Afterword

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As this book went into production, the Covid-19 pandemic broke out across the world. Travel was restricted and our geographical sense of place focused on the local: our neighbourhood, our street, our house, our room. We had to renegotiate distinctions as places for work and domestic living, schooling and relaxation overlapped.

We are in the final stages of publication in July 2020 with little time to reflect on the past few months, but as editors, we wanted to acknowledge the profound and astonishing changes that have been brought by the pandemic. The lockdown affected each one of us in different ways, and as co-editors, we offer a short dialogue on our experiences of lockdown that are redefining our sense of place.

AW Tamara, can you describe how the lockdown affected you?

TA Immediately, I was affected by the loss of contact and touch in my daily work. My work involves building a sense of place through touch – human-to-human contact through movement and dance. My body is a place that holds and witnesses these intersections of communication, touch, movement and learning. Daily, this work remakes me, defines my sense of place, refines my intelligence, relating, being and community building with others. Lockdown took dance out of the studio into the bedroom, from skin-to-skin contact to screen-to-screen contact. The screen-to-screen interaction lacks tactility, a key part of my usual everyday practice. When I am teaching, I find myself reaching into the screen – my body expands and reaches in reaction to what I observe and what I want to feel, which is the reciprocal kin-aesthetic exchange that characterises dancing in a room together.

AW What immediately affected me was the change in our house as we had to fit four people in to work alongside each other. Our previously

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shared areas changed function, and functions were layered within rooms. Our boundaries between work and relaxation, between screens and real life, online appointments and domestic rhythms, even work days and holidays all had to be renegotiated. We developed a routine and focused on meeting at two points in the day: for a lunch-hour walk and an evening meal. We found that in the neighbourhood, the farmers re-marked footpaths, installed signs to protect land use and diverted walkers away from animals and buildings. The village’s communal playgrounds, parks and sports grounds closed and we sought to find alternative walking routes from home to add variety. It was a swift and profound change in our family’s – and other citizens’ – freedom of movement.

I also noticed that there was an equally swift change in language. The leisurely turnover of terms between generations (e.g. meh, bloomers) or over a decade cycle (e.g. firehose tweets) was replaced by rapid redefinitions: contactless was no longer waving your bankcard over the shop’s machine reader, it meant stepping back when the delivery van driver left a package at your door. Social distancing was no longer being in the online virtual world Second Life, it meant waving in a friendly manner as you crossed the road to avoid someone, giving them two metres’ distance. Lockdown was not a prison term, it meant staying at home and keeping safe.

I felt that the language was heavy and restrictive: it could have been more positive if we had said ‘touch-free’, implying a freedom not to touch, or ‘distant socialising’, implying that our social chats were just happening at a distance, or ‘sequestering’, as this was, more or less, the effect on our lives.

TA Yes, I agree that the language has been very affective. During lockdown, my body and mind search for the wisdom and knowing that I used to encounter daily through moving with others, in shared space, touch, energy and contact. These practices based on sharing movement together shift in this extended period of isolation, and I feel how the language is defining us, even as I resist the definitions. I move by myself. I walk in nature. I listen and open my senses to the somatic relational learning in each moment. Movement can shift the mind and body, give new senses of place. By myself, the changes are subtle and gradual. I miss aligning energies with others, where the absorption gives presence and new organisation for all of us. I find new ways to experience tactility. I find self-sounding is like a
superhighway to change. I resonate my body through tones and pitch; the vibrations expand, open, soothe and reorganise. I chant every day and then improvise in my body, moving the voice like a limb, like a wave and a self-hug. It changes inner and outer configurations.

AW Yes, I am missing colleagues and friends whose contact gives me energy. I began to spin other threads by saying hello to neighbours, keeping an eye open for the more vulnerable, becoming part of the village in a way I have not been before. As I went for my daily walk, I saw how the community was coming together creatively: artwork appeared in front gardens in praise and support of the National Health Service workers, a stream beside the recreation ground became a fairy dell decorated with handicrafts from painted travellers’ stones to dream catchers, and hand-coloured rainbows appeared in front windows or chalked on the pavement as a symbol

of hope. One resident had set up an ‘interactive’ trail around the village, with challenges from drawing and quizzes to throwing balled socks through complicated hoops and down runs. These were unscripted and unsolicited offerings – evidence that in times of crisis when people need support, they turn to arts practice to come together and generate a sense of community.

