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### Flat Out! Dancing the city at a time of austerity

Noxolo, Patricia

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## **Flat Out! Dancing the City at a time of Austerity**

### **Abstract**

This paper reflects on and challenges existing paradigms around movement and mobilisation in and with the city. This focus is provoked by a community arts project called 'Flat Out', in which the researcher collaborated with the Drum Intercultural Arts Centre and Birmingham Royal Ballet, on a dance project with members of the community in the Lozells and Newtown areas of the city. The paper pushes for more deeply embodied and more highly politicised versions of place ballet and urban vortex, introducing a concept of choreography that comes from dance practice, and working through decolonial and postcolonial theories. A brief auto-ethnography of the author's Birmingham childhood illustrates that movement repertoires are diverse, historically and spatially conditioned, and, in the case of Birmingham, located within an ongoing 'decolonial churn'.

**Keywords: community arts, dance, place ballet, urban vortex, choreography, decolonial churn**

### **Introductory problematic: Flat Out recurring**

The audience is silent. There is a simple set, with two flat pieces of scenery made to look like papered walls, a sofa and a chair, some boxes. One piece of scenery depicts a window, the view from which is a photograph taken from the window of one of the flats in Inkerman House, Birmingham: it is a busy innercity-scape. The other piece of scenery has dark patches, like marks from pictures hung by previous residents. A 'family' of three dancers enters noiselessly, looking around. Two of them lift the smallest dancer and pass her one to another; they support her weight with fluid care, hoisting her high above their heads. The silent movement creates an atmosphere of caution and expectation. When the music begins there is a burst of joyful shared dance, but soon the three are isolated one from another: one dancer in particular makes complex repetitive hand movements in a faster and faster rhythm, folding and turning, exhausted by the routine. Rescuing her from this, the 'household' again finds a lightness, mirroring each other's movements. However soon this again gives way to conflict: the smallest dancer puts on pointed ballet shoes and there is a two-handed dance full of anger and frustration, with dramatic lifts and spiky oppositions. At several points from the beginning to the end of the whole performance, each of the dancers picks up a letter and worries over it, building towards a terrible tension between a light dance of freedom and relaxation at the front, and a tense, anxious mime in the background. Finally there are expressions of shared grief, then of shared resignation, and all three turn hopefully, fearfully, towards the door. The audience claps appreciatively.<sup>1</sup>

This 2014 dance performance, and its packed multicultural audience, made up of people living in the Lozells and Newtown areas of Birmingham, was the successful outcome of a project called 'Flat Out', which was a collaboration between the Drum Intercultural Arts Centre, Birmingham Royal Ballet (BRB) and myself. The project aimed to explore the meanings of community arts for people in the area, and to involve them in the devising of a ballet performance. Responsible for the research element, I employed a research assistant (Dr Arshad Isakjee) to conduct preliminary interviews with

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<sup>1</sup> Choreographer: Jenny McNamara. Dancers: Laura Day, Rebecca Thomas, Oliver Till (2014) and Max Maslen (2017). A recorded version of the 2017 re-staging of the performance is available to watch online, as well as a documentary about the 2014 project, and a downloadable version of the project report, at: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/gees/research/projects/flat-out/index.aspx>

local stakeholders, and then collaborated with the dancer who was overseeing the project to devise and conduct a series of dance-and-word focus groups with community groups and residents of Inkerman House, a block of flats opposite the Drum. The ballet performance was choreographed and devised based on the themes and movement repertoires of the families and community groups. People we spoke to in Inkerman House had never been to a ballet, and beyond this most had not been to the Drum, even though it was across the road from them and was well-known and well-supported amongst the more established multicultural community in the area. Inkerman House often homes temporary residents, many of them new to the UK and on their way to being re-housed elsewhere. So the combination of reasons for non-participation in the arts of course included money (and a perception that the arts can be expensive), but more significant was a sense that, even though the Drum had been in the community for many years, most community arts projects are short-term. Without embedded community networks people simply did not find out in time what cultural opportunities were available, and they did not have the relationship with arts centres like the Drum that would enable them to find out. The need for community networks in order to participate in community arts was particularly poignant to me, as the meanings of community arts that came back from participants emphasised that, conversely, community arts build community - as one participant put it, community arts are: "people in the community pulling together, spending time together, getting to know each other, just celebrating being neighbours".

