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# Moving Together, Sharing Space in *Dance Your Way Home* by Emma Warren

Olivia Ho

*Dance Your Way Home: A Journey Through the Dancefloor.* By Emma Warren. 2023. ix + 400p. £16.99.  
Faber. ISBN 9780571366033

Italian has two words for dancing, *ballare* and *danzare*. The former refers to the informal, everyday dancing one does with family and friends; the latter means dancing of a high level, the kind that usually requires years of formal training. British author Emma Warren observes that the conflation of both these meanings into the single English verb ‘dance’ comes at the cost of nuance; for one to be defined as a dancer, the assumption follows that one is good at dancing. In her vibrant non-fiction book *Dance Your Way Home: A Journey Through the Dancefloor*, she seeks to decouple these meanings: if one dances, she argues, then one is a dancer, no matter how excellently or terribly one dances.<sup>1</sup> Her book is concerned not with professional dance but with the ordinary movement of bodies together to music, the spaces this shapes, and the communities this creates. She writes: ‘Moving together to music, I realised, allows us to form new relationships with ourselves and with the wider world’ (7).

Among intellectual circles, social dance has long carried the whiff of stigma. *New York Times Magazine* writer Carina del Valle Schorske observes that much of today’s best writing about social dance remains confined to the academic disciplines of anthropology and performance studies; she laments: ‘In the traditional hierarchy of art forms, social dance doesn’t even rank.’<sup>2</sup> This is a hierarchy that Warren, a journalist who documents grassroots music culture and whose debut book was *Make Some Space: Tuning into Total Refreshment Centre* (2019), sets out to ignore.

The dancefloor, which she defines as ‘the ground upon which the dancers dance’ (11), could be youth clubs, school discos, reggae dancehalls, raves, and many, many other places. It could be getting down to acid house on a nightclub floor; it could be bopping with your siblings to *Top of the Pops* in your front room. Warren refracts her research through her own personal dancefloor experiences to produce a clarion call for embracing collective dance as a crucial aspect of community. ‘We absorb or reject each other’s movement in order to signify that we’re part of a community, or to indicate that we’re not,’ she argues. ‘It shapes us, as we make shapes’ (16).

A dancefloor requires a physical space, and the construction and control of such cultural spaces are inextricable from the political and economic pressures they exist under.

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<sup>1</sup> Emma Warren, *Dance Your Way Home: A Journey Through the Dancefloor* (London: Faber, 2023), p. 33. All citations hereafter will be in-text.

<sup>2</sup> Carina del Valle Schorske, ‘Dancing Through New York in a Summer of Joy and Grief’, *New York Times Magazine*, 15 September 2021 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/15/magazine/dancing-new-york-summer.html>> [accessed 26 August 2023].

Warren looks mostly at British and Irish dancefloors, particularly those frequented by the working class, youth and/or minority groups, from 1930s Irish dance halls squashed by moral panic to the Northern dancefloors of the early 1990s and their policing. In one especially striking image, Warren describes how riot-ready police would turn up in Manchester clubs in a show of strength, moving across the dancefloor in a strict line with hard hats and shields in ‘the copper conga’ (194).

Warren is of the view that ‘downward pressure can create the dance, like pressure turns carbon into diamond’ (97). Control—whether exerted by authoritarian governments, religious leaders or restrictive families—often takes the form of curtailing the movement of bodies in space. Yet the need for that movement remains and may come out ‘sideways’, manifesting as dancefloors that exist as spaces of resistance. That said, while Warren makes much of the dancefloor as a safe space, she dwells less on unsafe dancefloors—there are fleeting references to drug culture, but not the harassment that women often experience in some of these spaces.

This book is not academic in nature, though it draws on a considerable breadth of academic research across multiple disciplines, from history to psychiatry. There is an amusing detour into what might have constituted the earliest English dancing; Warren cites Martha Bayless’ assertion that the engraving on the ninth-century Fuller Brooch is a depiction of Anglo-Saxon dancing, which seemed, among other things, to revel in rudeness (30-1). She also marshals an array of scientific studies about the benefits of everyday dance, from Swedish research on the effects of collaborative dance class on the physical and mental health of teenage girls, to a paper on the effects of prenatal dance intervention on foetal neurodevelopment (164; 240). But her roster of interviewees ranges far and wide, from big names on club circuits to family, friends and acquaintances she once shared a dancefloor with. Toni Basil, best known for her 1981 hit song, ‘Mickey’, but also a dance historian in her own right, repeats to Warren a phrase by Henry Link of hip-hop dance crew M.O.P.T.O.P: ‘Dance your history’ (18). This is echoed in Warren’s later interview with veteran London DJ and producer Frankie Valentine, who says: ‘When people listen to music, they dance their story’ (177).

