Perpetual Motion

Bench, Harmony

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In November 2013, pop star Pharrell Williams released a twenty-four-hour online music video, *24 Hours of Happy*. It features four hundred people dancing along the streets of Los Angeles alone or in small groups, moving in their own individual styles while lip-syncing to Pharrell’s continuously looping song “Happy,” written for the animated feature film *Despicable Me 2*. In addition to being a durational work made for the web, *24 Hours of Happy* is a clock; mousing over the screen reveals a time-telling feature. Every four minutes, the length of Pharrell’s song, the spotlight shines on a new performer or group that has a single take to walk, sashay, turn, stomp, fist-pump, jump, kick, bounce, and snap their way down sidewalks and across streets. Throughout the twenty-four-hour video, there are cameo appearances by familiar faces, such as Steve Carrell, Alex Wong, Magic Johnson, and Ana Ortiz. At the top of each hour, Pharrell himself appears dance-walking through alleyways, boxing rings, and bowling alleys and singing with a gospel choir. Prompted by the lyrics to “clap along if that’s what you wanna do,” the performers collectively sidestep and sidewind around neighborhoods and businesses from sunrise to sunset—and then they keep going.

A few dancers perform steps that reveal expertise in a dance style, such as tap, ballet, or popping, but the majority of participants represent the dancing abilities of the general population. A Steadicam operated by Jon Beattie tracks their movement, which is sometimes mundane, occasionally on point, and frequently delightful. The continuously receding camera
forces them to keep pace, and the emphasis on the dancers’ forward motion shapes the movement vocabulary available, filtering all gestures—however stage, street, or silly—through the lens of pedestrian locomotion. The only edits appear at the conclusion of each iteration of the song. The camera points skyward or at the floor to set up the next take, smoothing transitions between each performance. The result is a never-ending music video without obvious cuts. Recalling the hyperdances discussed in chapter 1, video controls allow viewers to pause/play and fast-forward or rewind through different scenes, and the work includes information about the production team, participants, and view count. But 24 Hours of Happy also exceeds the capabilities of hyperdance, being filmed in public spaces and circulated online, as we saw with dance in public in chapter 2, and incorporating contributions from the crowd, as we saw in chapter 3. Thus 24 Hours of Happy is a fitting piece for the concluding chapter of this book.

Made for sharing, the participatory elements of 24 Hours of Happy situ- ate the work distinctly within a social media era. Viewers can share a moment from the video on their social media accounts, comment on any of the scenes, and, of course, purchase the music track on iTunes. In this chapter, I focus on additional ways in which 24 Hours of Happy is shared: the independent artist Anne Marsen from the online film Girl Walk///All Day discussed in chapter 2 accused Pharrell of plagiarizing the concept for the twenty-four-hour music video, Pharrell’s fans re-created short versions of the music video and posted videos of themselves to sites such as YouTube, and designers Julie Fersing and Loïc Fontaine have, in turn, created a website.

Figure 28. Screenshot of a woman dancing in Los Angeles’s Union Station from 24 Hours of Happy (2013), featuring Pharrell Williams, directed by We Are from LA, produced by Iconocast Interactive.
called We Are Happy From to aggregate the distributed fan-produced content into a single dedicated site. As the proliferation of online “Happy” phenomena shows, as dance circulates through social media, the boundaries between theft, appropriation, sharing, homage, participation, and fandom blur significantly.

In *Spreadable Media*, Henry Jenkins and his coauthors suggest that commercial and cultural appropriative tendencies are embedded as fundamental flaws in Web 2.0 logic, which “transforms the social ‘goods’ generated through interpersonal exchanges into ‘user-generated content’” that can be taken up and used by anyone—including and especially those who stand to profit financially. But the traffic in images goes the other direction too, they contend, since “audiences often use the commodified and monetized content of commercial producers as raw material for their social interaction.” This dynamic provides a core tension that motivates my analysis throughout this chapter: the monetization of a person’s or group’s creative labor by industry, the reclamation of commercial products and images by individuals and communities, and the debates over cultural access and ownership that result. In the field of dance, the collision of
music video and social media offers ready examples of this multisided, multisited phenomenon, where dancers upload material to the internet, which pop artists scour for inspiration for their music video routines, and which fans then reperform in their own online videos.

Imitation and replication lie at the heart of how dance travels. In considering how dance steps and dance practices circulate through digital media, fundamental questions regarding the nature of dance arise: can dances or steps be owned, and if they are not material objects, how is that ownership expressed? How does one give or receive movement? As anthropologist Michael Taussig observes in *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, “you can’t easily trade a language or steal a squint or a strange motion. But what you can do is imitate them if you want to or have to.” Imitating movement has very practical consequences for dancers whose movement innovations circulate beyond their spheres of influence and without attribution, for choreographers who have been unable to copyright their stage-based works, as well as for the dance enthusiasts who revel in the supposed universality and universal accessibility of dance. That dance travels via mimicry is no small thing. We saw in chapter 3 how Matt Harding progressively made room in his own body for the gestures of others as an indication of goodwill and a developing orientation toward a world rather than an abstract globe. This chapter furthers the consideration of what it means to share in the gestures of others with emphases on dance as gift, the relations of reciprocity that gifts are presumed to foster, and how movement communities negotiate the refusal of reciprocity. What is the difference between what we take as given and what we receive as gift?

Here I focus on the intensification of neoliberal economic logics in the early twenty-first century that encourages, on one hand, an ideology of free giving that obscures social and deferred costs and, on the other hand, encourages the monetization of what appears to be given or made freely available. Contemporary entrepreneurial activities mine collective archives and compel computer users to donate their personal data and the like in exchange for access to online services. We need only look at the success of Facebook or Google to understand “free” as a business model. In his parsing of sharing and pseudo-sharing behaviors on social networking sites (SNSs), business and marketing scholar Russell Belk observes that
“the ubiquitous ‘share’ button and invitations to share from the SNS are best regarded as nicely packaged invitations to provide content to the site, encourage more participants, and in so-doing provide information that can be sold to advertisers, marketers, and research firms.”5 Gift economies directly participate in this logic of financialization, which, dance and political theorist Randy Martin has argued, “brings people together only to seem to take away what they thought they possessed.”6 Dance, as Anthea Kraut acknowledges, may simultaneously participate in gift and market economies.7 These economies are not antithetical to each other, but each suggests proximity or distance among participants in a relationship of exchange, or the worlds in which they participate. The convergence of gift and market economies complicates perceptions of inclusivity and exclusivity, rights of access versus those of reuse or reproduction, and expanding gestural repertories in a corporeal common as dances travel from screen to screen and body to body.

In this chapter, I offer examples from approximately 2009 to 2016 to propose that dance circulates in digital cultures as a gift but that the content of this gift belongs to a common. As dances travel beyond the communities that provide them with context, questions of cultural theft and appropriation arise, particularly where artists and entrepreneurs fail to give credit to others for their contributions. Throughout the chapter, I consider Pharrell’s 24 Hours of Happy as well as fan responses to the long-form music video and the repackaging of those fan responses by others. I also analyze questions of appropriation and what I call infelicitous acts of transfer through the examples of Karen X. Cheng’s video Girl Learns to Dance in a Year (2013) and the online profile video This Amazing Girl Mastered Dubstep Dancing by Just Using YouTube (2016) featuring a young dancer, Adilyn Malcolm, both of whom claim a space for themselves as dancing autodidacts. Fan engagement with music videos like Michael Jackson’s Thriller (1983) and dance video games like the Dance Central series provide avenues through which dance movements circulate beyond specific communities of practice and beyond any agreed-upon parameters that govern the corporeal common from which community members draw and to which they contribute. The place of these media within the global market of American popular culture facilitates the transfer of gestural information they contain.
When dances travel without authorship, attribution, or a sense of participation within a community, a decontextualization that is key to how dances circulate through digital spaces, they become positioned within a corporeal common that ostensibly can be mined by anyone. In my analysis of the 2011 controversy between American pop singer Beyoncé Knowles and Belgian choreographer Anne Theresa De Keersmaeker, as well as a 2014 rehearsal video by American choreographer Alexandra Beller that went viral, I examine how both artists and entrepreneurs obscure sources of their creative material to favor their own authorial position and how De Keersmaeker and Beller in particular responded to challenges to their authorship. A principal concern throughout the chapter is the way that the loss of local specificity is crucial to dance’s broad accessibility and marketability, which creates a tension between dance as an expression of cultural belonging and as a commodity. Alternatively, positing dance as gift of the common sustained through the social ties and mutual indebtedness of practitioners may help to work against what I call infelicitous acts of transfer. My aim in this chapter is neither to advocate nor to dismiss dance as a common-pool resource but to grapple with how dance artists, practitioners, and fans leverage different corporeal commons and how the structuring concepts of credit and debt that define an era of financialization may be recuperated for understanding dance as a gift of the common.

INFELICITOUS ACTS OF TRANSFER

A few months after 24 Hours of Happy premiered, Anne Marsen, who starred in the 2011 independent online film Girl Walk//All Day, accused Pharrell of pinching Girl Walk’s concept and posted a side-by-side video comparing scenes from the two pieces to substantiate her claim. As evidence, she included a scene from 24 Hours of Happy in which a man sports a colorful wind-breaker similar to Marsen’s; scenes in which Pharrell kicks his heels and snaps his fingers; and additional scenes of participants fan-kicking their legs, dancing in pairs, or flailing about on the street. Bloggers, of course, quickly offered up their own opinions of whether Pharrell’s team was engaged in creative plagiarism and if, once again, the entertainment industry had gobbled up the innovations of independent artists only to pass them off as their own. Philosopher Alva Noë offered his own take on the controversy for National Public Radio, suggesting that Marsen’s
claims of plagiarism were specious: “Nobody stole any steps. They didn’t need to. The steps were everyone’s already to start with.” Without question, both 24 Hours of Happy and Girl Walk//All Day certainly participate in the same aesthetic moment and share key traits. Just as Girl Walk’s director, Jacob Krupnick, wanted to inspire the everyday dancer, We Are from LA, the French directing duo behind 24 Hours of Happy, wanted to “get some freshness, some spontaneity,” and, in representing diverse populations, get audiences to identify with the performers “and just say ‘Why not me?’” Beyond their lengthy durations, explorations of aesthetic and cultural diversity in urban U.S. contexts, and mutual embrace of amateur and everyday aesthetics, a direct relationship between the two works remains speculative. Aesthetic influence can be difficult to prove. Copying, however, is another matter entirely.