Mirroring the rhythm of the performance piece, having been born and raised in Birmingham but new to Birmingham University, for me this 2014 project was a time of settling in to working collaboratively with local organisations that were keen to invest in community arts in the long term. The organisations and community members carefully supported each other's weight (both metaphorically and literally) during the expectant time of building trust through the dance and research workshops; the successful performance, as well as the well-attended evaluation workshops that followed, was a burst of joyful music and activity. But then came frustration. The ongoing effects of austerity measures in Birmingham (Elkes, 2017) meant that there was a shrinking space for community arts, as public funding has been drastically cut across the board. The Drum fell victim to the austerity cuts: following much excitement over a planned refurbishment in 2015 (Jones, 2015), the Drum closed suddenly in 2016, after twenty-two years of black-led arts in the city. The loss felt very personal to me as a black person brought up in Birmingham: having attended many events and workshops there, with relatives who had been very involved, the loss of the Drum definitively reconfigured arts in the city for me, leaving a painful sense of exclusion. I attended, with many other black and ethnic minority people, the 'wake' event (Laws, 2016) and I grieved for the centre.

In 2017, with the support of the community outreach team of Birmingham Royal Ballet, and with some internal funding from the Geography department at Birmingham University, I turned, hopefully, fearfully, towards the door. This extension project deployed interviews, dance workshops and a re-staging of the ballet performance, in order to re-engage community arts practitioners. It also sought to engage housing officers, who had been very important in facilitating access to Inkerman House during the 2014 project, in exploring sustainable models for community arts amongst their residents in the city. I found that austerity in public services, including widespread cuts in public employment across the city (Gentleman, 2016), is sharpening the need for communities to build strong networks, to be more proactive in managing and promoting the wellbeing of their own neighbourhoods and communities. In this context, participation in community arts has never been more important, because, as participants in the 2014 project

expressed repeatedly, they “deepen a sense of connection to the area”, enabling “life, purpose, communication”, and increasing well-being. Housing and community arts practitioners continue to work in this complex situation but, as Fuller and West (2017) describe, it is hard for public servants to resist and contest the tide of austerity: they risk becoming disabled by the discourses of short-termism and constant change (see also Tabb, 2014, on the pessimism around austerity that also plagues the urban literature). I have found that both housing officers and arts practitioners react in diverse ways: some go into siege mentality, hunkering down, waiting it out until the changes stop or until they retire; others twist and turn, spotting opportunities and setting up projects, working creatively within the thicket of confines surrounding them. Some begin to take on business language in relation to the management of scarce resources, talking about “inputs and outputs”, and doing “cost-benefit analyses”; and others are aware of expending a large amount of energy on the task of simply staying in place, being the last person or service standing, re-applying again and again for the same job or for a parallel move across the council. At the same time, I have found an enormous amount of goodwill, local knowledge, and, crucially, community networks, amongst housing officers and arts practitioners. In my research practice, I have been pushing to see how these immensely valuable local resources can stay connected to the community and feed into sustainable community arts, especially dance.

However, the consequence of all this determination and uncertainty, goodwill and stasis, is that at the time of writing I, like the dancers in the performance piece, am still turned towards the door, looking for a new model that will mobilise sustainable community arts in the city. In this expectant moment, I want to use the foregoing description of the Flat Out project as an opening problematic, i.e. as a means of opening a set of questions that the project raises. In other words, whilst Flat Out as an ongoing search for sustainable community arts remains effectively unfinished, this article will do some of the intellectual work that, despite the widespread neoliberal understanding of intellectual performance in universities as something to be ‘managed’, is still at the core of academic work (see Ien Ang, 2016, and Edward Said, 1994, for thoughtful discussions on the relationships between intellectual and academic work). Moreover, as I have described above, this deep reflective work and paradigmatic challenging is something for which practitioners and activists may find it more difficult to find time under austerity, as they are “bowled over in the rapids of history” (Harris, 2006, p. 99). So, coming out of the foregoing description of joy, grief, resignation and immobilisation, I want to take the time to reflect on and challenge existing paradigms around movement and mobilisation in and with the city. In the next section, the paper reflects on and critiques recent formulations of the urban vortex and of place ballet: I argue that these gesture towards useful metonymic heuristics for, respectively, the spatial forces that mobilise urban spaces, and the diverse place-based experiences of mobility and mobilisation in the city, but they could do more. The article points the way by engaging with postcolonial and decolonial theories as ways of taking seriously the materiality and movement of dance practice in the process of mobilisation in and for the city. Both post- and decolonial theories highlight the entanglements between embodied self and environment, so the next section is a reflection on my personal investments with Birmingham as a city. This section puts into practice more heavily materialised and politicised versions of urban vortex and place ballet, in the context of the multi-racial, postcolonial and constantly decolonising city that my body experiences. A short conclusion tentatively explores what this analysis of the mobile city can express about sustainable community arts.

