Shapeshifters: Self-organising systems, migration and repetition at the intersection of folk and popular dance, improvisation and choreography

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We are three dance practitioners/artist researchers who have met to share histories, practices and research interests to evolve new understandings across geographical and cultural borders. This article is adapted from a lecture demonstration performed in December 2018. Let's open with a dance.

Our arms aligned through the interlinking of our little fingers, we three are repeating a sideways stepping pattern during which we continually bounce:

Right, Left, Right, bounce, Left, bounce.

During each six beat cycle our arms swing forward and drop in towards the body, then drop back out and down with a similar trajectory in coordination with each 6 bounce pattern. We encourage people to join the line and become absorbed into the pattern. Gradually our dance spiral grows as more and more join. We are slowly starting to trace a curve, facing inwards, enclosing the space and slowly spiraling towards the centre of the space, at which point the leader faces outwards and the line rewinds back out of the spiral. The exiting spiral line of dancers faces those still tracing the inward spiral trajectory. We are surprised to find ourselves looking into new sets of eyes as we pass each other on our different pathways, and find ourselves smiling at the bouncing faces that mirror our own.

We are evoking a dance motif from choreographer Rosemary Lee's 'world-class contemporary art' (Spence, 2018) *Passage for Par*, a two hour dance work of 30 female performers made for Par beach, Cornwall, performed at the turn of the tide in a 'synergy between site and artwork' (ibid.). Presented as part of the Groundwork Festival it was based on a simple Breton step with fingers linked…

'If I were you, at this moment, to say 'I' would be to say 'we', and to say we would be to say I – for what is happening is that the singular and the plural have become mobile. Some perhaps would say it is utter confusion, mayhem. We would perhaps say it is a delight…maybe I would say… I am somewhere between an individual and a group. Better Still: you are not quite an individual and you are not quite a group.' (Lomax 2017)

As we dance together Yve Lomax's words serve as one articulation about a working process in which three people come together to share a conversation across disciplines and dance practices and shifting borders. It is also a means of identifying that we do not wish to homogenise the different practices and cultures we discuss under a common rubric but are interested in how these practices themselves are a way for both the singular and the plural to be experienced and performed. Through repeating, breaking and re-forming these dance forms in different contexts arguably become mobile, and evolve, offering possibilities for transformations and connections.

The practice-as-research process of making new connections is part of an emergent conversation where our different histories, knowledge and experience as artists and researchers intertwine and form new emergent behaviour. Such "emergence" is the outcome of a complex system, and is generated through the interconnection of similar elements interacting at a local level, responsive to feedback, environmental conditions, pattern recognition and indirect control. Think birds flocking, fishes swarming, fashions forming, people dancing. Emergent behaviour is unpredictable, is self-organising, auto-poetic.

Exploring points of interconnection is part of a choreographers practice, particularly when working with groups of people through improvisation towards new performance. In facing the challenge to create original choreographic systems and performance experiences with diverse groups of individuals, often under the pressure of limited resources, a growing recognition that there may be a simple equation that ensures the unexpected, new creative results, has led one member or our trialogue – Jane Turner - to explore of the science of self-organising systems. Wendy Wheeler's assertion that 'the closer we can bring our research questions to our own lived and skilful experience, the more likely these are to yield good results' (2006:90) resonates in considering the migration of forms, danced by multiple different bodies from an understanding of emergence, complexity and chaos.

Complexity and emergence are science-sourced theories that reflect understandings of our universe's Quantum characteristics identified by unpredictability and paradox - Quantum physics tells us that particles can behave like waves, and vice versa, they have dual identities, asserting the me/you, I/group shifting identities that we experience in shared dancing. Spiraling from the micro to the macro, this wave-particle duality is a metaphor, a pattern that is iterated at many scales in the systems of Nature and Culture.

Such shifting of states in improvised interactions take place each quarter at the Tanzparty (dance party) in Berlin, Germany where Jo Parkes' company Mobile Dance hosts a coming together of new and old Berliners who meet in a space where folk dance interacts with contemporary and urban dance in improvised interactions on the dance floor.

