Moving Otherwise: Making Change
Opening Reflections

12 February 2025
Kingston University Town House

The below are the reflections of the project team as presented at the start of the Dancing Otherwise Network's closing event. The four perspectives reflect a moment in time in the network's 18 months of activity and are not intended as necessarily complete statements or finalised academic texts. The project team shares them in the interest of open dialogue on the project's themes and to foster the continued unfolding of the research.

Professor Victoria Hunter (Principal Investigator)

Today is a celebration of this work and an acknowledgement also that, in many ways we are still at the start of this research journey.
A Pluriverse imagines a world of many worlds – we have explored this perspective to collectively explore how we might re-imagine doing dance research and practice differently to support or advocate for a shift in the UK dance ecology. An ambitious undertaking! In this opening talk we are not going to re-visit some of the theoretical and conceptual ground we have covered along the way in too much detail – further readings, recordings and reflections of this work can be found on our website www.dancingotherwise.com.
What each of us will present here (in a Pluriversal manner) is our own reflections on the journey so far and where we find ourselves and our respective curiosities at this point along the way.
Over the past 18 months we have organised and facilitated 9 events in total, with over 300 participants from 20 different countries and representatives from 36 different arts of HE education organisations.

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But what does Dancing Otherwise mean or entail?

- Doing this differently?
- Organising, collaborating, resisting and proposing alternatives?
- Or Dancing……Otherwise……?
- Is this a directive, a threat, a warning, a demand….or else – or else what might happen?
- What are the consequences of not dancing – of not doing things differently?

This was a question raised by emilyn claid at our first in-person event at Bath Spa University in April 2024 titled 'Choreographing Otherwise' where we invited choreographers and dancers to explore the themes of 'Dancing Otherwise' and 'Choreographing the Pluriverse'.
What is this notion or proposition of the otherwise she asked?
On reflection I offer here an observation that has temporal, spatial and ontological dimensions.
As a directive or call to action Dancing Otherwise assumes consequences of stillness, of not filling space. Think of the University space allocation audit process for example, the phenomenon by which some incomprehensible cost per square metre of campus space is calculated and our teaching activities are interrupted by (usually a man) with a clipboard who will open the door, count heads, make some comments on the activities and report back to the powers that be. Dancing must be happening in this scenario otherwise we are not being cost effective, not using the space effectively, not fulfilling its purpose.
Quick move around! I would often shout to the class as the dreaded clipboard nosed its way through the crack in the door - look busy, fill the space!
Activity would ensue, lots of dancing, lots of moving to no end other than to occupy space and illustrate the requirement for dancing, moving bodies to have space - to take up space and have enough space for flailing limbs to enunciate without collision or fear of injury.
The concept or idea of becoming otherwise employed to inform the theoretical territory of the network's research comes from the feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz's reading of Deleuze and Guattari's writing on concepts. She offers the following -

We need concepts in order to think our way in a world of forces that we do not control. Concepts are not means of control but forms of address that carve out for us a space and time in which we may become what can respond to the indeterminate particularity of events. Concepts are thus ways of addressing the future, and in this sense are the conditions under which a future from the present - the goal of every radical politics - becomes possible. Concepts are not premonitions, ways of predicting what will be; on the contrary, they are modes enacting of new forces. They are themselves the making of the new. The concept is what we produce when we need to address the forces of the present and to transform them into new and different forces that act in the future.

(Elizabeth Grosz 2011:80)

But, what if we invite the clipboard and the entity holding it into the space? Invite them to join us, to be Otherwise, operate differently, to experience the feel and shape of moving in that space alongside and with other dancing bodies in a pluriversal encounter in which bodies, breath, flesh and bone navigate the space together? Dancing Otherwise, Being Otherwise - exploring new modalities and ways of being and becoming together. How might we tell others of this spatial encounter differently and what metrics of relationality, embodied negotiation, cause and effect might be employed to help shape future activities and allocate resources?