### **Embodying the urban vortex and choreographing place ballet**

In recent years there has been a range of geographical writing that conceives of dance in the city: this writing describes dance in terms of site-based performance (Hunter, 2012), and as a place-making activity (Jayne and Leung, 2014), as well as in terms of indigenous resistance to the city as a colonising space, through the 'flash mob round dance' reimagined as 'spatial tagging' (Recollet, 2015). Conversely, two urban theories have recently emerged that conceive of the city as an organism that not only contains movement but is itself in movement: urban vortex, and place ballet. Rather than being limited to seeing dance as a loose metaphor for urban flow, I want to suggest that both 'vortex' and 'ballet' gesture helpfully towards a stress on spatial and embodied *forces* acting in and on the city; as such they become potential metonyms (rather than metaphors) of the billions of everyday embodied and architectural mobilities – banal flows and re-compositions of flesh, muscle, glass, steel and brick - that make and remake urban environments around the globe.

The concept of the city as a vortex was first put forward in relation to the “[d]eeper currents, profound social and cultural trends” (Freund and Padayachee, 2002, p. 2) of post-apartheid Durban, South Africa. The focus was on the specific transitional and contradictory motion of opposing forces in the city: a formal economy, racialized white, de-industrialised and decentred, combined with an informal economy, racialized black, characterised by squatter settlements. The vortex first comes into use then as an image for conceiving the complexity and contradictions of urban form in a Global South city, with the implication that these different currents swirl around each other: it was a loose metaphor for unpredictable but irresistible movement and change.

Continuing the focus away from global centres, such as Tokyo and New York, Hall and Savage (2016) draw on urban sociology in Cairo, Istanbul and Brazilian cities, as well as London, to push the concept of the urban vortex further. They draw on the “volatility, intensity and centrality” (Hall and Savage, 2016, p. 85) of the vortex, to bring out three social dimensions of the city: the “flux and mobility” in urban society, which they argue becomes “distinctively concentrated and directional” (Hall and Savage, 2016, p. 86); the constant combination and recombination of a range of cultural and economic ‘forces’; and the turbulence created by ‘upwards’ social mobilities, which “produce spill-over and stress for those being thrown around in the urban maelstrom” (Hall and Savage, 2016, p. 86). There is an elegance to this reformulation of the vortex; their case study of London focuses on the forceful pull of the city as an “attractor and sorter” (Hall and Savage, 2016, p. 92) of capital and labour. Seeking to upfront the sociological rather than the econological, this analysis nonetheless retains the spatial and political sensitivity of critical urban theory (for example Brenner et al., 2011; Harvey, 2006 – both of these pieces reflect on these critical urban sensitivities). It understands vortical centripetal forces in the context of the range of embodied decisions and material constructions of capitalist agglomeration, whilst also retaining a strong awareness of how difference and inequality amongst urban populations are deepened by “austerity governance” (Hall and Savage, 2016, p. 88), in the context of a planetary sensitivity that draws explicitly on Paul Gilroy’s (2004) focus on plurality and planetary life-worlds (see also Jazeel, 2011). Nonetheless, despite the imbrication of assemblages, practices and racialized difference, the large-scale aggregation of a rather abstracted mass of practices into a vortex still only gestures towards the re-conception of social forces in spatialized terms: ultimately the materiality of urban morphology and of those millions of embodied practices (the glass, brick, muscle and flesh) becomes muted.

By contrast, David Seamon’s (1980) formulation of place ballet focuses down on the gesture and motion of the material body moving through space. Taken up again by a range of geographers more

recently, place ballet focuses on “habit or routine” (van Eck and Pijpers, 2017, p. 166): it re-imagines everyday acts and gestures as ‘body ballets’; it re-conceives time-space routines (such as commuting) in which individual bodies coordinate, interact, dodge and manoeuvre around other bodies as choreographies (Symes, 2013); and it rethinks place-making as “recursively practised everyday... activity” in which urban spaces are ‘domesticated’ (van Eck and Pijpers, 2017, p. 167). Deliberately focused on individual and communal phenomenology, the body comes into view through close observation of urban mobility as a set of highly localised and specific practices, repeated daily in parks and on trains, surrounded and structured by features of the built environment (walls, doors, borders, open spaces). At the same time, through interviews and auto-ethnographies, theorists of place ballet seek to understand the significance of repeated movement for the embodied subject, and the place of the cognitive and customary in their minute corporeal decision-making.

Seen at this individual scale, mobile practice becomes much more concrete, more material than it does in vortex theory, but in place ballet the structures of power that condition individual mobility – structural understandings from critical urban theory for example, as well as post- and decolonial theories – are often lost from sight. Crucial in this gap is the concept of choreography: who or where is the choreographer in place ballet and, more importantly, what is the choreographic process? The emphasis on site-specific habit and repetition, along with loose imbrications of ‘conviviality’ or of ‘virtuosity’, is useful in understanding the schooling or training of movement performance in and by urban space, which is also heavily implied in the choice of ‘ballet’ (a form that is universally recognised as having a performance technique that relies on years of corporeal training) rather than any other dance form<sup>2</sup>. However, the relative lack of engagement with how non-environmental, inter-corporeal forces structure embodied movement through the city yields an uncritically ‘domesticated’ urban space, holding in abeyance theories around relations of power and the co-production of movement that might be informed by the *actual* relations between choreographers and performers.