Copying is integral to the circulation of dance, embedded in training, rehearsal, performance, and reperformance as seen throughout this book. Copying is also central to debates in dance scholarship, ongoing at least since black dance studies scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild published her 1996 book Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance. In this book, Gottschild shook Eurocentric dance scholarship at its core by revealing, among other things, the influence of African American cultural
practices on neoclassical choreographer George Balanchine. Ever since, dance scholars have been grappling with the politics of how dance steps and movement aesthetics travel across boundaries of race, nation, and culture. Particularly vexing is that such sharing of movement inevitably occurs amid an imbalance of power. As Priya Srinivasan notes in her analysis of the transnational circulation of classical Indian dance, “dance is embodied and passes from body to body whether we like it or not.” In his analysis of technique in performing arts practices, Ben Spatz similarly emphasizes that “technique does not circulate under conditions of freedom or justice.”

Anthea Kraut’s extensive study of choreographic copyright is of signal importance for understanding the history of how dance artists have activated legal and economic language to claim authorship and ownership of movement ideas in order to protect localized worlds of meaning. She analyzes how, without recourse to copyright law, African American vernacular dancers in the Jazz Era established a system of choreographic exchange that included a code of ethics within it. Dancers imprinted certain dance moves with their signature style, and these were accompanied by unwritten agreements about the conditions under which a dancer could perform someone else’s signature steps. Additionally, community policing in the form of disruptive action reprimanded violators for trespassing these norms. While mimicry fueled development, Kraut clarifies that the commercial arena constituted a different economy than that of the clubs and communities in which dancers developed their material. Thus, “when exposure and money were at stake,” different rules applied; “dancers treated their ‘pet steps’ as a kind of intellectual property, and theft of that property constituted blatant infringement.” In this way, Kraut argues, African American performers found ways to embody and deploy the logic of intellectual property for their movement specialties, even as the community practice of “stealing steps” was crucial to the advancement of dance forms in the absence of official pedagogy. Playing at the boundaries between gift, theft, and sharing in a common vocabulary, stealing steps multiplied dance as a resource, while the community also placed limitations on performance to protect individual rights by visibly marking instances of trespass.

In dance studies, analyses of how gestures travel and change as they move from one cultural group to another have generally taken place within the
structuring concept of cultural appropriation. Whereas appropriation as recycling or reframing holds a positive valence in the visual and literary arts as well as in postmodern-leaning circles of dance-makers, in dance scholarship, appropriation has referred negatively to instances of artists “stealing” movements, styles, or approaches—typically from socially disadvantaged groups. Within the framework of appropriation, access to material may be unauthorized, or the material may be misused in such a way as to benefit the recipient and/or harm the donor. As ethnomusicologist Kiri Miller observes in the case of learning dances from video games, “performers might mean no harm but still inflict injury.” In other words, acts of cultural imperialism are not limited to those pursued with obvious ill intent.

An understanding that appropriation consolidates power and prestige through acts of cultural dispossession motivates these debates, giving rise to such questions as who owns specific dance practices and who has access to them, and how artists and cultural outsiders transform publicly available gestures and movement ideas into something for private monetary gain or individual cultural capital. In her analysis of bioprospecting, or investing in the “discovery” of Indigenous knowledge that can be converted into patented pharmaceutical products, intellectual property scholar Eva Hemmungs Wirtén describes this process as “acquisition, concentration and control, and finally recirculation and regulation.” Her formula offers a precise account of how knowledge-as-practice, immaterial labor, and financial investment travel and is generative for considering the circulation of gestures and dances alongside and within neoliberal capitalism. First, one gains access to and acquires a desired object, skill, or knowledge. Then, by accumulating influence, one restricts others’ access to the same. Finally, one controls the supply and the channels of its redistribution.

This model of appropriation recalls John Locke’s theory of property, in which ownership results from mixing what is unowned (or part of the common) with one’s labor, enabling appropriation to function specifically as a mechanism of possession. The addition of one’s own labor transforms what is shared as part of a collective inheritance into what is owned as individual property. However, the transformative power of labor that Locke identified is explicitly linked to the race and gender politics of colonial expansion where appropriation is positioned as the exploitative counterpart
to acculturation: colonial and settler logics created the conditions for extracting capital in the form of natural resources, Indigenous knowledges, and cultural practices. As Gottschild, Kraut, Srinivasan, Caroline Picart, Jacqueline Shea Murphy, and others have shown in the field of dance, the transformative labor of some individuals, namely, white men, has been legally recognized through copyright and intellectual property protections, while the labor of others, namely, women and people of color, has not been equivalently evaluated or protected. In a legal and economic framework that favors the contributions of some over others, not all creators have been equally positioned to claim the rights of authorship or attribution, let alone derive monetary benefit from their innovations.

Eric Lott has described this imbalance as both love and theft in American race relations playing out in the field of cultural production. In mining the origin story of blackface minstrelsy, Lott focuses on the relationship between the enterprising white actor T. D. Rice and a black man named Cuff, from whom Rice has “borrowed” the apparel for his act. Onstage wearing black makeup and Cuff’s clothing, Rice stirs up the audience with his antics, while Cuff waits half-naked backstage. The arrival of a steamboat, the source of Cuff’s income as a porter, brings the act to an uproarious conclusion as Cuff proceeds to reappropriate his belongings to go meet the boat. Cuff’s central place in the origin tale, and specifically his literal and metaphorical denuding, Lott suggests, titillates with the “threat that he may return to demand his stolen capital” and functions as an “allegory for the post-slavery economy of blackness” in which black people, as well as markers of black identity and culture, were both desired and feared by white audiences and cultural producers. The narratives Lott analyzes “share an anxiety over the fact of cultural ‘borrowing,’” particularly as “issues of ownership, cultural capital, and economics arise” around the stars of blackface minstrelsy. Notably, Cuff can take back his material belongings, but not the nonmaterial songs, dances, or speech patterns, which, in their maligned form, made Rice a very wealthy man. Cuff cannot take them back because they were never his (alone) to begin with, and because Rice’s market-oriented transformation has made them into something other than what they were—a commodity. Functioning both as a historical figure and as an archetypal character in this parable, who or what Cuff is or might have been, as manifested in corporeal practices such as
song and dance, has been reconfigured as a projection of white Americans’ fears and desires. As we see in Lott’s retelling of Cuff’s story, the stakes are nothing less than the self-possession upon which ownership of culture is founded, a self-possession that cannot be disentangled from the history of slavery.

To say that these anxieties at the nexus of race relations and market circulations are still prominent despite the prevalence of cultural hybridity and globalization is an understatement. Despite a significant shift in how dance and other movements travel from one site to another in digital global economies, the turn of the twenty-first century has not seen a shift in rhetorics of ownership and cultural imperialism. Indeed, concerns over and claims of appropriation and cultural theft have only amplified in online “call-out” culture. Accusations of appropriation attempt, in part, to correct historical wrongs, and, as media theorist Lisa Nakamura suggests of call-out culture in general, to “create better conditions for women and minorit[ies]” online. Professional and amateur artists, fans, and anti-fans cry foul over recontextualizations of material over which they feel a sense of ownership, even when it circulates widely and beyond anyone’s direct control.

Reflecting on the prevalence of white pop stars who “borrow” fad dances from their nonwhite backup singers and dancers, Gottschild has, like Lott, traced a pattern of appropriation to the minstrel era, arguing that for centuries, “whites have [had] the privilege of appropriating black cultural goods and tailoring them to their culture-specific needs.” From blues to jazz to hip-hop and rap, from Madonna to Eminem to Miley Cyrus, white musicians have long benefited from participating in or borrowing from black music and dance forms, prompting unresolved debates regarding the merits of their participation, compensation, and recognition by the music and dance industries. What is interesting about Marsen’s claim that Pharrell’s 24 Hours of Happy plagiarized Girl Walk//All Day is that it inverts the racial dynamics presupposed in most discussions of appropriation, while reinforcing the gender and class dynamics found in intellectual property debates.

As African American pop artists have become prominent figures in the mainstream, they, like white artists, have been accused of appropriation. Beyoncé is a frequent target for such accusations, because she, with the
choreographers in her employ, openly mines the archives of both popular and experimental dance for her music videos and choreography. Her approaches are not unique, however, since sampling, remix, and versioning have long been crucial to the project of embedding black histories within black musical practices. Yet, Beyoncé seems to have received more than her fair share of criticism. Perhaps Beyoncé’s sources are more discoverable than those of her predecessors and peers, because hers is an internet-savvy audience. Or perhaps the fact that Beyoncé mines both white and black archives poses a specific, uncomfortable challenge to white supremacy. Perhaps Beyoncé’s status as a black female success story makes her a perfect scapegoat for a practice that is as pervasive as it is ethically ambiguous. In any case, online commentators and scholars have pointed to Beyoncé’s direct quotation of choreography in the music videos Get Me Bodied (2009) (Bob Fosse’s “Rich Man’s Frug” from the 1969 film Sweet Charity), Single Ladies: Put a Ring on It (2009) (Fosse’s 1969 “Mexican Breakfast” routine from The Ed Sullivan Show and additional choreography from Sweet Charity), and Countdown (2011) (Thierry de Mey’s 1997 film adaptation of Anne Theresa De Keersmaeker’s stage-based work Rosas danst Rosas [1983] and De Keersmaeker’s 1994 film of her work Achterland [1990]), which I discuss in more detail at the end of the chapter. As these few examples show, like so many other aspects of cultural production, dance can function as both a belonging, that is to say, as an exploitable form of intellectual property, and a mode of belonging, or a means through which individuals demonstrate their affiliation with a group. Tensions arise, it seems, when a dance or dance practice flows from one sense of belonging to another. Importantly, it is not commodification as such that produces this tension but what commodification enables: the circulation of gestural belongings outside the communities of practice that manifest social belonging through those very gestures, and the financial profits that accrue to those who facilitate monetized circulation as compared to community participation.

Rather than take accusations of appropriation as truth claims to be proved or disproved, Srinivasan has usefully reframed such claims as “performative gestures” that momentarily disrupt the too-easy translation from cultural practice to commodity that broadens access outside the boundaries of community. By calling them out, accusations of plagiarism
or theft check individuals or corporate entities set up to profit from collective production, even if accusers are unable to prevent the transfer they oppose. Part of a moral economy theater scholar Elizabeth Dillon locates in the embodied public sphere, or what she calls the performative commons, such performative gestures assert “a concept of the commons and the common good, announcing a set of relations and obligations among the members of a community.”