‘Dance your history’ and ‘dance your story’ may be said to be *Dance Your Way Home*’s defining ethos, and also its limiting factor. Unlike other titles that deal with collective dance—most notably Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* (2007), which looked more broadly at spontaneous group celebration in phenomena such as dancing, feasting and the carnivalesque through the ages—Warren eschews range in favour of grounding her writing in her own lived experience. This is the safest approach one can take towards such a culturally sprawling subject, but it also circumscribes it. The sensitivity Warren brings to the project is laudable, but it does mean its scope is sorely narrowed. Warren, a Londoner with Irish ancestry, describes herself as a ‘white, middle-class, middle-aged woman’ (5). This means that the majority of the dancefloors featured in this book are British or Irish, with some exceptions, such as a jaunt across the pond to the clubs of Chicago’s South Side. A chapter on 1970s and 1980s reggae dancehall begins with the apologetic caveat: ‘I should say here that I didn’t dance under these particular red bulbs, and might not have done so even if I’d been the right age’ (79). The Arabic group of dances called *raqs sharqi*—more familiar to the layperson as ‘belly-dance’—makes an appearance, but only to bolster an argument for the positive effect of dancing during pregnancy and labour (242). *Raq s sharqi*’s association with childbirth is significant, but it is a pity that this is the only one of the genre’s myriad aspects—and certainly not the one most pertinent to the rich span of Arabic dancefloor culture—to be highlighted here.

In another rare mention of a non-Anglo-centric dancefloor, Warren recounts a visit to Rwanda's Hôtel des Mille Collines, where she observes at the back of a disco room 'a small handful of young men dancing Jamaican dancehall-style, dipping down and winding their waists in a manner I perceived as gendered, in the sense of being associated with the way women move'. She adds obliquely that any assumptions she made about their sexuality 'says more about me than it does about their reality or the way they might identify' (317-8). There is a point she seeks to make here about the universal nature of dance as a form of celebratory expression, but it is obscured by her overt consciousness of her outsider status, keen to get on the floor but hesitant to tread on any toes.

Where the book benefits most from the approach of memoir is in its exploration of the body as instrument and limit. Warren's father was disabled; the increase in her caregiving responsibilities as a teenager coincided with her introduction to club culture. 'My need for movement increased in tandem with his decreasing strength,' she observes (179). Later, she herself develops dyspraxia, a 'condition in which poor balance affects co-ordination', resulting in her inability to learn dance steps. Dance class helps her understand, however, that her symptoms are a standard experience for the non-neurotypical (311).

A photographer who works with professional dancers tells Warren about something she calls 'a con': 'the constant deferral that comes with bodily connection', especially for women; the time that you can enjoy or appreciate your body always out of reach (342-3). Warren argues that spontaneous, everyday dance gives one a chance to inhabit the body as it is in the moment, arriving at a version of the self 'less tainted by the illusions that society places upon individuals based on ability, gender, sexuality, class or ethnicity' (343). Some individuals benefit from these illusions more than others: Warren cites Maxine Leeds Craig's *Sorry, I Don't Dance: Why Men Refuse to Move* (2014), positing that the cliché 'white men can't dance' came about because white middle-class men are rarely reduced to their bodies. She wonders if they have thus somehow absorbed the idea that 'moving freely presents a risk to status and social standing' (44).<sup>3</sup>

Warren realises she cannot separate herself from her body; now she wants an 'embodied life, in which the self sits in the soft inside of an elbow or in our muscles, not just in our brains' (214). She speaks with Brian Belle-Fortune, DJ and author of *All Crews: Journeys Through Jungle/Drum & Bass Culture* (1999), who recalls a scene in the documentary *All Junglists: a London Someting Dis* (1994) that included a man in a wheelchair on the dancefloor: 'I knew that if something horrible happened to me, I'd be on the dancefloor too' (237). Belle-Fortune, who now uses a wheelchair due to the progressive effects of multiple sclerosis, has similarly remained on the dancefloor, inhabiting his body with whatever he has got (238).

Much threatens the proliferation and survival of dancefloors today—authoritarian regimes, capitalist profiteering, and most recently the Covid-19 pandemic, which turned the collective joy of moving together in a shared space into something deadly. In the face of such pressures, Warren makes a compelling case for the dancefloor in everyday life. To move with each other is vital to a sense of shared humanity. 'Are we human or are we dancer?' sang Brandon Flowers, questionably and ungrammatically, in The Killers' 2008 song 'Human'. This book's answer is that it is precisely because we are human that we are dancers.

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<sup>3</sup> Maxine Leeds Craig, *Sorry, I Don't Dance: Why Men Refuse to Move* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).