Feminist dance theorist Susan Leigh Foster (1998, p. 16, my emphasis) argues that: “choreography, whether created by individual or collective agencies, improvised or designated in advance, stands apart from any performance of it as the overarching score or plan that evidences a *theory of embodiment*.” The performer of a movement may also be the choreographer (the person who devises that movement), and even where the choreographer and performer are two different people, the choreographer often devises movement by moving her own body, whilst the performer always has to own or embody the movement. However, that overlap within the space of the body does not make choreography synonymous with performance, because choreography does not only

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<sup>2</sup> The invocation of a high-status dance form, not only in place ballet but also in my collaboration with BRB, reminds us that dance, as a spatial practice, does not stand innocently outside of politics. As dance scholar Randy Martin (1998, p. 14) states: “politics appears first in the context of mobilizing forces within which dance and all other social practices are located and, second, as the particular bodily relations that contest a given space...” Dance can have explicitly political content (see Kolb, 2011), or it can take forms that affirm raced or gendered social hierarchies (see Cresswell, 2006). Dance can become shaped by its funding context (see Lee and Byrne, 2011), and at such moments differences in the mainstream value placed on diverse dance forms are sharpened, so that those associated with minority groups (in particular the wide range of dance forms often bundled together in the UK as ‘black dance’, see Carty, 2007) receive very little funding. And, as a resource-dependent art form, the whole dance sector is highly vulnerable to politicised changes in cultural policy (see Harrison, 2013).

*enact* the movement, as performance does, albeit with virtuosity and engagement, but also *networks* it within a much wider repertoire of corporeal protocols (based on the limits and potential of the entrained body), and *derives* it from a much wider reservoir of socio-cultural signification. Therefore, despite place ballet's very welcome focus on embodiment without the need for rationalisation, this question of choreographic *process* (connection and derivation) is crucial to an effective mobilisation of dance and movement in the city: "By distinguishing between choreography and performance, the process of generating corporeal significance can be made more apparent. It is this process that connects dance to other cultural practices and larger systems of cultural values" (Foster, 1998, p. 11).

To conclude these thoughts on the relations between performance and choreography within the theory of place ballet, I want to focus briefly on how this relationship could be more deeply informed by actual dance practice. Ballet is not the genre most well-known for reflecting on urban movement repertoires: engagement with more urban-centric dance genres allows a deeper reflection on the choreography of urban place ballets. Tricia Rose (quoted in Foster, 1998, p. 14) theorises the improvised choreography of street corner break dancing as a choreographic philosophy that itself theorises the movement repertoires (habits, limits, shifting routines) of urban dwellers like myself. The philosophy is to: "create sustaining narratives, accumulate them, layer, embellish, and transform them. However, be also prepared for rupture, find pleasure in it, in fact, plan on social rupture." Similarly, Recollet (2015, pp. 141-2) notes that indigenous flash mob round dances in Canadian cities, like hip hop, rely on "rupture as a generative practice... infusing pathways, intersections and other spaces with this very specific form of love". As Foster (1998, p. 15) notes, break dancers are literally "thinking on their feet", and, I would argue, in line with Rose, what they are thinking about is how to move in, through and with a rapidly changing urban vortex. Close attention to the actual dance practice of break and pop, flash mob and round, along with the specific movement repertoires of a range of other urban-focused dance genres (see also Shipley, 2013, for a spatially fertile analysis of Ghana's Azonto dance genre), as well as attention to the actual practice of ballet, might therefore assist analysis of the lived choreography and performance of diverse place ballets about and within the city.

This reference to a range of dance genres brings in some questions around urban diversity. Taken together, the urban vortex and place ballet gesture towards a welcome emphasis on mobility, motion and materiality in and of the city at a range of scales, but each could go further in achieving a theorisation of mobile embodiment, and of material mobilisation, in and for the *diverse* city. In the next section, I suggest that attention to postcolonial and decolonial theories, particularly taken in relation to dance, could push towards a more deeply politicised sense of the co-constitutive movement of cities and diverse bodies, one that I illustrate through a brief auto-ethnography in the section after that.