Accusations of appropriation call out a performative injury, a trespass of symbolic violence that results in indirect emotional suffering rather than direct physical pain. They are a reminder of the obligation to act morally and an assertion of proximity and responsibility toward others where distance, mediated by commerce, has been assumed by at least one party.

Blogger Radical Faggot offers an example of calling out cultural appropriation in their thoughtful and heartfelt post “Vogue Is Not For You”: “Voguing belongs to queer people of color—specifically trans, poor, working, sex-working, homeless and young queer people of color. We created it, we need to be the ones dancing it, and we need to be the ones protecting it. . . . [It] is laughable that the privileged find such discomfort in our limiting their access to our bodies, traditions and genius.” In addition to criticizing the use of vogue by white, cis-gendered, or wealthy individuals, Rad Fag also critiques the desire to leverage vogue for profit from within the ballroom community, fusing decolonial performative gestures with anticapitalist ones. In Rad Fag’s view, any use of vogue that is not primarily a practice of belonging that affirms the experiences of the politically disenfranchised and economically precarious is immoral.

In the performative commons of the internet, call-out commentary that serves as a reminder of mutual obligation, responsibility, and the ethics of limiting access is not generally well received. As Nakamura notes, the efforts of feminist and antiracist advocates to improve the space of the internet by drawing public attention to misogynistic, racist, homophobic, and ableist speech “are unwanted, punished, and viewed as censorship, uncivil behavior, or themselves a form of sexism [or racism, etc.].” Yet these important voices of dissent highlight what is at stake as dance travels through digital spaces, disconnected from communities and packaged as commodities to circulate “freely.” Such voices press against an overarching ideology that claims all knowledge, art, or culture as a universal human
birthright, available for entrepreneurial transformation from collective production into private wealth. They point to something amiss in what Taussig describes as the “bewildering cross connections between gift, theft, and trade” that accompanied European colonization, which globalization has only exacerbated. Where globalization has produced an abstract globe as discussed in chapter 3, call-out culture defends localized worlds of meaning and their modes of being-in-common.

In a global market economy, a model of cultural transfer based on colonial encounter is no longer sufficient to describe the commodification and circulation of cultural practices. Instead of appropriation, then, I wish to speak of infelicitous acts of transfer, after performance theorist Diana Taylor. In The Archive and the Repertoire, Taylor argues that performances “function as vital acts of transfer” of knowledge and identity. But she also notes that performances may travel among dominant and nondominant groups, influencing and changing the course of other performances. She notes, however, that this process of “mutual construction” is one that few theorists seriously consider and that such a conversation would “demand the recognition of the permanent recycling of cultural materials and processes between the Western and non-Western [and] the transformative process undergone by all societies as they come in contact with and acquire foreign cultural material, whether willingly or unwillingly.”

Even within Taylor’s own project, which analyzes the clearly exploitative scenario of transmitting Indigenous knowledges under conditions of conquest, she points beyond readings that limit acts of transfer to unidirectional appropriation.

As performance practices circulate through global economies, Taylor’s “vital acts of transfer” take on a new function, not only transmitting “communal memories, histories, and values from one group/generation to the next” but also transmitting empty gestures into which new meanings and values are projected in response to changing circumstances. Older meanings continue to resonate, perhaps structurally embedded in dance forms and practices as they circulate, but, adapting to new contexts and populations with different histories and memories, new meanings may obscure the old, transforming a practice’s intrinsic or social value into a market value. Although Miller correctly observes in her analysis of internet-based kinesthetic cultures that “we still have to learn from other people’s bodies,
finding a way to comprehend their kinesthetic knowledge and make it our own,” to use J. L. Austin’s terminology, there can be something infelicitous about such acts of transfer. Austin uses infelicitous to describe the use of performative utterances (speech acts that transform the reality they describe) in contexts where their transformations cannot be realized. Examples of infelicitous performatives include performing a wedding ceremony in a theatrical play or appointing someone to a position without the authority to do so. In such instances, the performative is unhappy. Staging a marriage in a play may not change the standing of the participants in the eyes of the law, yet the legal and cultural frameworks that operate beyond the theatrical frame enable the fictional function of such a staging. Similarly, there is potentially a failure or misfire when a gesture or movement circulates as a commodity with a use-value rather than as an expression of belonging and cultural affiliation. Yet, it is precisely this failure, this abstraction and decontextualization from a world of meaning, that enables movement and physical practices to circulate across bodies regardless of community affiliation, knowledge, history, or condoned participation. Those who take up or take on these gestures ascribe new meanings to them, in accordance with, as Gottschild remarks, “their culture-specific needs.”

For example, learning dances through YouTube tutorials and video games rather than with and alongside amateur and practiced dancers is now commonplace. Karen X. Cheng, who now creates videos for start-ups and other companies, documented her progress learning elements of popping, tutting, roboting, and other urban dance styles in her 2013 video *Girl Learns to Dance in a Year (TIME LAPSE).* This video offers compelling evidence for the importance of a daily, deliberate physical practice: over the course of the year, Cheng’s movements become more precise—the fluidity and sharpness in her gestures become more distinct, and her confidence and performance style become more apparent. Most of the video shows Cheng dancing in her home to Justice’s upbeat track “D.A.N.C.E.” (2007), but in a dramatic conclusion to her 365 days of dance, Cheng takes her new skills to a subway station—a preferred site of so many videos documenting urban dance phenomena. The music shifts to the smooth electronic melancholy of Dusty Brown’s “This City Is Killing Me” (2010) as Cheng disembarks from a BART train. Her neon green shirt complements the neon yellow at the platform’s edge; the stripe on her leggings
mirrors the stripes on the train cars. Almost immediately, the beat drops, and she drops her weight, rolling a shoulder and widening her stance. Each percussive sound is met with a gesture, and a tremolo in the electronic music waves in a ripple through her extended arm and comes back into her chest as she arches backward. The camera zooms in on her upper body. As the train departs and picks up speed, she is pushed further into the foreground of the image, appearing serenely rooted even as the train’s speed lends her movement more force and intensity than it actually possesses. Cheng gestures triumphantly—open chest, raised arms. It is all as if to say, “I have arrived.”

On a now-defunct website featuring the video, Cheng declares, “Some of the best dancers I know have never taken a dance class. They learned by imitating what they saw on YouTube.”40 Taken on its own, the visual rhetoric of Girl Learns to Dance in a Year (TIME LAPSE) seems to suggest that this is the path Cheng herself pursued, relying on the presence of online tutorials and her own resources to teach herself to dance—in the

Figure 31. Screenshot of Karen X. Cheng documenting her fourth day of dedicated dance practice in Girl Learns to Dance in a Year (TIME LAPSE) (2013).
space of a single year, no less. But, in fact, she credits her dance teachers on the video’s YouTube page, and on her old website, she incorporated a row of class cards from San Francisco’s City Dance Studios as a background design element. However, she has not provided this contextual information in the video itself, even though online videos circulate independently of additional information provided in descriptions, tags, or comment fields. The result, even if unintentional, is an erasure of influence in favor of an inspirational story of personal achievement. Furthermore, Cheng’s advocacy of learning dance from YouTube plays at the tensions between approaching dance as an acontextual physical practice aligned with fitness culture versus dance as a cultural practice aligned with participation in a community.

Take, as another example, a 2016 profile video by Fusion TV on YouTube titled *This Amazing Girl Mastered Dubstep Dancing by Just Using YouTube.* The young dancer Adilyn Malcolm, aka Audacious Adi, suggests that she has learned to dubstep by watching YouTube videos over a seven- or eight-month period. What the video calls dubstep dancing is a freestyle dance form that combines gliding footwork with tutting, waving, popping, and strobing, thus requiring physical fluency in each of these individual dance practices. The Fusion profile toggles between shots of the twelve-year-old Malcolm dancing on a gymnasium floor in jean shorts and a sports bra,
revealing her small but muscled frame, and sitting in her room watching YouTube videos of dancer Marquese Scott, who is credited in the YouTube video description but not in the video itself. To learn, Malcolm says she “watch[es] the video over and over . . . until [she] figure[s] out how they do it,” and further comments on how the ability to pause, rewind, and repeatedly watch these videos has enabled her to learn dubstep. She further notes that she has “learned all these things on the internet,” but what gets lost in attributing one’s ability to learn new styles of moving to the internet or to YouTube is the labor and creativity of the individuals who distribute their content through these platforms. In other words, Malcolm did not learn to dance from the internet. What she has learned, she has learned by imitating Scott and other dancers, and perhaps also by reading the constructive criticism that more practiced dancers have left as comments on her YouTube videos.

Both Cheng and Malcolm promote themselves as self-taught, aligning themselves with a popular narrative of the autodidact who achieves mastery without the benefit of formal training. Of course, practice by oneself is indispensable to learning any skill, but dance remains a social
practice, regardless if one learns in a studio, on a street corner, or from a screen. As William Given observes in his analysis of transmissions of Lindy hop, the understanding that communally oriented improvisational dance practices “can quickly be mastered through mimesis alone” is both presumptuous and reductive.48 Such an approach to learning takes dance practices out of the contexts that give them meaning. Furthermore, twenty-first-century narratives of quick mastery not only cheapen the accomplishments of dedicated dancers through hyperbole; they obscure the generosity of dancers who share their dances and dissect them in tutorials.49 Regardless of whether dancers attain their movement knowledge in formal settings, to learn dances and dancing is to partake in the corporeal generosity50 of others, to incorporate their donations of gesture and movement.

As dances circulate and multiply across bodies along the way, they lose their connection to local circumstances of production. Indeed, dance’s loss of local specificity is crucial to both its marketability and its global accessibility. In his analysis of African American social dance forms in 1970s popular media, dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz has questioned the “neoliberal right of access” that renders community practices available for general consumption.51 He laments that these dances, “at once precious and freely available,”52 have been transformed by neoliberalism so as to “absorb participants who have no sustained contact with the corporeal fact of black people in the world.”53 Rendered fugitive from their own signification, the decontextualization of black social dance practices makes them available to repurposing for profit, which further enables broad consumption by those who neither partake in nor necessarily sustain the communities from which these practices stem. DeFrantz acknowledges that there may be little choice in the matter, but there are consequences. He cautions that “bit by bit, YouTube video by video dance game, we lose our ability to understand these dances and their larger historical-aesthetic capacities.”54 The claim to a right of access carries with it both colonial and capitalist histories. As Kraut and others have demonstrated, in categorizing black dance and performance practices as “vernacular,” African American contributions to dance have been assigned to the collectively available folk idioms constituting the public domain, “effectively giv[ing] artists with greater access to the means of production license to mine and capitalize
on those forms for their own creative endeavors.” In other words, opening access can itself be an act of dispossession.