This reflection may appear flippant or even trivial in the face of more pressing global, national, and sector-wide issues affecting our field at the present moment. But, what I hope to express here is an approach to thinking and doing otherwise that has evolved from engaging with the network's activities and the many brilliant and diverse voices that have contributed to the discourses along the way. Pragmatically, what can we do here and now - when faced with seismic global shifts and wicked problems on a macro scale it may be small acts, small shifts and incursions and unremarkable acts of resistance that bring about pluriversally informed modes of being and doing otherwise.

References:

Grosz, Elizabeth (2011) Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics and Art, Durham M.A., Duke University Press.

Michelle Elliott, Co-Investigator

Today I offer some reflections on this research journey that are really notes to self about some of the learning that has felt most pertinent to me, and that I hope might also resonate with others. I would like to begin by saying that I feel acutely aware that this research is taking place at a time when it is hard not to feel paralysed by the enormity of the many local and global challenges we face. Like so many of my colleagues, friends and family I grapple with trying to see how we can sustain and satisfy the needs and aspirations of our fragile communities in a way that doesn't diminish the needs of other populations or future generations. I sense an increasingly complex inner landscape where I remain constantly entangled and in dialogue with a seemingly vast, complicated and rapidly changing outer world. Here, I can often perceive a deep sense of misalignment between what I'm doing and what I could, should or need to be doing. So I ask the question, how might exploring ideas about pluriversality provide some perspectives on the current situation? And what is particular about dance as a distinctive form of worldly engagement and what can it offer these conversations?

When people less familiar with pluriversality as a critical framework have asked me about this research I like to describe how, in simple terms, pluriversal thinking promotes the idea that it is not necessary (or indeed possible) for the world to be conceived of as a unifying totality for it to make sense. People, communities and societies can exist independently of the state or corporations, despite the fact the opposite position is often presented as if it is the only alternative. Many hegemonic cultural practices continue to assert 'universal' principles and do not recognise ideas and belief systems which fall outside the dominant narrative. Indeed they have been so effective at eradicating other cosmologies and epistemologies that they almost cannot conceive other ways of being. During the research we have discussed how one of the most pervasive ideas contained in the Western, neo-liberal modernist agenda has promoted the idea that we are separate individuals.

This cultural messaging has been extremely pervasive at establishing individuals as separate egos competing for scarce resources. Capitalism as a political project has been so successful in how deeply entrenched it has become that it often operates at an unconscious level, or as George Monbiot describes it, as an invisible doctrine which drives our actions and keeps us stuck in the worlds we are trying to escape (Monbiot and Hutchinson, 2024).

I like to consider how at its most basic, culture is a set of ideas and beliefs that are often presented as if it is the truth, a reality. But pluriversal thinking encourages us to embrace the fact that what we think of as real is certainly not the only reality out there. Indeed, there is a strong cultural dimension to the very notion of 'reality'. When communities have shared ideas and beliefs systems about how people relate then it helps to speed up communication and predict future outcomes. These beliefs become enacted and then feel 'real'. So how does our sense of reality shape how we relate?

Pluriversality invites us to shift away from this story of separability towards alternative worlds of radical relationality. As James Bridle explains, other worlds are already here, we just need to start paying attention to them (Bridle, 2022). As part of the network we have explored the way in which pluriversal thinking can be considered a practice and mode of attention that might allow us to sense the world differently and consequently find some alternative possibilities to the present conditions. This is an attractive proposition for anyone who wants to actively work towards course-correcting the current trajectory we are on. As the philosopher Bayo Akomalafe suggests it is in times of crisis like we currently find ourselves that we need to challenge what we think we know about being human to expose delusions we have about the present 'reality'.

In the last few years I've become interested in the work of neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist who stresses that what we pay attention to changes what we find in the world (McGilchrist, 2021).