### **Dancing between postcolonial and decolonial theory**

I have been very challenged by the interdisciplinary decolonial push in recent years (see for example Mignolo, 2010; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012). Postcolonial geography had become a comfort zone for me – I know the literature, I've contributed to it (see for example Noxolo, 2006; 2009; and Noxolo and Prezioso 2013), and I have reflected on how it relates to my sense of who I am and to my contribution to the discipline. For me, postcolonial geography explores the ongoing tensions,

tragedies and contradictions that ensue from colonialism as a historical legacy, including racialized oppressions. As such, it has a historical bent to it, a recursive prodding at national and global histories. But it is also very much ongoing, not only a settling in but also a 'settling up' with the former 'mother country': the boundaries of and between the formerly colonised and the formerly colonising shift, blur and above all expand, as global forms of exploitation continue to evolve. I was first challenged by an indigenous critique of postcolonial theory back in 2004, when I went to Australia and New Zealand as a visiting researcher. There, Maori, Aboriginal and Pacific Islands scholars gave me a very warm welcome, listened to my papers as a visiting scholar, and told me, in no uncertain terms, that there was nothing 'post' about their colonialism – they were still in the thick of it. In the decolonial theory that I have read since then, not only from indigenous theorists, but also from racialized and other minorities, (for example Tuck and Yang, 2012; Mbembe, 2016; and Esson et al, 2017) I can see the ongoing unfolding of that forceful critique, not only of ongoing direct colonisation and marginalisation, but also of a global system that is founded on and maintained by brutal inequalities and exploitations. I accept that decolonial theory requires a more urgent response now, in the 21st century, than what can be a rather mournful, recursive testifying in postcolonial theory – it requires eventful action in the here and in the now, and we see this in diverse local and transnational forms of activism, such as the transnational student-led 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign (see Elliott-Cooper, 2017; Khan, 2017).

Alive to this urgent need for direct activism to end direct oppression, I still want to hold on to the complexities around place and identity that are visible in both decolonial and postcolonial theories. There is a very intimate, entangled affect around place and identity in indigenous and decolonial theories: it starts from the embodied self in place, and the violences done to the body, to place, as well as to the entangled relations between them. In a collection that was ground-breaking in collecting together Aboriginal academic voices, Fabienne Bayet-Charlton (2003, p. 175) states that: "Without land there is no base for the structure of Aboriginal culture", yet indigenous people have been dispossessed of their lands repeatedly and brutally. It is for this reason that Julie Christensen's (2013, p. 821) study of homelessness amongst indigenous peoples in Canada concludes that "indigenous homelessness [is] a phenomenon that is multi-scalar and occurs both collectively (as a community, as a nation) and individually". Where postcolonial theory might describe this as the legacy of colonialism as a finished event with an ongoing power to wound and dispossess, decolonial theory describes an ongoing dispossession that yields what for me is nonetheless a very familiar affect - as one of Christensen's (2013, p. 821) interlocutors, an indigenous support provider, puts it, in words that resonate deeply for me with the experiences of racially marginalised men and women in a range of postcolonial states, including the UK: "For many people, they have that pain inside that they haven't dealt with, and it makes it so difficult to hold down a job, to hold down a place to live, to take care of yourself and your family". A similar sense of dispossession reverberates through postcolonial theories, across distances crossed by slave ships or migrant ships (see Noxolo, 2009), resonating (but not competing) with the cruel proximity of indigenous people's dislocation onto reserves and into institutions for example (see Esson et al., 2017).

Decolonial writing about dance reflects very acutely on these body-place entanglements, and the epistemic questions they raise in and for academic work. Sarah Hunt (2014, p. 28) uses dance as both a metaphor and a context for the kinds of "shapeshifting, of moving between worlds..." that she performs in crossing divides between different processes of knowledge-making at academic conferences and within indigenous community events. Metaphorically, as an indigenous scholar



Hunt 'dances' as she enters the conference centre, shifting between academic norms and responsibilities, and the responsibilities and ethics that come from her intimate network of family and community. Hunt, working between two worlds, is "caught in the discontinuous time of translation and negotiation" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 38), or, with a more spatial referent (since dance is movement in both space and time), in "a field of intersubjectivity [that]... is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and reinterpretation" (Langton, 2003, p.119). Hunt shows that much of indigenous knowledge is unknowable within the knowledge production regime of the conference, and gives the example of a "potlatch", an indigenous dance event, to show how some of that unknowability is linked to the importance of embodied knowledge in indigenous knowledge production. Hunt (2014, p. 30) learns how to dance, a key element of cultural participation, not by following instructions, but by "following in the footsteps of my aunts as I learned over and over what it is to perform our law, our business, our spiritual obligations and relationships." The links between this, place ballet, and Foster's (1998) description of choreography (see above) are very plain: dance is not only *performed* as movement that is repeated until it becomes routine within the body (as in place ballet), but performance is given significance by a *choreography* that (metonymically, one might argue) connects the embodied person's movements with the corporeal repertoire of indigenous place-based embodied culture, and derives those movements from the place-based philosophies of lived civic relationship and spiritual obligation that underpin indigenous culture.