In an era of mass distribution via television and internet technologies and neoliberal free-market principles, dance forms and steps become raw material for remixing on television shows, in dance studios, in dance video games, and for reperformance on the internet in music video cover dances and the like. Although social norms and mores come into play in determining what types of movement are considered appropriate and for whom, evaluations viewers frequently make on the basis of dancers’ perceived sex and race, it is very difficult to limit physical vocabularies to the membership of a predetermined group. In legal and market terms, dance is non-excludable: attempts at choreographic copyright notwithstanding, people cannot effectively be barred from learning and participating in dances. Furthermore, dance is nonrivalrous: one person’s dancing does not prevent that of another. In contrast to rivalrous goods, for which one person’s usage or consumption presents a significant barrier to another’s simultaneous usage or consumption, a nonrivalrous good cannot be exhausted by one person’s use of it. Indeed, dance practices could be considered what Steven Weber has called anti-rival; the more people participate, the more value and affective weight they carry. Dance scholar Cynthia Novack, for example, notes that practitioners of the dance form contact improvisation liken their experience to the poker player who arrives in a town where no one plays the game and who must teach others in order to play. As Kraut argues, unlike other commodities in a capitalist system, dance circulates by rematerializing on other bodies. If one person dances, that does not prevent another person from also dancing, and, indeed, the more people who can be persuaded to dance, the more social and financial value dancing has. It is not, therefore, acts of transfer that are at issue so much as infelicitous uses that decontextualize dance practices to facilitate their greater commodification or that recast dance movements as without history, meaning, or specific cultural relevance. As they spread, such movements become part of the public domain, or a corporeal common. In the following section, I focus on the fabrication of this corporeal common through the sharing of movement practices in dance video games as well as in acts of fandom that reproduce music video choreography for popular entertainment.
A CORPOREAL COMMON

Almost immediately after 24 Hours of Happy appeared online, fans began recording and posting videos of themselves dancing to Pharrell’s hit tune on YouTube, contributing their own videos to a growing online archive of happiness. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, Pharrell recalls discovering that Happy had gone viral. He remarks, “And we were like, ‘What’s happening?’ . . . People are putting up their own videos. It was like no longer my song.”60 Happy deviates somewhat from the popular trend of rigorously embodying music video choreography in cover dances, seen especially clearly with fan reperformances of Beyoncé’s Single Ladies (2009) and Psy’s Gangnam Style (2012), because the video avoids spectacular choreography and employs everyday movements and accessible dancing instead. In responding to the call of happiness, fans explore their own style without questioning whether their dancing is correct or “good enough.” Happy’s choreography calls upon people to perform as themselves, drawing on whatever gestural resources, footwork, and rhythmic sensibilities they can access, dancing a dance that belongs to no one because the steps, as Noë points out and DeFrantz has troubled, belong to everyone. In Paris, a notably racially diverse group strolls through plazas with iconic architecture behind them.61 People in Warsaw clap, sway, and roller-skate.62 Seaside views feature prominently in a video from Croatia that includes young and old participants, as well as break-dancers, ballerinas, and folk dancers.63 And a group in Tehran dances in overcoats and jackets, incorporating a few swing dance steps and handstands.64

Even though the videos emphasize self-expression above conformity, key features keep the videos in direct conversation: fans record themselves in multiple locales, facing the camera, dancing or dance-walking, and usually lip-syncing. These shots are then edited together and overlaid with Pharrell’s song “Happy.” The effect is similar to the Where the Hell Is Matt? videos discussed in chapter 3. Some of these Happy videos are sponsored by local businesses or created by video production companies, and sometimes they are completely fan created. Either way, audiences leverage Pharrell’s popularity to build and fortify their own sociality and market-ability by taking up and sharing in the Happy text, perpetuating its circulation as they engage in their own social and cultural expression. The fans
Figure 34. Screenshot of dancers in the fan-produced video Happy We Are from Tehran (2014).

Figure 35. Screenshot of a street scene from the fan-made video Pharrell Williams—Happy (WARSAW IS ALSO HAPPY) (2014).
dance a happy dance without right or wrong, better or worse execution. *Happy* does not require knowledge of specialized movement vocabularies; a shimmy, a butt wiggle, a twist, a shuffle—all gestures are available to and for this dance because they are held in common.

In their book *Commonwealth*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri identify an “artificial” common “that resides in languages, images, knowledges, affects, codes, habits, and practices.” Whereas what they call the “natural” common is characteristically made up of tangible resources such as land and water in limited supply, dance practices are not scarce resources, nor can simultaneous participation by multiple parties deplete them. Indeed, like languages, habits, and affects, dance practices accrue meaning through their repetition as they spread across individuals, communities, and populations. Despite the continuing drive to privatize resources and wealth, Hardt and Negri recognize that “contemporary forms of capitalist production and accumulation, paradoxically make possible and even require expansions of the common.” For this reason, Randy Martin views contemporary revaluations of the common(s) with suspicion. Referencing the enclosure movement that forcibly removed eighteenth-century peasants from common lands, Martin argues that “now dispossession breeds commons without anyone needing to be moved anywhere.” Martin, Kraut, DeFrantz, Gottschild, and others help us see that there are conflicting logics of belonging at play in the unfettered circulation of movement. Logics of copyright and individual authorship as well as the ability of dance artists to exert control over their creative expression stand ambiguously alongside the commercial exploitation of user-generated content and the communal ownership of cultural expression, an ownership that contains within it the right to exclude nonparticipating populations. Indeed, the concept of the natural common requires adherence to practices of exclusion so as to avoid the very tragedy of the commons that Garrett Hardin famously describes in his economic fable. As DeFrantz has noted, however, the neoliberal ideology of access, and more specifically a post-racial ideology of access, clamors against any right to exclude, even though regulated access has historically made the commons possible and sustainable. It is this suspension or violation of the right to exclude toward which critics of cultural appropriation point, as we saw above with Rad Fag’s advocacy of limiting white, wealthy, cis-gendered access to vogue.
I do not wish to advocate for the proliferation of gestures through infelicitous acts of transfer, motivated by a neoliberal, post-racial, or still-colonial right of access. Nevertheless, regardless of whether gestures should circulate freely across moving bodies, they most certainly do. In situating dance as common, and, in the next section, as a gift of the common, I hope to emphasize that movement practices develop and circulate under conditions of mutual indebtedness, and that therefore care must be taken to distinguish what is offered as a gift from that which is “given,” that is, what is broadly available because it is already held in common. In this analysis, I take seriously Taylor’s call to consider performance practices as mutually constructed despite that the dancers whose labor and creativity are imbricated in the generation and circulation of danced movement may nevertheless wish to limit access to these practices. It is not my intention, then, to posit the common of dance as an antidote to cultural appropriation or capitalist expropriation. Instead, I explore the common as a model for understanding how dance circulates through early twenty-first-century digital cultures and what happens when technologically enabled decontextualization allows dancers to bypass the social norms that sustain a movement culture.

As exemplified by the fan reperformances of Pharrell’s Happy music video, in positing dance as common, I wish to think of dancing as what theater scholar Elizabeth Dillon calls a commoning practice. Whereas Marsen accused Pharrell of stealing Girl Walk’s concept for 24 Hours of Happy, fans who mimic the Happy music video are not accused of theft, because they do not try to pass it off as their own. Instead, the videos specifically include the song “Happy,” which ensures the recognizability of their contribution to a wide-ranging, global constellation of videos referencing the Happy music video. In this instance, fans do not mimic the movement or structure of Happy to steal it but to participate in it. With their participation, fans mobilize the shared vocabularies that popular music and dance make available as a way to craft shared reference points and common ground.

Taken up and put into play, movements are shared across bodies. By allowing oneself to be permeated with others’ gestures, for example, by learning a dance, one corporeally manifests belonging to a social group—even if that group is constituted in online spaces or through shared media
use rather than through physical proximity. As phenomenologist Rosalyn Diprose proposes, “the lived body . . . is built from the invasion of the self by the gestures of others, who [refer] to other others.” Reproducing the gestures of others, dancers invoke shared vocabularies in which their gestures or sequences of movement register as meaningful precisely because they are shared. Like spoken language, bodily movements are “techniques of the body” that articulate a form of gestural belonging. They offer a shared sense that gives meaning to a common world supportive of social or communal interaction.

Such gestures and dances, or what I call “embodied objects,” form a corporeal common through their communicability. Embodied objects are nonmaterial, corporeal objects that assume a bodily shape or sequence, and are transferable and transmissible across the bodies that are their primary medium. Gestures, steps, moves, movement phrases, dance routines, somatic practices, choreographic scores: all of these exist as movement ideas that take shape through corporeal instantiation and interpretation. They travel contagiously and accrue affective weight and meaning as they travel across the bodies that come to perform them. Embodiment activates these objects, which are similar to what philosopher Michel Serres calls “quasi-objects.” He offers the example of a ball: “A ball is not an ordinary object, for it is what it is only if a subject holds it.” By itself, the ball is meaningless. It must be activated through game play. Similarly, gestures, steps, and dances “make sense” only when put into play or into movement. As undanced dances, abstract choreographic structures, or mental images of movement, they only function as ideas. But when put into practice, they materially transform the bodies that carry, express, and transmit them and link those bodies to all the others who share a gestural or movement vocabulary.

One especially powerful example of how fans take up the contagious gestures of popular dance and, through reperformance, leverage a shared choreography to manifest a corporeal common is Michael Jackson’s Thriller. With some modifications, wedding celebrants the world over have performed this famous choreography. Filipino prison inmates performed it in a video uploaded to YouTube in 2009, and a 2010 Halloween flash mob in Tulsa, Oklahoma, also danced the Thriller choreography. Students in a 2011 Zombie Walk in Flint, Michigan, danced it with lyrics performed in
American Sign Language, and cowboy ghoulies danced *Thriller* in a July 2013 parade for the Stampede rodeo and festival in Calgary, Alberta. Bolstered by the annual Halloween holiday in the United States and fueled by a contemporary cultural fascination with zombies, *Thriller* has proved an enduring—even viral—choreography. Now more than thirty years old and still performed by fans, *Thriller* is canonical. Adapting the choreography to new sociopolitical landscapes, Jackson fans have staged more flash mobs and zombie walks in recent years than can be accounted for, including political protests and bodily expressions of cultural critique alongside acts of fandom. Like internet memes, which can respond to changing circumstances, what *Thriller* means, or how it functions, is a matter of how it is employed. *Thriller* is no longer a mere fad or seasonal favorite; it is part of a global repertory of popular dance.