In our field of dance we are already very attuned to an understanding that choreographic ideas and practices can heighten particular forms of attention and perception. So our attention, and what we direct it to, can shape new realities. Many movement practices encourage us to explore and pay attention to how we relate to ourselves, other people and the environment in which we are situated. Pluriversal thinking helps us to start to explore how ideas about these relations, or relationality, arise from a complex network that is socially, historically and culturally mediated. This is useful because as Escobar, Osterweil and Sharma propose, we inherit patterns of thought and action with a deep and tangled history (2024) and even when we begin to see this more clearly delinking ourselves from these systems can be an extremely difficult task.

Pluriversal thinking also encourages us to think about localised needs and issues, reminding us that one size won't fit all. It urges us to ensure that when new grassroots alternatives arise to dominant systems and structures we build bridges between these worlds. The Mexican Zapatistas proposed that changing the world was too hard. Rather, we should aim to build new ones. I'm interested in exploring how we can both recognise and map radical alternatives as they arise? What might the radical stance of building new worlds have to offer how we respond to the threats currently faced by dance in Higher Education?

During the network activities we have been able to create many opportunities to move together, which has enabled us to experience our interdependency, our interconnectedness. In this respect, collective movement has been a form of network learning. When we improvise, even in very simple ways, we are learning to navigate and negotiate non-verbally. As dancers we are well rooted in the idea that not all knowledge can be accessed through the proxy of language, an idea that has been explored robustly by the early dance phenomenologists. Improvisation becomes a way of relating. When we move together, we are experiencing moments where we are not sure what will come next, and in so doing are expanding our capacity to embrace uncertainty and tolerate ambiguity.

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When we move with another something emerges that is somewhere between the 'I' and the 'We' a type of inter-ness. Here, I am reminded of the writing of bell hooks who described interbeing and interconnectedness as a spiritual practice. And in this space, moving can become a way that we can think things through. Our actions become our thinking. We are exchanging but without the need for a transactional relationship. Today, we would like to offer you some gentle, practical experiences that allow us to explore these ideas. Dance allows us to experience our collective, kinetic intelligence. Everything that is alive is intelligent. Everything that is alive moves and subsequently communicates. In these challenging times I find comfort in re-asserting the long held belief I hold that movement is our most foundational intelligence.

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Julia Pond, Project Co-ordinator

I would like to talk about practice, how our tools for doing and being exist underneath radical ideas of new ways of worlding, and support, or undermine, their potentials. What forms of being or doing can support a shift towards outcomes that are truly 'otherwise?'

I note that it seems very fitting that I bring these reflections on tools, having in this project been the most engaged with the nuts and bolts of eventbrite pages, websites, and the like - the tools of producing research, if you will.

I'm carrying with me the title of writer, activist and poet Audre Lorde's essay: the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house, in which she argues for a (what i might call) pluriversal welcoming of difference - both for its power to spark creative forces and in order to finally recognise our interdependence.

I am also carrying with me political economic theorist Moishe Postone's contention that 'everyday patterns of practice and thought' are what construct our systems of social and economic exchange. I note that these tools, these everyday patterns of practice and thought, when unacknowledged, can be more powerful than the big ideas, than a stated aim.

With this in mind over the course of the last year we as a project team have tried to practice ways of being differently, asking 'what tools for being and doing can we use to dance 'otherwise' together?'

Some of the tools we have been practicing (imperfectly!) with are:

Slowing down. Trying the impossible game of doing less in a research world that demands more. This is probably the underlying basis of the rest.

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Feeling as well as thinking. Slowing down makes time for this; welcoming both feeling and thinking helps to break down defenses and work together from a more holistic place.

Horizontality. Aiming for a non-hierarchical structure. One evidence of this is the inclusion of my remarks here, where the person in my role as project coordinator would not always be represented. Nor does my role as project coordinator reflect my wider experience in the arts, facilitation, and as a leader, rather, it is a role I adopted as I engage more in academic and research spaces.

Moving towards a horizon (a phrase from activist Katia Valenzuela Fuentes, who presented at our first event). This means moving in the direction of the world we want to create, while acknowledging there is no one arrival moment, when all the work is done.

Staying with the trouble. A phrase borrowed from Donna Haraway. This is the practice of getting closer to what feels off, to conflict or other discomfort that comes up. It is the practice of giving the trouble time to reveal its lessons.