Each week, every week, for over four years, Parkes, in collaboration with educator Barbara Weidner has led a team of 30 artists, almost a third of whom themselves arrived as refugees, in leading workshops with families living in refugee accommodation in five different centres. Growing up working class in the Midlands, England, Parkes acknowledges that she does'nt feel that she belonged in the circles of academia and contemporary art to which she later forced entry. Somewhere along the way she began to understand that not belonging might be a strength: that it might help to see things differently, to innovate, to recognise others excluded from the field. The constant search for how to combine dance with a socially engaged practice has led to Mobile Dance's work.

Rather than re-iterate the nuanced debates that other scholars have engaged with about the continuum of classification between folk and popular dance, we use the term "social dancing" in order to identify a particular way of practicing folk dance that overlaps with concerns that are central to notions of popular dance. In her work, the third member of our triad Ruth Pethybridge is interested in how forms of folk become popular and how popular dance might be recognised as folk if this very concept can be untied from its nostalgic notions and specific associations of national identities, because as Sherril Dodds puts it popular dance 'travels easily across borders and contexts … and the idea that popular dance cannot be easily contained is part of its appeal' (2011:40)

The feature of Breton and Cornish social dancing into a presentational performance context is one such migration across borders. *Passage for Par* took place in Cornwall, England in the summer of 2018 with Pethybridge as assistant choreographer, and involving Turner as one of the dancers. The repetition of the bouncing step in a spiral formation, which rely on the dancers remaining connected throughout - described in the opening of this article - is commonly known in Cornish dance as the serpent dance, or the 'snails creep'

This spiraling movement was central to this work and it bears similarities to aspects of the Dabke – a pan-arabian dance which regularly makes an appearance in the Mobile Dance Tanzparties in Berlin. The Dabke has migrated and been claimed by different national projects as a representation of regional or ethnic identities, and has many variations that become very specific. More recently however, it is understood to have become part of contemporary narratives through the music of electro-dabke which makes claim to a more globalised identity associated with electronic music and clubbing, in particular through music from groups like 47soul and Ministry of Dub Key, which takes its name from the iconic British club ministry of sound. Breton and Cornish dance in a distinct way, has also allowed dance to be an embodiment of what Desi Wilkinson (2016) refers to as Celtitude – a kind of Celtic identity that exists without strident nationalism. These social dance forms also offer ways to consider self-organising systems that essentially require simple rules amongst a large group of interconnected peoples to enable the party to take off!

Parkes first danced Dabke in 2015 as part of her dance/documentary film project *On Tradition* and shown here. As part of this project 12 portraits were created of shopkeepers on one street in Berlin, and loosely exploring the theme of tradition and its shifting importance in a diverse urban context. One of the questions Parkes asked of the shopkeepers was: "What is the best dance you have ever had in your life?" This turned out to be the key to some fascinating stories - and for almost every person she worked with - an intense dance.
In this video we meet Antar who owns a mobile phone shop and internet cafe.
"We learned it and we will teach it to our children, and therefore never forget it."

https://vimeo.com/172901697

Antar's story reveals the use of folk dance as a form of resistance. Being forced to migrate to a foreign country and to live in an unfamiliar society presents particular challenges in identity construction. As Yda J. Smith puts it: 'If you don't know your culture, you don't know who you are' (Smith 2018). Antar and his family use folk dance to reinforce an identity under threat from forced migration. Positioning himself to a conflict which is volatile and active, Antar does not resist his identification as a refugee (as many people who have experienced forced migration do) but rather embraces it. His identity is rooted in his 'refugeeness' (to use Smith's term) which he performs in his dance as a resistance to forgetting: a way of keeping his family's experience present. For Antar (and many other people met in the accommodation centres of Berlin) the repetition of the dance seems to help to build resilience in the face of the traumatic experience of forced migration. Also underlined in this video is how the three dancers, rather ineptly learning a 6 count step, are drawn together in warm shared experience.

Returning to *Passage for Par* a description that underlines how the dance functions through repetition taken from a review reads as follows:

> On Par beach…Lee's performers — 30 women dressed in dark navy, their arms
> interlinked — moved... with tiny, impeccable gestures that married minimalism to folk
> dancing. For two hours, the audience remained mesmerised by the collective display of
> inner and outer unity — not a foot could falter or all would collapse like dominoes
> (Spence 2018).