As with other viral choreographies, *Thriller* perpetuates itself as a shared embodied object, contagiously transmitted from one person to another. Thus *Thriller* as a cultural text is not limited to the original film by Michael Jackson and John Landis but includes all manner of fan reperformances of Michael Peters’s choreography. Furthermore, online videos and public performances spread the choreography to an audience of others who additionally extend *Thriller*’s broad reach as they watch and share (in) them.

Figure 36. Screenshot of the Thrill the World flash mob event in Thrill the World at L.A. Live ~ Official World Record Shot of 2009 Los Angeles Thriller Event (2009).
Serres elaborates on the quasi-object, “The ball isn’t there for the body; the exact opposite is true: the body is the object of the ball. . . . The ball is the subject of circulation; the players are only the stations and the relays.”

Fans render themselves physically available to Thriller’s choreography, serving as a medium in which it materializes and through which it circulates. Dancing fans do not simply pass the choreography along but volunteer their embodiment as a means of its circulation and transfer. Performances of Thriller generate and expand a corporeal common through replication, which installs the choreography in the bodies of fans who reproduce it. Each iteration refers to each of the others in a process of accrued significance through citation.

Thriller’s dancing fans demonstrate how dance not only makes use of a shared capacity for movement but organizes sharing in the gestures of others. This “syncretic sociability,” as Diprose calls it, or this “intracorporeal ‘transfer’ of movements and gestures and body bits and pieces,” establishes what she calls corporeal generosity. Bodies give themselves to and for others through movements and gestures that circulate in excess of the very bodies that produced them, to be materialized on yet other bodies. What Diprose describes in the domain of everyday gestures such as those featured throughout 24 Hours of Happy pertains equally to codified
movement vocabularies and choreographed dances. *Thriller* is just one example among many that illustrate the project of syncretic sociability within contemporary digital cultural production.

Like Diprose, dance theorist Mark Franko emphasizes generosity in his essay “Given Movement,” in which he analyzes a scene from Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead’s 1936–39 film *Learning to Dance in Bali*. He focuses on a particular moment when a Balinese dance master transmits a dance to one of his students. In this scene, the master teacher guides a novice student through the motions of a dance by standing directly behind the young dancer, pressing his own body into his pupil’s and moving the student’s limbs. The teacher provides a physical support for the dancer as he manipulates him, moving his body through the motions of the dance. Animating the student, the teacher brings the dance to life through the student in this moment of body-to-body transmission. This example demonstrates what Franko calls an “incorporative donation.”

The teacher “gives” the movement to the student, but as a gift, it is a “donation” that cannot be met with a response; the student incorporating the movement “gives” nothing to the teacher in return. Nor, in fact, does the teacher “give” anything to the student, but “an impulse is transmitted” from one to the other. In this scenario of movement acquisition, dance is (and can only be) circulated, exemplifying cultural critic Lewis Hyde’s notion of circular giving, in which “each donation is an act of social faith.”

Circular giving presumes that all contributors and beneficiaries identify as “part of the group,” which keeps everything circulating within agreed-upon parameters. *Learning to Dance in Bali* demonstrates just such a phenomenon of giving movement within the context of a predefined community. In Franko’s description, a second scene of the film crucially shows an advanced student “giving” movement to a younger student while the master teacher looks on. Franko describes this scenario of gifting or giving movement as a “posteconomic” form of circulation that requires one to give (of) oneself.

Thus an ethical orientation accompanies this example of dance pedagogy. Dance cannot be transmitted without performers or teachers giving of themselves in the process, and to give of oneself is to offer one’s labor (or one’s very being) as a voluntary contribution, or a “self-donation,” in Franko’s terms. The student becomes the teacher, thereby
keeping the dance in circulation by passing it from body to body as a gift of movement across generations.

Dance video games offer another example of the corporeal generosity that attends dance transmission, even where the framework explicitly foregrounds an economic motive. In Playable Bodies: Dance Games and Intimate Media, Kiri Miller aligns these games with heritage projects that support the transmission of dance through embodied performance, not unlike the project of transmission staged in Learning to Dance in Bali. Such games mediate the space of interaction between teacher and student, thus reworking the body-to-body relationship that is a hallmark of all sorts of dance training programs, from the highly formal to the rather informal. In the Dance Central series of video games by Harmonix, gamers stand in front of a Kinect—a peripheral motion tracking system added to the standard Xbox console—and dance to popular songs. Gamers follow onscreen animated characters that, thanks to motion capture, expertly perform the choreography, which has been devised especially for the video games and the tracking system’s abilities and limitations. Flashcards notify gamers as to which moves are coming up in the sequence. Some of these steps reference specific movement histories, like “boogaloo” and “cabbage patch,” while others have generic names like “step pump” and “topple.” Players acquire points for creating the same shapes at the same time as the animation. The Kinect tracks players’ movements and provides visual feedback when they fall out of sync with the dance onscreen. “An impulse is transmitted,” but without bodily contact between teachers and students. Dance Central’s choreographers move players at a distance, and the players activate the choreography within themselves, materializing it as they follow along. They incorporate the embodied objects that animate the dancers onscreen. In this way, dancing under the tutelage of a video game is not so different from learning and performing choreographies from music videos, television shows, films, or YouTube videos, as we saw with Karen X. Cheng and Adilyn Malcolm, except that dance video games evaluate players’ execution of the routines. As Miller observes, Dance Central offers gamers feedback on their performances in real time, allowing them to “work through a dance curriculum and master a particular choreographic repertoire without ever submitting themselves to human evaluation.”
Whereas other examples in this chapter omit, defer, or occlude monetary compensation, the example of dance video games lays bare social and economic operations that are present in many scenarios of teaching, learning, and presenting dance: participants within a movement community generate and contribute embodied objects in a collaborative gift economy, dance artists/teachers cull from these gestural repositories and organize available movements into choreographed compositions or routines, and dance artists/teachers expose these movements to broader audiences when they sell these choreographies for corporeal consumption by novice dancers and gamers in a market economy. While Miller calls attention to the questionable histories dance video games inherit, including the role of “racial masquerade” in American popular music and dance, she also acknowledges positively that the games encourage players to try “moves that many players would not perform of their own accord.” In an interview with Dance Central choreographer Marcos Aguirre, Miller offered Aguirre an opportunity to comment on how he would respond to the criticism that “these games are making some kind of cultural appropriation possible,” to which he responded, “Nothing’s being taken. . . . A lot of moves we’ve learned growing up, and it’s kind of like just being spread.” Miller notes that both Aguirre and Chanel Thompson, another Dance Central choreographer, “referred to dance as a gift, and described feeling a calling to share that gift.” Miller further observes, “Neither choreographer expressed concern about who exactly might be the recipients of these gifts, nor that they could be misused.” Of particular importance for the present discussion, Miller reflects on the choreographers’ own positions, remarking, “Giving a gift forestalls appropriation; you can’t appropriate something that has been freely given to you.” But Miller also notes that “the ethics of gift economies also dictate that gifts incur obligations.” As theorized by Marcel Mauss and many others, gifts are paradoxically structured: they present themselves as though outside of any obligation, but in fact, to accept a gift is to be obliged to the giver in some way. Socialization within a cultural group trains participants in the unstated social obligations that gifts entail. As dance practices move outside of specific movement communities, these social norms fall away.

By purchasing choreographic content and learning dances from a video game platform, players partake in the gift economies that support the development of movement material. Physical reproduction installs these
Figure 38. Split screen of MMC (MightyMeCreative) dancing the hard level as Emilia in “Pon de Replay” in Dance Central 2.

Figure 39. Split screen of RiffraffDC dancing the hard level as Bodie in “Moves Like Jagger” in Dance Central 3.
embodied objects in gamers’ personal gestural repertoires, enabling players to acquire ways of moving they might not otherwise have pursued. The Dance Central series thus trains players in new bodily techniques and capacities for movement. However, players pay for these embodied objects and this dance education. Whereas concert dance audiences pay for access as spectators, video game players pay to reproduce these gestures in their own bodies. With Dance Central, a corporeal common, populated with gestures through community members’ “contributive participation,”99 becomes a resource of corporeal commodities available for consumption by gamers who remain separated from the communities and individuals who have generated and continue to develop the very gestures, steps, and ways of moving that gamers pay to learn.

From these decontextualized gestures, gamers constitute other communities (and other commons), in which they post and share videos of themselves achieving high scores in accordance with the values of gaming communities. Thus a different value system recodes these danced gestures and what their performance signals to those who embody them. Dance Central demonstrates clearly how choreographers might draw from a corporeal common of collaboratively authored gestures and movements, and open access to them such that they achieve greater circulation through gamers’ physical incorporation and reproduction. Furthermore, the game illustrates how opening access does not contradict but rather can support the monetization of dances that are otherwise held in common by a movement community. While all paid dance instructors rely on this same social and economic structure that enables them to receive payment for providing access to shared movement knowledge, Dance Central offers a clear example of how market and gift economies sit inside and alongside each other. As Taussig notes, “the ‘gift economy’ entails and perhaps depends upon mimetic facility.”100 Dance video games exemplify how a corporeal common expands beyond the parameters of a specific community as the market facilitates mimetic reproduction of these movements among those who are not otherwise affiliated with a community of practice. Severing dances from their cultural situation accelerates transmission across bodies, transforming gestures of belonging, which some may consider gestural belongings or proprietary gestures, into corporeal commodities.
The ways fans participate in Happy, Thriller, and Dance Central video games illustrate at varying levels how elements of a corporeal common become commodified but are then also repurposed through popular engagement, which reasserts a commonness in these movements as they become available for more generalized embodiment. Happy’s repertory of everyday gestures and call to fans to perform themselves make it the most easily reproducible of these three examples. While some knowledge of creating and uploading a video with a sound track is required, the only dancing expertise needed is that performers are experts at being themselves. Fans thus do not replicate Pharrell’s specific movements or those of the other dancers from the long- or short-form music videos; they replicate the concept or structure. This structure, however, is also shared, visible in both Girl Walk//All Day and the Where the Hell Is Matt? series, among many other videos made with social media content or for a social media audience. Fan performances of Thriller require a little more effort from those who want to embody its choreography. Rather than dancing as their own unique selves, they follow Thriller’s script, which indicates a particular relationship between song and choreographed movement. In performing Thriller’s choreography, dancers incorporate gestures that may not have previously been part of their repertory, which they work into their bodies through practice. In this process, the choreography and the movements of which it is composed change their character from corporeal commodities to shared embodied objects in a corporeal common. What fan performances of Thriller achieve on a global scale with a single choreography Dance Central achieves with hundreds of dances, but with a more targeted gaming audience. Instead of providing fans with a single choreography that they can master and reperform for other audiences, Dance Central opens access to all sorts of movements, styles, and routines, which are broken down so as to further facilitate their transfer. Whereas dancing fans often take pride in their virtuosic mimicry of music video choreography, Dance Central reproduces the educational scenario of coaching dancers through the acquisition of specific moves and routines. The express purpose of Dance Central is the transmission of embodied objects. What embodied objects can be gifted without forfeiture to the market and who has authority to give, retain, collect, and/or profit from a corporeal
common are under constant negotiation both inside and outside of communities of practice.