Being curious about blind spots. We all have them. What is invisible to us about this project? About each other?

Now, to stay with the trouble a little bit. These virtuous and radical sounding practices also come into conflict with other training and forces: the weights of our own professional accomplishments, the pressure to make things happen and produce research outputs, to, as theorist and activist Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti puts it, trade in 'intellectual (and I'd add artistic) economies of worth?'

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These tools I have named do not necessarily facilitate success in the existing dance ecology, which rewards (for example) speed in submitting applications, or an inhuman ability to show up at every single industry event. Our own preferences and interests get in the way of opening up to blind spots. It is these points of tension, these small frictions, that are most with me as we close the project. I'd like to close with some questions:

What happens when the thing is not the thing? When the research event and intelligent conversations which are the focus of production are not actually where the richest learning might take place? What is there to be understood at the edges, at zoom meetings, in side conversations, and in the creation of schedules, where people and practices rub uncomfortably against each other? What would it take to shift our ways of being and doing, to feel or sense into a more radical inclusion, a more pluriversal perception, what would be sacrificed to do this, and what might be enabled?

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Postone, M. (1993) *Time, labor, and social domination : a reinterpretation of Marx's critical theory,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

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Dr. Daniela Perazzo, Co-Investigator

What I am offering today is a circling back to the questions this project has addressed. In proposing this research, we identified the following research questions:

a) What is a Pluriverse and how (and why) do we dance "otherwise"?

- How do practices beyond the mainstream manifest in contemporary dance practice research?
- Where do they take place and how are they organised through ecologies of practice?
- How might they point to a dance 'pluriverse' in dialogue with accepted practices/ frameworks?
- How might pluriversal practices open new emancipatory directions through their embodied relational models and different ways of inhabiting time and space?

b) How do we choreograph a Pluriverse?

- How might attending to the pluriversality of dancing bodies lead to dancing 'otherwise'?
- How might this facilitate a break from dominant epistemological models and open generative perspectives for understanding structures of power, agency and horizontality in dance-making?
- What can choreographic and movement practices teach us about building constellations between humans, environments and nonhuman others that reimagine power relationships?

c) How might we produce, present and promote the dance Pluriverse?

- What kinds of practical and theoretical modelling might we envision, how might we produce and suggest strategies for change – what opportunities can be found within pluriversal practices?
- How might a developed understanding of centring and de-centring, and pluriversal coalition inform practices of producing and planning dance and affect policy change?

d) How can knowledge emergent from dancing otherwise inform social, ecological and behavioural change?

- How might practices of edgework, centring and de-centring central to pluriversal thinking and doing be read against or overlap with practices of kinship, coalition, and allyship?
- Where do practices of coalition and confederation fail, what new models of pluriversal practice might be envisioned through practice-led research, informed discussion, and debate?
- How might pluriversal dance research help us to better understand methods and processes of practice-as-research more widely and feed the dance ecology?

I have to admit that looking at this list of questions and sub-questions makes me feel a little overwhelmed. In preparing for this introduction, I was re-reading them and found them to be really meaty but also so dense and, to an extent, impenetrable. I noticed the many times the pronoun "we" appears in the questions and asked myself: who is the "we" that asks these questions? I paused to consider the word "otherwise". In one of our events, a contributor was querying the use of "otherwise", asking: what does it mean in this context? Is it even grammatically correct?
"Otherwise" is quite a 'fashionable' word in some circles – of both academic and intellectual people working through and promoting counter-hegemonic epistemologies and radical ways of knowing and unknowing.

We traced the term "otherwise" to Bayo Akomolafe (2018), whose philosophy of unknowing, 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 perceived in the dance world, in terms of research, education and industry.

This is also a word that has been used by other thinkers of unknowing: decolonial thinkers, queer theorists, posthumanist philosophers, engaged in the project of "staying with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016) while also imagining alternatives.