Spence identifies here the methodology of the piece in which the women were joined throughout, entirely interdependent, linked through various hand/arm holds that feature distinctly in both Breton and Cornish social dancing - through these holds they became 'not I, not we, but somewhere in-between' as the citation from Lomax at the beginning of this article evocatively points out.

Borrowing from social dance movement vocabulary may feed back value to those people who are directly involved in the social practice. While audience members at Par may or may not have been aware of the hierarchies of value that have plagued the study of dance in relation to the folk/classical/popular triad, Lee was sensitive to the fact that we were taking movement material

out of its original context and to an extent changing its form and function. There was some anxiety around how this might be received. However Rosemary was also clear how collective memory functioned for her in these simple patterns of movement – she said: 'I feel like that's not me, it's me following in the footsteps of humans moving together, borrowing (I hope respectfully) a known form' (Lee, in conversation).

The shapeshifting, two-in-one nature of the work, and of the dancer in the work echoes the scientific underpinning of Complex systems: it is simultaneously dynamic art (a dance and a visual art work) and part of the visual shifting landscape. 'I feel I have been inside a painting, under and in the skin of creativity – crafting and crafted, creating and created, individually and collectively, myself and ourselves.' Kiki Gale's words **2**, as one of the dancer participants, echoes a quantum understanding of our ever expanding, evolving nature and culture; that a wave of energy is simultaneously a particle of matter.

Due to the duration and setting of this work, audience members were relaxed and using the beach as they would on any other occasion; to talk and eat and play. In conversation with a woman who regularly dances Breton, she expressed delight in the recognition of the steps and recounted spending hours in the pub 'in a trance' as she put it, doing the same.

Joanna Tagney, a long time member of the Cornish Nos Lowen social dance scene, watching the dance commented that for her 'these dances are like making a cup of tea' and to see someone making her daily cup of tea into a work of art was 'absolutely beautiful' in her words; her belief is that what defines social dance is it being, fundamentally, for everyone, 'open source' in the same way that much documented folk music is. **3**

The notion of 'open source' is inimical to modern computing and digital communication networks, emergent self-organising systems. The scientific pathway towards this our digital culture finds articulation in the theories of Complexity and Emergence that were forged by mathematicians such as Alan Turing. In one of his last published papers he foresaw the potential of the 'universal computer' and 'demonstrated using mathematical tools how a complex organism could assemble itself without any master planner calling the shots.' (Johnson 2001:14).

The use of the term *universal* computer underlined a vital shift in mathematics, for Turing's

abstract notion of a machine was designed to tackle *any* mathematical problem 'in the sense that a modern computer can carry out any program' (Coveney & Highfield 1995:30). Interconnection here with the way different individuals can join a spiraling Breton based social dance or choreographic 'program', as described at the opening of this writing, and that was a core part of *Passage for Par*, which similarly sees simple repetitive dynamic patterns, based on simple rules, evolve over time. The computer, being capable of processing many different types of equations, languages and softwares to a considerable degree of complexity has opened the potential of cross-disciplinary dialogue on many levels, just as groups of unique individuals interconnected into simple choreographic systems create new dances and multiple transformations of experience for participants and audiences.

Turing's *universal* machine has further relevance as it started 'as a purely imaginary device, a 'thought experiment' '(Gribbin 2004:114). Imagining/inventing constructions before knowing that they are feasible/workable is one of the traditional routes of the artist and choreographer. The computer is of course now a constantly evolved 'organism/species' and is used to explore every kind of discipline and data. An analogy can be found between a computer and the shapeshifting dances we explore here. Just as the modern computer is able to take on the physical computational activity of a disciplinary problem to new solutions, a group of improvising dancers triggered by a simple set of rules always create surprising new patterns through a process of shared intelligence. As a creative tool the computer programs and systems allow the flow of information to new formations and not the hardware parts.

The ongoing repetition of patterned steps and gentle bouncing required a lot of concentration for the dancers in Lee's work due to fixed pathways and the specific movement qualities that she was seeking. In the social dance context, this repetition may encourage inclusivity. Alice, 23, has spoken of the regular Breton Fest Noz parties in Falmouth, Cornwall as allowing her into a dance that she didn't have to learn, **4.** she was simply carried along in the collective, taught by the movement itself – a pedagogy that exists also in certain popular forms such as Krumping and Hip Hop – which choreographer Jonathan Burrows (2018) refers to as having a pedagogy of 'each one teach one' – passing on movement through social interactions. These styles are arguably learnt through shared movement rituals, or as sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990) puts it through 'a logic of practice' - producing the learning through social, embodied interactions rather than

the didactic teaching of choreography.

