformative possibilities in the world, allowing us to extend beyond our inherited patterns of thought and action. Dancing bodies are always situated in and inseparable from the environments that surround them, providing a unique terrain for exploring how to respond to Escobar, Osterweil, and Sharma’s call to replace separation myths inherited from modernity with new stories of radical relationality (Escobar et al., 2024). We celebrated how dance allows us to experience ourselves in complex relation to others, the environment, systems, and structures in order to move beyond the artificial propositions of separation.

Dance practices expose the radical relationality that connects everything to everything because they provide ways to experience a core, collective resonance that works against dominant narratives of separation. Dance encourages us to value both our embodied knowledge and our sensemaking interactions with the world and, in doing so, expands the possibilities for moving beyond the “ontology of separation to a life-centred ontology of inter-existence” (Escobar et al., 2024, p. 43). Through the network’s activities, we experimented, for example, with how to move alongside others using a different narrative from which to begin the engagement. Rather than thinking, “I am separate from others; how can we connect?” we considered, “I am already deeply related to others; let’s move together to find out in which ways.”

## Conclusion

Over the course of eighteen months, we discussed, debated, moved, and improvised together—as a project team, with other dance artists, researchers, students, teachers, programmers, and members of the general public. We experienced moments where we were not sure what would come next and expanded our capacity to embrace uncertainty, tolerate ambiguity, and experience how relations are often underscored by deep uncertainties about what is and what could be. Returning to Koenig et al.’s notion of a social field perspective (2021), when we move with another, we are reminded of a way of being that emerges somewhere between the *I* and the *we*, a type of inter-ness, a form of experiencing that is also reminiscent of bell hooks’ (2009) descriptions of interconnectedness as a spiritual practice. As Escobar, Osterweil, and Sharma propose, “there is no such thing as an individual; rather it makes more sense to speak of persons in relations” (Escobar et al., 2024, p. 33). In our workshop spaces, moving together became a way to think things through, and actions became a form of nonverbal sensemaking. We exchanged but without the need for a transactional relationship, and we enacted life rather than passively consuming it. Importantly, we also experienced how difference can be a vital component of a healthily functioning collective (Escobar et al., 2024) and how this acknowledgement can be helpful in supporting communities to transition towards nonhierarchical structures. Circling back to pluriversal thinking, the network participants gained an embodied experience of pluriversal thinking:

The pluriverse is the result of the dance between autonomy and interdependence that living beings and many place/territory-based communities perform to keep themselves and the pluriverse going. At its best, autonomy is a praxis of inter-existence. (Escobar et al., 2024, p. 278)

In relation to its long-term aims of envisioning and materialising a new model of dance ecology, rather than arriving at a new tight structure or framework as a replacement for the constricting boundaries of the existing one, the network proposed a mode of moving towards horizontality, slowing down,

attending to others, and valorising embodied knowledge as guiding principles for engaging with one another. The network's dance improvisations opened up spaces of possibility for relational and horizontal theories to be enacted through creative, embodied engagements. The project embraced the pluriversal principle that we are inextricably enmeshed with other worlds; to perceive these entangled relationships, we need to be able to both sense and attend to what lies beyond the self. Through movement and embodied interaction, we experimented with how experiencing pluriversality as a mode of attention can help us to sense worlds differently, enabling us to experience alternative possibilities beyond the present conditions. As James Bridle (2022) reminds us in *Ways of Being*, where he challenges anthropocentric views of intelligence, other worlds are already here—we just need to start paying attention to them.

The network also provided opportunities to explore how dance can fine-tune our capacities for what we are able to perceive and pay attention to. Feelings, emotions, sensations, physical actions, inklings, and hunches are all valid forms of knowledge; movement practices can hone skills in sensory awareness of both live and retrieved experiences. When network participants improvised together, even in very simple ways, they were experiencing and learning to navigate and negotiate nonverbally. This, in turn, enabled them to encounter and respond to difference whilst simultaneously experiencing a collective, kinetic, embodied intelligence. The experiential nature of these types of dance activities requires complex, cognitive processes that draw on pre-reflexive, nonconceptual forms of knowledge. The practical activities and conversations encompassed in the network activities invited deep listening to each other and the nonhuman world to promote a recognition and valuing of the multiple, complex forms of intelligence of all life forms. These conditions offered a rich terrain from which to develop an embodied awareness of potential systems change, ways of organizing people, ideas, and shared concerns to reimagine a more equitable and collaborative UK dance ecology. This terrain is unstable, porous, and precarious; it is simultaneously dynamic, entangled, and messy in nature. Ideas, practices, and processes of dancing, researching, organising, and being *otherwise* are literally in motion.

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## Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors (Hunter, Perazzo, Elliott) declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

## Ethics Statement

All research processes, including planning, documenting, and disseminating findings, were conducted in adherence to ethical approval protocols from Bath Spa University and Kingston University London.

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