Moreover, as choreography rather than commentary, these connections and derivations are not overlaid on the dance – they are accessed directly through corporeal participation in the movement. Hunt (2014, p. 30) says: "There was a productive confusion in this way of learning, one which would not have been possible had I been told in a linear way how to dance at a potlatch." This "unhinged, uncomfortable" (Hunt, 2014, p. 31; see also Noxolo 2009) movement experience enables Hunt (2014, p. 31) not only to conceive of the important epistemic question: "How do we come to know that which is rendered outside the knowable world?", but also to connect this epistemic question directly with an important corporeal question, around the relative absence within the mainstream academy of the Indigenous people who carry the embodied knowledge that is otherwise unknowable within the mainstream academy: "So what does it mean for Indigeneity to be theorized, accounted for, and constructed as a category, within hegemonic geographic systems of knowledge production where only a small number of Indigenous people situate their work?" (see also Todd, 2016).

If we reconnect Hunt's questions with both place ballet and the urban vortex, we see that it matters *which* bodies move repeatedly in the choreographies of place ballet (Symes, 2013), and *which* bodies animate and are caught up in the "volatility, intensity and centrality" (Hall and Savage, 2016, p. 85), particularly when we recall that the urban vortex concept begins in post-Apartheid Durban (Freund and Padayachee, 2002). We also see that this gendered, sexualised, racialized, ethnicised mattering is not an essentialist or exclusivist question in relation to the city. As place ballet implies, the embodied experience of movement in urban space, particularly if we understand it not just as performance but also as choreography, is a site of production of embodied knowledge about the city: but as Hunt's questions and experience imply, embodied knowledge is itself produced through choreographed movement that connects with specific and located urban movement repertoires that are sometimes incommensurable with other urban movement repertoires, and derives from systems of signification in and about the city that are also shot through with difference.

Further, as the urban vortex implies, the aggregated effects of these multiple and diverse embodied experiences and knowledges of urban space entails an urban space that is itself irresistibly and *diversely* mobile, mobilised through multiple and diverse material practices of planning, building, dismantling, trading, walking and dancing. This is not to undermine the centralised, agglomerative, directionality of the urban that the vortex suggests, but to highlight its limitations in the face of the highly diverse city. If the city is mobilised by all its diverse bodies, and the diverse knowledges they all embody, then it may not only have vortex-like centripetal forces of power and privilege that push inwards, upwards or downwards, but it might also have centrifugal forces that resist or push against the directionality of the vortex, ultimately pushing outwards and away from any one city<sup>3</sup>.

To get a sense of the texture of this more diverse, mobilised city, I want to explore the intimate and entangled relationships among place and embodied identity, the decolonial and the postcolonial, within a re-embodied and re-politicised interaction between place ballet and urban vortex. I will do this through the embodied specificity of a brief auto-ethnography of growing up in Birmingham. After this, the conclusion will draw on these tangled threads in order to swing the problem of sustainable community arts around, so that it can be looked at from a slightly different angle.

### **Diverse city: post/decolonising place ballet and the urban vortex in and for Birmingham**

I am the youngest of a family of mum, dad and five children. When I was born in the mid-1960s, we were living in a small house in Birmingham city centre. The house was rented in relation to my dad's job with the Midlands Electricity Board: whenever I see their acronym, MEB, now only as I step on ancient manhole covers and walk past peeling posters, I remember the Christmas parties, outings and pantomimes laid on by a benevolent employer for their workers' children, as well as my dad's work van parked by the communal garages, and his overalls stinking of creosote from treating fences. These resistant traces left in the urban landscape connect my mobile body now, step by step, glance by glance, not only with the sights, smells and laughter of a small-scale Birmingham childhood, but also with the employment practices of major companies who shaped the city's energy landscape. The performance of my place ballets, both then and now, is conditioned by the historical relations of power and conviviality within which it is choreographed.