But there is another approach to thinking about sharing in movement, as indicated by Idle No More’s inclusion of Round Dances in their flash mob protests, discussed in chapter 2: to partake in a corporeal common is to be bound together. Moving together, synchronously or asynchronously, knowingly or unwittingly, and with whatever motivations, co-implicates each dancer in the movement of another. We might therefore modify Srinivasan’s claim that dances travel from body to body “whether we like it or not”\(^{102}\) and suggest that sharing in movement, gestures, and dances links bodies together—whether we like it or not. It remains true, however, that misrecognizing danced gifts for the unqualified givenness of movement perpetuates the performative injury of appropriation through infelicitous acts of transfer. The misrecognition of a gift for a given, that is to say, a common inheritance, implies a misrecognition of rights of access for rights of reproduction and monetization. This misrecognition further contributes to a genericization of movement practices as commoditized versions travel from screen to screen and body to body on a global scale. In the next section, I consider this misrecognition further through the lenses of credit and debt in gift economies.

CREDIT, DEBT, AND THE GIFT OF THE COMMON

24 Hours of Happy encouraged mimicry with its unabashedly accessible dancing performed by a largely anonymous crowd. Noting the explosion of happy dances in social media, Julie Fersing and Loïc Fontaine aggregated videos of fans performing their happiness in response to Pharrell’s hit song. They created a Facebook page on which they encouraged Pharrell’s fans to share their videos,\(^{103}\) which they then included on their We Are Happy From website, a bright yellow page filled with a list of cities linked to more than 1,900 YouTube videos from 153 countries, which they have also located on a world map. Happy is made for sharing, and We Are Happy From does not let all those acts of fandom go to waste. Like the dancing fans, Fersing and Fontaine offer their aggregate of happiness as a “token of gratitude,” a gift, we might say, to Pharrell and the 24 Hours of Happy team for their “worldwide contagious happiness.”\(^{104}\) In answering the call to be happy, fans both produce their own happiness and
simultaneously demonstrate the generative nature of collaborative consumption, in that their collective incorporation and dissemination of *Happy* makes their own movement donations available for repurposing and therefore further online consumption. Creating a collage out of thousands of contributions for online audiences, Fersing and Fontaine repackage fans’ consumption of Pharrell’s music video for reconsumption by online viewers. They organize the fans’ largely volunteered, creative labor and transform it into a new event that will also add to their own design portfolios. As content curators, they, too, volunteer labor as an investment in themselves, demonstrating their skills for hire in their own act of fandom. Building a website collecting fan videos, they add value to *Happy* and to Pharrell as a commercial entity, and they add value to themselves in the form of desirability and hire-ability. In the example of *We Are Happy From*, *Happy* and its affiliated pedestrian movements travel across contexts, from the long-form music video *24 Hours of Happy*, to thousands of fan videos circulating online that both receive the song and simple dance as a gift and return that gift through reperformance, to the collation and re-presentation of these fans videos on a website. *We Are Happy From* is an act of fandom and volunteer labor that gives something back to Pharrell and the fans, and it simultaneously leverages fan-produced content to demonstrate the designers’ own job qualifications. Even though *Happy* circulates within a commercial economy, it simultaneously activates (and is amplified by) an internet gift economy, where digital platforms cultivate and capture the circulation of intangible commodities such as the embodied objects of gesture and movement.

In this section, I consider the social functions of credit and debt as dance circulates through digital venues. I turn to the examples of Fersing and Fontaine’s website *We Are Happy From* gathering and re-presenting fan-produced content, a rehearsal video by choreographer Alexandra Beller that went viral under the name *Baby Modern Dance*, and pop singer Beyoncé Knowles’s infamous borrowing of Anne Theresa De Keersmaeker’s choreography for the music video *Countdown* as well as De Keersmaeker’s response. Each of these examples offers an inflection point where movement comes into or out of a common, where authorship is anonymized so as to facilitate greater transfer, and where creators reassert claims of ownership when their work is unacknowledged by those who use and
Figure 40. (Top) Screenshots of the homepage for We Are Happy From (2013) by Julie Fersing and Loïc Fontaine showing the geographic distribution of fan-produced videos responding to Pharrell Williams’s song and music video “Happy” (2013). (Bottom) Fersing and Fontaine have embedded fan-produced videos in their own website.
build upon it. As we have seen, however, a performative assertion of ownership is volleyed from a somewhat disadvantaged position. Backed by large companies and legal teams, popular artists such as Pharrell and Beyoncé have less need to assert ownership over their creative material, and fan responses to their work frequently solidify rather than challenge their authorial positions. When dance circulates as gift, it circulates unevenly, and with inconsistent practices of acknowledgment and credit. When creators and content aggregators refuse to credit others for their contributions, they mistake danced gifts for the givenness of movement, disavowing the mutual indebtedness that fuels the shared practices in which they participate.

In his influential and much-debated Essay on the Gift, Mauss sets out to discover a form of social contract that is at once voluntary and obligatory, or rather, that creates obligations through voluntary behaviors. He settles on the gift as a form of exchange, arguing that the gift contains within itself three obligations: “to give, to receive, to reciprocate.” With this triune expectation, the gift ensures its continuation beyond any one instance of transfer or transmission and further ensures that, while gift giving may be asymmetrical in terms of the participants’ status or wealth, it is not unidirectional. The gift assumes an obligation on the part of the recipient, generally in proportion to the perceived value of the gift. For this reason, would-be recipients refuse gifts for being “too much” when their value implies a proportional obligation beyond that to which they are willing to commit. Gifts can be dangerous—fairy tales are full of duplicious and deadly gifts, Trojan horses that arrive with false humility and expose the gift recipient to risk in the very act of acceptance. When offered, seemingly, without ill intent, gifts remain suspect in the ways they create social bonds between a donor and a recipient. Professional codes of ethics therefore routinely prohibit service providers from accepting gifts from clients and constituents, and other rules abound that regulate giving and accepting gifts.

Following Mauss, many commentators have remarked upon the gift as paradox. Mary Douglas contends that there are no free gifts, Pierre Bourdieu describes gift giving as a social game in which everyone is aware of the rules yet must “refuse to know” them, and Jacques Derrida calls the gift “the very figure of the impossible.” Two competing claims are
embedded in the gift: that, as Derrida suggests, the gift is given freely, or free of social ties and reciprocal obligations, and that, as Mauss contends, the gift is given with obligations already attached. In his analysis of the gift, Olli Pyyhtinen describes the paradox thus:

While the gift, almost without exception, occurs within exchange, when it is explained entirely based on exchange, the gift is annulled, for in exchange nothing is really given, irrevocably and without return. And the other way around, when one looks at the gift solely in terms of free giving, dissociated from relations of reciprocity, one fails to see the circles of exchanges in which the gift takes place and to which it gives rise. Thus, the gift cannot be what it “in reality” is (reciprocity/exchange), and it is what it cannot be (free giving).

So the gift is neither free nor not-free; reciprocation is both demanded and disavowed. Upon acceptance of the gift, the recipient incurs an obligation that cannot be discharged in the form of mere compensation. According to Mauss, the recipient thereby enters into an irrevocable bond with the giver. Yet social propriety dictates that both giver and receiver must feign ignorance of this obligation.

While pretending to ignore mutual obligations may facilitate and strengthen social ties, actually ignoring the social bond and reciprocal imperative damages those ties. Refusing to acknowledge generosity and to respond in kind violates, as Diprose says, the very “condition of personal, interpersonal, and communal existence.” She therefore finds that injustice stems, in part, from an asymmetrical recognition of generosity: outsized celebration of the generosity of some coupled with selective amnesia regarding the generosity of others. “Some bodies accrue value, identity, and recognition through accumulating the gifts of others and at their expense.” As seen in the reperformances of Happy and Thriller, fan videos contain within them an acknowledgment, a thank-you to the artists whose work they duplicate and embody. Sometimes fans indicate thanks by dedicating their videos to the artist who inspired their reproduction. Sometimes, to deter take-down notices from music copyright holders, they add a note that no infringement is intended and that theirs is an expression of admiration and appreciation. Serres reminds us of the importance of
expressing gratitude: “No exchange could take place, no gift could be given . . . if the final receiver did not say ‘thank you’ at the end of the line.” This phrase is indispensible, he says. “Without it, there have been wars.”

When a recipient accepts a gift with no acknowledgment and no thought of return, it may be considered a form of theft. This is because, as Mauss contends, “the gift necessarily entails the notion of credit.” “What is credit?” Maurizio Lazzarato asks: “A promise to pay a debt.”

The term credit describes both the situation of acknowledging an individual’s contributions to a group enterprise and a measurement of the capacity for indebtedness. In “giving credit where it’s due,” as the saying goes, one expresses gratitude as well as obligation to the individual or group from whom one has borrowed. Giving credit is an acknowledgment of social debts, or the “reciprocal bonds of productivity between people” for which cultural theorist Richard Dienst advocates reserving the term indebtedness. But when credit is employed in finance, it is tied to repayment. Credit cards and credit lines establish an estimated loan amount that a borrower “is good for,” and purchases made on credit carry with them a built-in penalty in the form of interest. The inability to pay off a debt within a predetermined time frame can lead to further penalties, including hindering one’s ability to borrow in the future. The same term describes an obligation born of gratitude within a group endeavor and a monetary debt.