This also offers an indication of how what is conceived of as "folk dance" and as such imbued with particular values, and indeed investment, can perhaps also be broken open to address popular dance styles, not borrowing from their aesthetic, or creating superficial "fusions", but simply acknowledging the function and potential of popular dance in contemporary culture to shapeshift and invent new traditions within an emergent multicultural society. The 'universal computer' analogy is perhaps useful in understanding what we see happening in the Berlin Tanzparty with Mobile Dance.

In the company's work in the accommodation centres, the importance of repetition and ritual in creating spaces of arrival for people who have had (and are still having) traumatic experiences is noted: repetition in movement, repetition in class structure, repetition in project structure (each week, every week at the same time) and again with the regular quarterly dance parties delivered in partnership with Uferstudios, an established Berlin dance venue. One format "plug and play" occurs at the end of every party. The simple rules which make that particular party "take off" as a self-organising system are:

if you want to play a song you can - take your phone to the DJ

each song must be played from beginning to end

you must wait your turn (some queuing might be involved)

Tanzparty video https://vimeo.com/279065324

At every Tanzparty, in the "plug and play" format, a Dabke spiral emerges, dissolves and reemerges in an ongoing cycle. People join hands and begin the now familiar six beat rythm. At the beginning, it was mostly men dancing but now more and more women join **5**. Contemporary dancers join the line and disrupt it with an unexpected step, a break-out, the creation of a second line. Urban dancers, enter the centre of the circle and invert themselves, children run into the circle and spin. The line breaks apart and dissolves into solo dancers, duos, quartets,

and then reforms. At first four, then eight, then 20 dancers. Here we are in the realm of the 'logic of practice' of Pierre Bourdieu. There is a gentle "teaching" of the dance to those who do not have it in their bodies, counts are sometimes shouted, the downbeat accented, encouraging smiles, leading from the contact of the hands. Parkes experiences these lines as an important reversal of the refugee and host situation: who has what to teach to whom? who should learn something new? Integration is experienced as coming together to meet somewhere new and finding a new culture, a new dance, together, as opposed to a something just one group of people must "deliver" to the others.

It is not without conflict this forming and reforming of our dance. Sometimes a line is broken and it feels too soon for some dancers, they pull it back into existence with some frustration. We are a mix of many cultures and it is important that everyone gets to play the music they want to dance to. If we do not pay attention to this, conflict can occur. Sometimes the pattern which the emergent system creates loses energy, and needs an intervention, a new rule, a new impulse.

There are some initiatives in Berlin where the Dabke can be learnt in a more formal way. Syrian artist Medhat Aldaabal who teaches Dabke workshops explains his approach:

 "When you first see the Dabke movement it seems very hard and one feels like one cannot understand it. We try to explain it as simply as possible so they understand how the steps work: slowly slowly..."**6.**

At Tanzparty # 12 Medhat started the party by teaching Dabke, step by step, count by count; "the didactic teaching of choreography" mentioned earlier. Parkes found the teaching helpful in that it made the "rules" of the game transparent, and later in the "plug and play", could enter the system more easily. But in the moment of learning in this way, something was lost. Was it the kinesthetic experiences which allow us to shapeshift in response to our environment and the people in it? Confined by form, the hierarchy of the learning situation, the "right and wrongness" left her unable to move to meet the Dabke and the Dabke to meet her. It had become too predictable to allow for the surprises of actual dancing together.

Similarly in *Par* this interconnectedness also presented challenges to the dancers, arms stiffened, backs ached, timing went out and could not be refound, feet became heavy. The dancers had to

find ways of working as an organism rather than a group of individuals – in the same way that Jo identifies of refugees defining their own self-representations and 'refugee-ness', absorbing differences in the name of the whole can be a very painful experience. But in this case the form itself taught them how, constantly adjusting and emerging in relation to the simple rules - rather than anything or anyone external. The choreographers – Lee and Pethybridge - became less and less part of the physical problem solving.