Mum worked as a nursing auxiliary; Dad did carpentry for the MEB his whole working life. In Jamaica both had trained in skilled trades: dad was a cabinet maker, mum a dressmaker. Like many of the immediately post-colonial migrants who Clive Harris (1993) described as a racially-defined 'reserve industrial army', they were rarely unemployed but were constantly underemployed. The particular conditions of reservation and insertion of the formerly colonised population, who were "consolidated [as a] relative surplus population" within a "racialized hierarchy" of employment in the UK (Harris, 1993, p. 50) has led to a 2014 unemployment rate for Birmingham's black population that is approximately three times that of the white population in the city (BRAP, 2015), within an

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<sup>3</sup> Another way of considering difference, without overstressing the vortex metaphor too much, would be to complicate it by beginning to imagine the city as a rotational vortex, rather than an irrotational one, such that each particle (or person) in urban space rotates on their own axis, as well as being pulled directionally by the forces of urban movement (see Shapiro, 1961, which is a beautiful film of the post-war educational genre). This is a more limited metaphor for the effects of diversity than the reference to centrifugal forces that might oppose, or possibly even reverse, the vortex. It is also crucial to remember that urban forces are the aggregate of diverse practices, in much the same way that water in a vortex is the aggregate of water particles: neither people nor particles are simply pulled around by a disentangled centripetal or centrifugal force.

overall city rate of unemployment that, in the 2016 figures (Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce, 2017, p. 11), stood at 9.0%, compared to a 4.9% UK average. In short, Birmingham is a post-industrial, postcolonial city (Henry et al, 2001), without a full quota of service jobs to replace the dwindling manufacturing ones (see Barber and Hall, 2008), and with high black and female employment in a public sector that is shrinking continually under austerity measures (Conley and Page, 2017). Amid these entanglements it is easy to see the attraction and sorting that Hall and Savage (2016) note within the urban vortex, but I also see the proud angle of my parents' heads when telling their children about their level of training, and the skilled familiarity of my parents' fingers when they touched fabric or wood. These embodied gestures tug against the violent force of the vortex: a counter-temporality of lingering cultural meaning pulls against the sociological and econological analyses of rapid urban change and draws attention to the non-linearity and counter-forces within the overall turbulence.

In the late 1960s my family moved to a maisonette (two-storey flat) on a council estate called Lee Bank. In my dreams I often wander around 1970s Lee Bank, up the concrete stairs and along the shared balconies, around the grey interiors of nearby tower blocks where friends from school or from church or from girl guides lived, or run errands along the parade of shops (newsagent, laundrette, chip shop) for one of a panoptical network of mothers: they kept us all in line by the implausible but real threat that (even before many of us even had landlines) news of bad behaviour would travel home faster than we could. My dreaming place ballets are nostalgic of course and highly specific to my own perspective (see also Hanley, 2017, and Adams, 2011, for similarly perspectival views of Birmingham). As Phil Jones (2004, pp. 379-80) has pointed out in his study of Lee Bank, maisonettes were designed for families like mine, with an eye to also encouraging community networks, but "this dwelling type has been among the most unpopular with tenants and often the first to be demolished in the later wave of 'post-modern' redevelopment schemes". However I want to argue that, not only in my dreams but also in my body, the architecture that formed my movement repertoires (walking down narrow walkways and lifts, deftly swerving into and out of tightly-packed flats and parades of shops, standing on balconies and in stairwells, as well as leaping down flights of stairs, or my running feet pounding on hard pavements) still informs the choreography of my place ballets now, despite or even *because* of the architectural ruptures in the urban vortex that mean that my maisonette no longer exists. For this reason, the shifting affects around settling in and moving on within the dance performance with which I began this article really moved me: virtuosity around assimilating and expressing the rupture and change highlighted by the concept of the urban vortex is as crucial to urban place ballets as are routine and continuity.

To finish this short reflection, I want to spend a little time contemplating the mobile city of Birmingham in terms of decolonial 'churn'. Hall and Savage (2015, p. 83) use the word 'churn' as a near-synonym of the vortex, and it retains a sense of mixing together in a circular motion, but also connotes a queasy feeling that might not always be comfortable (as when the stomach churns). I lived on a street named after the architect Thomas Rickman, an early 1800s architect, who began life as a quaker, as were many of the most well-known figures of the city's much-celebrated civic era, such as the Cadbury family and Joseph Sturge (see Green, 2011; Hall, 2002). However, Thomas Rickman became estranged from the Quakers before his architectural career really began. Indeed, much of Rickman's architectural practice can be seen in the design of Anglican and Catholic churches in Birmingham (Aldrich, 2018). This includes St Thomas's church, the post-war ruins of which were a fascination for me as a child, when I was a pupil at St Thomas's primary school. I spent many hours

staring, through the bars that surrounded the playground, at the half-church rising like a ship from the pavement, surrounded by post-war factories and hospitals. Behind me, the Ryans and Rehanas, and Tariqs and Rebeccas, and Jacquies and Leroy's who shouted each other's names across the playground reflected the historically multi-faith, multicultural character of Birmingham's inner city areas – in the 1950s and 60s, colonial and Commonwealth migrants (Indian, Pakistani, West Indian, African) were tumbled into the churn of Jewish, Irish, Welsh, and rural English workers that the city had been drawing in from across the country, the empire, the world since the industrial revolution that began a couple of centuries earlier. This story of centuries of churn, of queasy shifts across identities, of disquieting traces of destruction and rebuilding, of generation after generation tumbling, settling, mixing in, goes a long way further in describing the constantly mobile city of Birmingham than the smooth-sounding melting pot.