These two notions of credit align with the two notions of belonging as affiliation and as property discussed earlier. In manifesting affiliation or belonging to a group, one gives credit in the manner a community has accepted as an appropriate mode of attribution or acknowledgment. In scholarly communities, for example, individuals belong to a community of ideas. Citation and attribution ensure that contributors receive recognition for their work within intellectual communities as members collectively borrow and build on circulating ideas, while also reflecting, as Thomas Jefferson famously opined, “the moment [an idea] is divulged, it forces itself into the possession of every one.” Similarly, kinesthetic and gestural communities form around movement practices, but no dancer owns the gestures or movements of which their choreographies or improvisations are composed. Like ideas, languages, and bodily techniques, embodied objects are held in common; they are not static belongings but dynamic
expressions of belonging. Thus attribution stands in the place of ownership. Social norms of attribution may not carry beyond the boundaries of a community, however, and belonging as property may come into play as a way to distinguish between the rights and responsibilities of community participants who engage in circular giving with regard to communal practices or products (what Russell Belk calls sharing in) versus access to these practices or products offered to community outsiders for a fee (sharing out).\(^{118}\) In this way, belonging also aligns with a financial understanding of credit. If movements “belong” to an individual or community as property, then in using them, one owes something to their creators for the right to use and reproduce them. If movements cannot be owned or licensed, however, then no one owes anybody anything for the right to use them. Cultural brokers and entrepreneurs thus benefit the most financially by acting as intermediaries between gift and market economies, reconfiguring what is commonly produced into a saleable format.

Digital platforms facilitate the slippage between gift and commodity, since posting and sharing content online have the effect of orphaning that content, stripping away affiliations and contextual information. Such content is attributed to the internet or anonymous creatives rather than individual contributors. “As a result,” notes media and communications scholar James Meese, “creators have little opportunity to benefit either economically or reputationally from this system.”\(^{119}\) For example, in her post “A Cautionary Tale: What Can Happen When Your Personal Video Goes Viral,” choreographer Alexandra Beller recounts how she uploaded a video from rehearsal one evening, only to watch it go viral over the next several days without reference to her or her dance company.

Beller is a contemporary dance maker based in New York, and she was rehearsing her work *milkdreams* (2015), an investigation of children’s movement inspired by her young sons.\(^{120}\) One day, she brought her fourteen-month-old son, Ivo, into the studio and asked her dancers to follow his movements. This is a variation on a common technique called flocking, which is regularly incorporated into modern dance classes and rehearsals as a way of sharing in movement. Typically, in a flocking exercise, a group follows the lead of whichever dancer is at the front of the group. As the group changes its spatial orientation, the leadership also changes. Beller altered this movement score by asking her dancers to keep following her
son. In a re-posted video clip of Beller’s rehearsal,\textsuperscript{121} the (unidentified) dancers Lea Fulton, Christina Robson,\textsuperscript{122} and Simon Thomas-Train follow Ivo as he squats, stands on his tiptoes and falls, turns circles, and collapses onto the floor. The video takes contemporary explorations of “de-skilling” as an aesthetic beyond the amateur into the realm of child development. According to Beller, she documented a playful moment in rehearsal and shared it with her online followers without a thought for how it might circulate beyond that intended audience. Like Pharrell, who was surprised to see that his song and video were no longer his, Beller was surprised to see how popular her video became. Unlike Pharrell, however, whose “Happy” song traveled with fan performances of the video’s concept, social media users posted and shared Beller’s video, titled \textit{Baby Modern Dance}, without any connection to Beller or her company, depriving her of the monetary compensation that could have come through YouTube advertising, for example, and also depriving her of the opportunity to build her theater audience through exposure. Beller recalls, “I didn’t have any experience with this, nor any idea what, if anything, it required of me. I watched, fascinated, as it got picked up and spread by \textit{Huffington Post}, BuzzFeed, Perez Hilton: 50 million views, 200 million, 300 million views

![Figure 41. Screenshot of the rehearsal video for milkdreams (2015), choreographed by Alexandra Beller. Pictured are dancers Lea Fulton, Christina Robson, Simon Thomas-Train, and Beller’s son, Ivo.](image-url)
on each site. Then it started getting posted by less famous sources, and I noticed my name was no longer on it, but advertisements were.”

Beller missed an opportunity literally to capitalize on what she thought was a moment worth sharing with her followers and friends because she did not anticipate the potential for monetization. As a result of this miscalculation, it was thus not Beller but content aggregators and re-posters who benefited financially, as well as those who used the same idea for product advertisements. Beller remarks in language reminiscent of Anne Marsen, “I’ve seen the concept—my concept—borrowed and reused to monetize products in television commercials and online marketing campaigns.”

As with Marsen’s claim that Pharrell stole Girl Walk’s concept, Beller feels that hers was likewise pilfered. Still, as with Marsen, it is difficult to ascertain what has been misappropriated. Beller is not the first contemporary choreographer to ask dancers to imitate the movements of a baby, nor are the techniques of flocking or mirroring unique to Beller’s choreographic process. Ivo, who was at the time in the process of acquiring movement as a toddler, was gathering the embodied objects of gestures and movement from the dancers he observed due to having a choreographer as a parent. Ivo copies the dancers, the dancers copy Ivo, Beller captures this copying on video, and content aggregators capture its monetary value. As Meese contends, internet platforms and procedures for sharing are frequently structured to sever content from creators. Whereas Beller posted the video as a small gift, a triviality, to share with her friends and fan community, others’ sharing of that gift assisted in its anonymization and transformation into monetizable content. As is commonly the case with viral videos, its value could only be recognized in retrospect as an effect of its having been shared. Prior to its viral spread, it had little value. Indeed, if Beller had known how profitable it could have been, she likely would not have given it away freely. “If I had ONE PENNY for every time the video has been viewed, I’d have $10 million,” Beller laments in her Kickstarter video for the production of milkdreams, indicting “the disconnect between how we ingest, share, take and discard each other’s material, versus supporting, nurturing, and collaborating on it.”

Traveling outside the context for which it was intended, Beller’s video became disarticulated from the relations of reciprocity she needs to financially support her work as an artist.
In his analysis of Mauss, anthropologist David Graeber differentiates between open and closed reciprocity. Open reciprocity “implies a relation of permanent mutual commitment” and is a form of generosity reserved for the closest of relationships—between friends or family members, for example. Open reciprocity allows for expenditure without exchange, in the way that family members will help each other out or dancers will collectively build from what each has to offer when they improvise together. Closed reciprocity, in contrast, is governed by a quid pro quo that preserves the ability to conclude relationships with the balancing of accounts. There is no sense that the relationship endures beyond the point of transaction. Graeber further allows that closed relationships can become more open, and vice versa, as the nature of a relationship changes, but in Graeber’s view, closed reciprocity resembles a market economy, where relationships conclude at the point of sale, more than the ideals of a gift economy. Gift economies retain the connection between giver and gift (or contributor and contribution), mediated by the recipient. Market economies, as Marx observed, alienate producers from (the products of) their labor, and compensation, in theory, terminates the relationship with payment for services rendered—whether in the context of a factory, a dance studio, or a video game.

In the example of dance video games seen earlier, gamers offer monetary payment toward a debt of access, seemingly bringing the relation to a conclusion by purchasing the game. Gamers thus do not accrue any debts vis-à-vis movement communities, because theirs is a closed relationship mediated by the video game platform and the choreographers who open access through commodification. In Beller’s case, she volunteered content only to be made aware of its value in retrospect as it became commodified. Viewers did not pay to view her video, but neither was there a sense of reciprocity in the form of attribution. In the place of Beller’s gift is an unacknowledged debt insofar as she has neither been compensated, nor been given credit. However, if one contends that gifts cannot be paid off, even if they circulate as commodities, then one must further consider the social debts that structure the gifting of dance, which insists upon an open system of reciprocity regardless of whether money ever changes hands.

Whereas theorists of the gift emphasize the obligatory gift and the paradoxical gift “with strings attached” as lying at the heart of community,
Maurizio Lazzarato follows Nietzsche in arguing that it is debt that lies at the foundation of social relations. The principle of exchange, Lazzarato argues, presupposes parties that are on equal footing, but acknowledging the force of debt in structuring social relations also acknowledges that there is an imbalance of power in every relation, and this influences the flow of capital. Imbalance “does not mean that exchange does not exist, but rather that it functions according to a logic not of equality but of dis-equilibrium and difference.”128 Debt not only operates economically, according to Lazzarato; it produces subjectivity in conjunction with a morality and, following Foucault, forms of life. Credit and debt have become powerful metaphors for contemporary life, bringing social and even biological life itself into the logic of finance. Financial solvency has become a measurement of moral character. Only those who are “morally bankrupt” would disregard the social debts that accompany a gift, “ignor[ing] the fact,” as Graeber remarks, “that we rely on other people for just about everything.”129 However, because credit relations always exist with an imbalance of power, the valuation of character reflects that imbalance with curious effect.130

Although presumably currency holds a consistent value in relation to itself regardless of where it came from—my dollar is the same as your dollar—the debt economy and financialization have eviscerated this basic principle of exchange. The value of currency has become a matter of speculation, an evaluation of the value of one’s promise to repay reflected in credit limits and interest rates. The inequalities built into the credit relations that fuel a debt economy thus net different results for different parties, in which some parties are indemnified against their debts and others are not: the more capital one has, whether financial or social, the more capacity one has for debt, which is measured and described financially as credit. This additional capacity for debt does not result in increased indebtedness, however, as excess capital indemnifies against the burden of debt. In Richard Dienst’s phrasing, capitalism produces “credit without debt for the few (who can wield the power of investment without accountability) and debt without credit for the many (who bear the hazards without exercising a choice).”131 In other words, the more capacity one has for debt, the less one is expected to repay, and the less capacity one has for debt, the more one is expected to make good on the promise of repayment. By
extension, there is potentially an inverse correlation between the credit one has (or takes) and the credit one gives. In the creative realm, one gives credit to others because one is not indemnified against one’s social debts and has a need for the ties they create. But when one is of such stature that social ties are unimportant to continued success, one is perhaps less likely to credit the contributions of others and more likely to take credit undeservingly. “Within relations of presumed inequality, no presumption of reciprocity exists,” Graeber remarks, fostering a scenario in which, as Dienst contends, “capital always tries to take credit for everything people can do in common.”