I was re-reading Jack Halberstam (2011: 2) recently and found this on page 2 of The Queer Art of Failure: “So what is the alternative? This simple question announces a political project, begs for a grammar of possibility […], and expresses a basic desire to live life otherwise.”In this book, Jack Halberstam thinks about “ways of being and knowing that stand outside of conventional understandings of success” (Halberstam, 2011: 2).

So I want to ask, where do we (as this project’s research team) stand? Where do we stand in relation to knowing and unknowing, to success and failure, to conventional and fugitive thinking when we ask these questions? I have thought it important to pause, now and also over the course of the project, to interrogate our research and our project’s questions in light of the experiences and insights that have emerged in the last year and a half – both through the project and alongside the project.

The idea of being and doing otherwise as a practice was also at the centre of Chilean sociologist and activist Katia Valenzuela Fuentes’ talk offered in the context of our online launch event on 24 January 2024 (day 1: https://dancingotherwise.com/mapping-the-dance-pluriverse-event-1-recap/). Here Valenzuela Fuentes talked about activism as a horizontal practice, one that involves walking towards a horizon and, as such, working towards horizontality, and in doing so, engaging in an ongoing enaction of horizontality’s principles.

In considering our project’s questions, I am proposing to question the questions, according to this principle of engaging in an ongoing practice of growth and development.
This reflective exercise is mostly guided by invitations developed by the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective, “an arts/research collective that [engages in] collaborations around different kinds of artistic, pedagogical, cartographic, and relational experiments that aim to identify and de-activate colonial habits of being, and to gesture towards the possibility of decolonial futures.” (GTDF, n.d.).

The Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective invites individuals and groups in the global north engaged in bringing people together to respond to local and global challenges (which is what our network proposes to do) to engage more deeply with the complexities of dealing with the often invisible tensions and paradoxes that characterise approaches to social change. Their self-reflexive practice resonates with the approach we committed to when embarking on this project, which has involved examining our own positionalities and also, as far as possible, our own blind spots. The gestures this collective commits to are particularly useful in offering a tool for interrogating and discussing ways of coming together to address social challenges that go beyond the dichotomy of focusing on solutions and action versus focusing on complaints and hopelessness. I will offer some of these invitations here as a framework for questioning of our project's questions:

- "facing our complicity in violence and unsustainability"

In what ways are we, as the project coordinators, complicit in perpetrating the lack of sustainability of and lack of true representation in the dance world as it is currently organised?

- "digging deeper and relating wider"

How can we engage with an idea of the "dance pluriverse" that deeply understands and recognises the structural inequalities of the system, and how can we reach wider without falling into the trap of ticking the boxes of EDI agendas?

- "interrupting modern-colonial addictions, in particular addictions to the consumption of knowledge, of self-actualization"

How do we engage with the network's work in ways that are not just about producing visible records that can be consumed by others and that will benefit us and our research profiles?

- "dis-investing in desires for […] authority […] and validation to create space for accountabilities, for response-abilities, for exiled capacities and for deeper intimacies"

How do we put the privilege of AHRC funding in service of deeper connections and wider networking that don't feed a desire for validation but become acts of care and compassion, including towards individuals and groups as yet unknown to us?

- "loosening our attachments to our self images"

How can we let go of who we think we are in the context of this project and of our existing agendas to make room for what truly emerges and needs attending to?

In proposing this interrogation, I invite a level of self-reflection that acknowledges that the work of a research project that wants to explore "otherwise ways" of doing things needs to engage with in-between places, unknown paths and processes of unlearning how to do and share research. What is beyond the distinction between knowing and unknowing, when we are drawn to the latter but inhabit the institutional home of the former?

What is an alternative third way, between centre and periphery, when we set out to explore the margins but can only do so when enabled by power that comes from the centre? What does it mean to "stay with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016) of not being able to reconcile these contradictions and understand this as the work that is needed right now – the kind of work where we often feel uncomfortable about not having answers while holding the possibility that we may not even have asked the right questions.

And so we continue and today is an attempt at staying with these unresolved contradictions, with openness, humility and a desire to listen, connect and share some of the journey.

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