This simple dance form, a collective practice involving the extensive repetition of an interconnected bouncing step, exists (with variations) across multiple cultures and therefore arguably serves as an embodied reminder of the human capacity for collectivity and connection at a time when we desperately need it. Folk revivals often occur at moments of crisis and we are potentially at another crunch point in history. Rather though, than reconstruct an imagined past, perhaps inclusive ways of dancing together can show how we are all capable of shapeshifting to respond to our environment and create alternative ways of being together, in the same way that philosopher Jean Luc Nancy (2000) suggests of being-singular-plural, a subjectivity based on relationality rather than 'I' and 'we' or 'them' and 'us' as Lomax also iterated.

Whilst being aware of the populist, reductive danger of claiming a shared experience that might hint at universality - particularly knowing that some of the people participating in the Tanzpartys in Berlin have individual experiences that cannot be understood from positions of privilege - we feel compelled to highlight these connections in a current political climate of divisive rhetoric. We would like to highlight the potential of these shared forms to generate kinesthetic experiences that are common to those dancing them in a way that can underpin rather than over-ride cultural specifity and allow us to say 'I' and 'we' at the same time. Echoing Lomax again, and in the spirit of radical coherence it is possible to conceive of how these practices '…might hold together without falling into conventional forms and flows… as a means of proposing conditions for the emergence of the unforeseen, the unimagined and the remarkable' (Allsopp, 2017).

So in relation to *Passage for Par* we ask how might the interconnected spiral embody 'the seemingly paradoxical effect of an ever-changing same' (Manuel-Garcia, 2005) as the loop does in electronic music, inspiring groups such as 47soul - emerging and repeating, while the repeated bouncing perhaps speaks of the human will to survive and to keep moving, or as Lee put it, to be

able to 'dance through the hard stuff' because as Erini Kartsaki writes, invoking the repetitive techniques of playwright Samuel Beckett sometimes we need 'To simply keep going: because in order not to die, you must come and go, come and go….' (Kartsaki, 2017)

Arno Böhler (Böhler-Granzer 2018: 204):

Bodies are - and this statement is politically highly relevant -

in interaction.

in interaction with other bodies.

A body is not a body

because bodies are constituted ecstatical: Sensorily affected by

all the other bodies surrounding a given body.

...when I am talking about the ethics of bodies

I am not talking about isolated bodies;

about things,

about rigid, locally identifiable single things ending at the

boundaries of their body surface.

When I am talking about the ethics of bodies, I am talking

about bodies in contact.

I am talking about ex-posed bodies

ec-statically interacting with other bodies.

About bodies stretched between two skins.

In this stretch between the two skins we form and reform our identities as I/we, them/us. At a time of divisive conflict , such experiences allow us to practice what arts worker and researcher François Matarasso (2016) calls 'liveable ambiguity' echoing the two-in-one quantum reality that is our contemporary world. To be in the complex, multi-layered, too big to understand changing experience that our lived bodies journey through, it is through tracing the iterating patterns of culture and nature that we find connections. And through connection find friendship with shapeshifting systems that rely on trust through feedback, knowing through repetition, new choreographies from past histories. Rather than retreating into simple answers for complex times, we reach for simple equations to generate complex patterns.

(count 4118)

Please note that we have many photographic images that can be used to support this article in addition to the one here.

Passage for Par (2018)

Notes

1. Rosemary Lee interview with Pethybridge 25/3/18

2. Kiki Gale interviewed 7/7/18

3. Joanna Tagney interviewed 14/10/17

4. Alice interviewed 24/2/18

5. As many families in the accommodation centres come from conservative Muslim back-grounds, the appropriateness of women and men dancing together in public is constantly negoti-ated in improvisations at the dance parties as women and men enforce, break, reinforce, shift and reformulate the rules around appropriate behaviour in their new country. Some women are committed to the understanding that one should not dance before men outside the family which they have inherited, others enjoy the opportunity to experiment with the boundaries of their traditional role and of course many arrive with a liberal understanding of gender roles.

6. Medhat Aldaabal interviewed on https://wasgeht.berlin/dabke-workshop retrieved 15/11/18)

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