**TA** As an artist, I felt very compelled to create and participate in the sense-making of this time. I started generating short dance films to try to explore some of these new experiences, while also providing some inspiration and starting points to students whom I am mentoring in choreographic projects. Students started to generate site-sensitive responses to isolation and lockdown. Moving filmic portraits of dancers in isolation emerged. The weather during the spring was dry and sunny, and many projects were filmed outside, drawing dancers closer to nature. There were also some poignant representations of

Still from the film *Corona Spring* by Tamara Ashley.
the pressure of confinement and lack of social contact. My own work conceptualises the space inside in black and white, and the outdoor space in vibrant colour; with person-to-person contact reduced, I perceive nature as more resonant and alive. In lockdown, there is the possibility to dance in the smaller spaces inside or in the vast expanses of the fields that I can visit on my daily walk. In June, after 14 weeks of lockdown, I was walking in Fen Drayton nature reserve and the damsel flies swarmed me in iridescent blue clouds. After weeks without touch, it was like an embrace from nature, an oxytocin hit.

Zoom emerged as a performance platform where the tessellated screen is harnessed incredibly creatively by performing artists. Gestures are passed through the screen to create choreographic continuity, and musicians harmonise across geography to play together in the virtual space. Seeing into the intimate spaces of artists, their living rooms, bedrooms and kitchens, while simultaneously

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Bolero: screenshot by Tamara Ashley.
appreciating the resonance of ensemble, is very moving. My favourite example was the Juilliard School’s rendition of *Bolero*, which enabled collaboration between the school’s dance, drama and music students with cameos by some of their famous teachers, such as Laura Linney and Yo-Yo Ma.

**AW** I wonder how much of this we will remember? I am sure we will hear of how we all lived in the virtual world – teleworking, socialising on apps and switching on the free streamed offerings of opera, musicals and plays from closed theatres – but if anything, it has taught us that the virtual environment is draining and does not energise us in the way that connecting with the life experience of others does. I have sought out the live and communal in my teaching and my exercise classes, where the living of others connects with, informs and enriches our own. I have found that my sense of place is rooted in the ecosystem which we develop around us and which comprises our living conditions, our closest family and friends, our street and the connections maintained through precarious forms of telecommunication. I have needed to counteract the creep of lethargy which can come from restricted movement with other sources of vital energy, and so have had shared theatre and film evenings with friends, exchanged notes on growing plants and walked the country footpaths around me.

**TA** The arts and culture offer during lockdown has been generous. Companies and organisations have offered streaming shows and free classes for practitioners. It has been possible to watch full-length plays, contemporary dance shows and musicals, while also being able to participate in classes with leading practitioners in various global performing arts centres. Access to information not normally available unless one travels has been a positive aspect of being an artist in lockdown, and sharing time and space with artists across time zones has enabled shared connections on the experience of the pandemic from diverse geographic locations. Archives of work created during the pandemic have been established. For example, my second film, *Oxytocin*, is archived on the website [http://www.timeofpandemic.co.uk](http://www.timeofpandemic.co.uk).

Meanwhile, at the time of writing in July 2020, theatres, studios and many galleries are closed, posing a real long-term threat to the survival of the sector, and many of the artists involved in the shows we have enjoyed watching at home on the laptop are out of work. The future is uncertain and the pandemic is not over. The resilient and creative nature of artists, which allows them not only to adapt to new
conditions but also to express the meaning of collective experiences, has been very evident since March 2020, but as access to theatres and rehearsal studios remains limited, the sense of place of the theatre itself is under revision and will affect the performing arts for a long time to come.

In our Introduction to this book, we said that our ‘sense of belonging to place is fragmented, disrupted and under continual redefinition’. We have experienced, during the course of the book’s production, one significant shift which has confirmed, in a startling way, our comment that the ‘bringing together of communities in a place is increasingly important in creating a sense of connection, well-being and understanding’.