I grew up in an explicitly decolonising moment, at a time when it was clear to all that the empire was ending, and consequently at a time of anguished public self-questioning about Britain's new status in the world (James and Harris, 1993). This decolonial 'nausea' (Ahluwalia, 2003) was accompanied by a savagely hostile narrative that refused to connect immigration to empire, instead figuring it as a series of unwanted invasions into British society (described in terms of waves of migration crashing in, rather than in terms of vortex metropolises pulling people in). The colonial silt of racist stories, images and cultural practices that was at that time a largely unquestioned foundation of mainstream British culture has been heavily contested in the intervening years (see for example Ross, 1996; Hesse, 1993). But in the decolonising moment of 1960s and 70s Birmingham, and continuing into the decolonial moment that is now, the surface of community life is constantly ruffled and roughed up. Nonetheless, in its ongoing processes of decolonisation, I have always experienced Birmingham as a city community whose rough churn belongs to all who are in the mix, even though each of us is not always made to feel that we belong to it.

The churn continues. In fact, there is an ongoing expansion of the vortex energy of the city, pulling people in and constantly redeveloping the environment within which they move. Co-producing mobile communities, the city's architecture is constantly on the move, from red-brick terraces to high-rise blocks, to luxury glass-fronted apartments (Jones, 2004). The vortex is thoroughly spatial in terms of constant movement through and around the city, not only movement of people, goods, services and money, but also of glass, steel, wood and concrete. This material movement forms the vortex that draws people in centripetally, but there is also a centrifugal force that flings people and materials outwards. Birmingham has many external geographies (Massey, 2006): there are investors bringing money in to fund the ongoing construction (BBC, 2017), and there are also investors sending remittances to change the environment in other parts of the world (Ndjio, 2009). Birmingham's planetary connections are multi-fold, and the centripetal urban vortex twists and moves, dancing and shuddering under the ongoing impact of its centrifugal counter-forces. Decolonial theory summons the urban vortex to recognise the diversely embodied people that are not simply lost in the vortex, but also continue to embody agency within processes of rapid urban change: the dizzying movement of the vortex is not a separate space to the everyday place ballets of bodies moving in the city.

## **Conclusion**

This article began with a set of questions stirred up by what the Flat Out projects, in 2014 and in 2017, revealed to me about how the grief and resignation stirred up by austerity immobilises urban public sector practice in relation to much-needed community arts. The article therefore reflects on and challenges existing paradigms around mobilisation and movement in and of the city, focusing on the urban vortex and on place ballet as two promising metonyms for movement of and in the city (respectively). Pushing both of these metonyms to engage with actual dance practice and with decolonial theories and practices around diversely embodied knowledge, I have argued that a greater sensitivity to choreography, rather than just performance, would highlight the ways in which urban movement connects with diverse movement repertoires, and derives from a highly diverse reservoir of cultural signification. The auto-ethnographic section, written from the perspective of a Birmingham childhood, illustrates, first, how the choreography of mobile, embodied place ballets is both historically and spatially conditioned; and, second, how the specificity of Birmingham's 'decolonial churn' is a historical queasiness that comes from the encounter between the urban vortex and a range of internal and external counter-forces.

This article does not aim to explore practical strategies towards sustainable arts: I am still turned expectantly towards the door. However, I do want to recognise the range of organisations who continue to actively practise community arts in the city, including Birmingham Royal Ballet's community arts section, Number 11 Arts, Birmingham Dance Network, ACE Dance and Theatre Company and many others. The first implication of the arguments in this article is that the city is always already mobilised. So a sustainable community arts will not necessarily be the product of yet another new community arts project: it will entail the creation of an ongoing set of connections between movement in and of the city and the arts. Such a set of connections will become all the more crucial at a time when the state infrastructure for sustaining community arts is so dramatically shrinking.

The second implication is that actual dance practice should inform geographical thought around urban movement much more thoroughly. I welcome the growing importance of embodied movement, but as geographers theorise the body ever more intensely I would like to push toward greater collaboration with the wide range of dance practitioners and scholars who have such a long history of 'thinking on their feet' (Foster, 1998, p. 15). This will entail more sustained collaborations between those who write the world (geographers), and those who move with it.

The final implication is that, if the wide range of geographical work that focuses on embodied performance begins more clearly to also recognise choreography, there will be a much more direct focus on power as a material, movement-oriented, force.

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