The conflict between Belgian choreographer Anne Theresa De Keersmaeker and American pop singer Beyoncé Knowles, briefly mentioned earlier in this chapter, offers another example of how credit and debt play out vis-à-vis social capital and choreographic authorship in the field of dance. Beyoncé famously borrows from music, fashion, dance, and visual artists for her music videos, garnering accusations of plagiarism from both the aggrieved and fans. Her music video *Countdown*, which is a collage of popular media references, reproduces sections of De Keersmaeker’s choreography from her dance works *Rosas danst Rosas* and *Achterland*, both of which were adapted for film. De Keersmaeker was not a featured participant or collaborator on *Countdown*. She was not consulted on the inclusion of her work, nor was she compensated. No presumption of reciprocity exists between De Keersmaeker and Beyoncé, not only because Beyoncé no longer needs the social ties that attribution and return gifts maintain but also because her cultural capital indemnifies her against any such social debts. Although De Keersmaeker did issue a statement challenging the use of her choreography in Beyoncé’s music video, she did not ultimately pursue a lawsuit. Instead, discovering that YouTube had transformed her choreographic gift into a given, that is, a universally available common inheritance, De Keersmaeker paradoxically reasserted her authorship by giving a simplified section of the work to the public for remixing, thereby explicitly submitting her choreography to the common herself.

A signature work developed early in De Keersmaeker’s career and filmed by Thierry de Mey, *Rosas danst Rosas* explores feminine and feminist themes through a series of gestures that repeat in ever-changing combinations,
resulting in a spare and highly structured exposition of everyday movements. In the scene used in *Countdown*, four seated women run their fingers through their hair, prop their elbows on their knees and chins on their fists, reach and fling their arms out of boredom and despair, and collapse forward. Each action recurs relentlessly. Although the women do not heighten the drama with performances of emotional states that accompany the otherwise angst-ridden gestures, the driving music and repetitive choreography convey a sense of frustration and confinement.

In the course of their dance education, college students frequently learn the “chair scene” as repertory—the embodied history of concert dance—so this choreography is already widely shared within a global community of modern dance practitioners. De Keersmaeker’s response to Beyoncé’s use of her material was to further open access to the choreography, formalizing the long-standing practice of learning repertory informally by copying it from film and video. For the *Re: Rosas!* project (ongoing from 2013), De Keersmaeker and the fABULEUS team posted a tutorial for the choreography online along with the original music. They extended an invitation to perform and adapt De Keersmaeker’s choreography by changing the sequence of movements, the music, the setting, the number of dancers, and so forth. As a point of comparison, when Beyoncé’s fans began posting online videos of themselves performing the *Single Ladies* choreography, she responded by sponsoring a contest for which fans were required to “adhere precisely” to the music video’s choreography. Illustrating the pervasiveness of both delegated artistic processes, discussed in chapter 3, and choreographic unworking, discussed in chapter 1, De Keersmaeker’s *Re: Rosas!* places the famous chair scene from *Rosas dans Rosas* in the hands of anyone who wishes to perform it and upload an interpretation to the project website. In unworking the choreography, turning it over to the crowd for reinvention and rediscovery, De Keersmaeker offers it as a site through which participants can express their being-in-common, their participation in a community of movement built on gestural indebtedness.

Affirming her authorship through the very process of engaging the crowd to unwork the choreography, De Keersmaeker provided a mechanism for danced interpretations to come back to her, inviting contributors
to upload videos directly to the Re: Rosas! website. Like We Are Happy From, for which Fersing and Fontaine gathered fan-produced videos, Re: Rosas! similarly gathers these contributions in a single location. In 2013, the fABULEUS project team also compiled and edited videos of the Rosas danst Rosas chair scene from around the globe, “from Australia to Burkina Faso and from Mexico City to Shanghai,” into a single video, which they posted on YouTube. Since then, the project has continued to grow. More than 360 rerendrings of the chair scene had been posted to the project website by the end of 2016. In groups or solo, participants reinvent the dance. They perform in subways, on rock faces, in rivers, in bathrooms and living rooms, on escalators, and elsewhere. Performances by young women read differently from those of solo men or groups of small children, all flinging themselves through its movements. Abstracted from the performers who originated the roles (Rosas danst Rosas gestured to the idea that the members of the company, called Rosas, were dancing themselves) and their experiences of femininity and feminism in the 1980s, the gestures take on alternate possibilities.
Notably, the extracts of De Keersmaeker’s choreography utilized in Beyoncé’s *Countdown* sample everyday gestures, club dancing, and even tap dance, which reside in an uncredited movement common from which postmodern dance routinely pulls, as Brenda Dixon Gottschild has demonstrated. Disrupting the presumed hierarchy between concert and social dance, the horizontal logic of a postmodern aesthetic, Randy Martin observes, “suddenly brings to notice troves of movement riches once consigned to the periphery.” In the case of Beller, this movement periphery extended all the way to the bodily logics of toddlers in the process of learning how to control their own motion. Both De Keersmaeker and Beller illustrate this practice of developing choreography within a postmodern aesthetic by turning to a movement common for their compositions. YouTube, where De Keersmaeker’s choreography circulated beyond her control and where Beyoncé’s creative team discovered it, ensures that the process of concertizing vernacular dance is reversed as well, flattening hierarchies of movement practices and vernacularizing concert dance choreography. Just as film and television disseminated the dance routines and movement innovations of individuals and communities of dancers in decades prior, YouTube and other video-sharing sites now enable the broad circulation of steps, gestures, and choreographies within and through the internet’s gift economies with little regard for authorial claims. Although they differ in their approaches to what can be considered a common from which to glean dance movement, both De Keersmaeker’s use of vernacular dance forms and pedestrian movements and Beyoncé’s use of choreographic material from experimental dance artists recognize that these cultural practices and products circulate as gifts. Both approaches exemplify a Derridean interpretation of the gift, which contends that gifts are given freely and without obligation, while also illuminating the financial and authorial investments in identifying (or occluding) the source of the gift.

In his short volume *Given Time*, Jacques Derrida dismantles Mauss’s three obligations to give, receive, and reciprocate through which the gift creates mutual ties of indebtedness. Derrida counters, “For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift, or debt. If the other gives me back or owes me or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift.” Derrida’s gift refuses recognition and reciprocation. It must be completely forgotten. “So we are
speaking here of an absolute forgetting—a forgetting that also absolves, that unbinds absolutely and infinitely more, therefore, than excuse, forgiveness, or acquittal.”147 With his emphasis on the forgetfulness embedded in giving and accepting gifts, however, I contend that Derrida more accurately describes the social operations of privilege than those of giving or receiving gifts.

Privilege, as unacknowledged inheritance, produces advantage even as it masks itself. Nothing has been given, nothing is owed, and yet these nothings add up to an immaterial something that both possesses and produces value. This privilege, born of disavowal and antisocial amnesia regarding the contributions of others, belongs to the parasite, which Michel Serres understands to be the direct product of the gift on Derrida’s model.148 Privilege allows for the purposeful or accidental mistaking of the gifted for the given—taking without thought of return, without thanks, and without recognition of the donations of others. As the corporeal common expands—populated by unacknowledged gifts that become part of the given via physical reproduction and circulation through digital media—it becomes fertile ground for entrepreneurial intervention and investment. But the expansion of the common can also open up a space of gratitude and a sense of indebtedness for movement that is shared.

Dance practices and choreographies are constructed from embodied objects that populate a corporeal common, but unlike giving material gifts, movement donors cannot be rid of the dances they give. As Thomas Jefferson observed of transmitting an idea, “no one possesses [it] the less, because every other possesses the whole of it.”149 As gifts, dances change bodies without changing hands. Dances are fugitive in one way, but in another, they never leave their location. Dancing is an invitation or an offering, not a giving-away but a gesture of giving that retains dancing for oneself in the act of distribution. Dance cannot be possessed, only circulated and propagated in relation to a common that establishes what is given to be shared.

Yet, what is given for some is not given for all, as neoliberal ideals of universal access would suggest, because there is no single common, only many commons. As Hardt and Negri argue, “contemporary forms of capitalist production and accumulation... require expansions of the common.”150 The expansion of the common is not only an expansion of what
knowledges, practices, and products can be made available for monetization, but an expansion of the common as singular rather than multiple, governed by universal access rather than communal norms that govern practices of sharing in and sharing out. This expansion underwrites the repeated misrecognition of gifts of a particular common for the given of a universal common. Embodied objects thus travel, through infelicitous acts of transfer, from situated fields of knowledge and practice to a common inheritance posited as universal. However, it is not only capital that demands the expansion of the common by mining particular commons. As Martin observes, postmodern choreographers turning to peripheral movement practices as sources for choreographic innovation likewise expand the movement common. Indeed, the craft of dance is the recapitulation and exposure of gestures held in common, which artists organize, situate, recycle, and re-present as gifts through scenarios of transmission such as choreography and dance pedagogy.

In this chapter, I have argued that danced offerings circulate, accrue meaning and value as they travel from body to body, lose their cultural specificity as they increase in accessibility, and become fodder for entrepreneurial as well as communal innovation. As with all embodied objects, dancing is never given once and for all; dance movements and practices find both their source and their destination in a corporeal common, from which they are gifted again and again. How far this corporeal common reaches is a matter of debate, however, and tensions arise between movement communities that assert dance as a mode of belonging and digital cultural practices that circulate movement beyond the boundaries of community. In positing dance as gift of the common, I wish to undo the privileged Derridean account in which gifts circulate without thought of return and suggest instead that a Maussian interpretation of the structure of the gift better grasps how dance’s circulation through digital media is underwritten by dancers’ corporeal generosity and gestural indebtedness. As common, dances circulate freely through digital media, but as gifts, they circulate with social obligations attached. Attending to these social obligations offers an opportunity to maintain an ethical orientation toward sharing in the movement and gestures of others.
Perpetual Motion: Dance, Digital Cultures, and the Common explores the uses and meanings of dance in digital and online environments from 1996 to 2016. Throughout, I attend to shifts in dance performance, reception, dissemination, and circulation brought about by popular digital media technologies. Whereas early examples of dance on the web and CD-ROM, such as those I explore in chapter 1, are mostly limited to artistic investigations of hypertextual and combinatory aesthetics, social media platforms give amateurs and enthusiasts a means of joining with professional dance artists to spread popular dances by digitizing, sharing, and embodying them. Participating in digital cultures, dancers across the amateur and professional spectrum physically articulate a space and sense of the common through their shared movements. In chapter 2, these performances of the common act to recuperate and loosen public spaces as common spaces in the wake of violence and pressures to curtail freedom of movement. In chapter 3, dances participate in performing a common world, which is enacted through gestures that link communities together. Employed in the broad participation of the crowd, dance additionally transforms and performs-world onscreen. Finally, in chapter 4, dances circulate among and between communities, raising questions about the ethics of dance’s corporeal transmission through digital media. Circulating beyond communities of practice, commonly accessible gestures are mistaken for a given field of movement that is universally available. Throughout Perpetual Motion, I have considered how digital cultures engage dance and movement in the production and performance of a common and the purposes and effects of these performances.
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