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# Preface

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Naomi Jackson

On a recent trip to Israel in May 2019, I had the pleasure of experiencing the booming dance scene. From the socially conscious work happening in dance and theatre at Western Galilee College, to the multiple activities of the Kibbutz Dance Village and Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance, and the innovative dance program for religious women at Orot College of Education, I was impressed at the high quality and passionate commitment by those involved from administrators to teachers and choreographers to dancers.

My trip was inspired by a contingent of wonderful Israelis I met at the conference I co-organized with the renowned choreographer Liz Lerman in October 2018 at Arizona State University (ASU). Our vision for that international conference was to assemble individuals interested in collectively investigating and celebrating connections between Jews and dance across historical periods, dance styles, disciplinary boundaries, religious differences and geographic locations. The result was an event that featured over 100 presenters from eight countries (Israel, Canada, Argentina, France, Germany, Austria, England, and the United States) in forty or so activities, including an evening of screendance, live performance curated by Liz Lerman and Wendy Perron, and a library exhibition.

What I found interesting to hear from the Israeli presenters at ASU was how little interest within Israel did a topic that related Jews and dancing garner. While I continue to reflect on the reasons for this, it seems that it has to do with: 1) it being taken for granted that much dance in Israel is by and for Jews, so why discuss it; 2) that anything that relates “Jews” and “dance” brings to mind dance either along religious lines or addressing recognizably Jewish themes, and these are not considered particularly relevant to the larger purposes of dance as an art form being pursued by many dance supporters in Israel, and 3) that the very terms “Jewish” and “Jewishness” evoke a diasporic Jewish existence that is not only foreign but anathema to an underlying Zionist ideology, with its focus on Hebraic identity and Israeliness.

However, it is around this very question of how Jewishness is constructed differently through the body, movement and dance, both in the Diaspora *and* in Israel, at different times and places, that is proving a fertile field of investigation. In recent years there has been a flourishing of new scholarship attempting to answer this query by authors including Ninotchka Bennahum, Hannah Kosstrin, Hannah Schwadron, and Nina Spiegel. The following articles in this special issue contribute to this recent wave, demonstrating the evolution of the field away from a narrow and limiting concept of “Jewish dance” to what Rebecca Rossen has conceptualized as “dancing Jewish”—a fluid, shifting notion that is increasingly addressed in an intersectional manner referencing gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, race, religious orientation and nationality.

Perhaps one of the most interesting lessons to be learned from this conceptual shift is that modern Jews have enacted their Jewishness by being some of the most prominent producers of culture through the arts and in so doing, embodied the many, varied and often conflicted feelings they have regarding their identities as Jews (<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox>). This is something that Marion Kant observes when writing about the prominent German Jew, Heinrich Heine, and *Giselle* in her essay in this collection, demonstrating that it was through the ballet that he embodied his desire for an identity free of the trappings of Judeo-Christian religion and rigid social conventions.

That Jews have created dancing and dances for the stage, screen or broader community, that either obviously or implicitly reveal something profound about the Jewish experience, and that have had a major impact on societies as a whole, is something I hope readers will find fascinating and compelling. Congratulations to Ruth Eshel and Judith Brin Ingber for having the vision and commitment to bringing this issue to fruition. It promises to be a significant means of not only documenting and disseminating material presented at the “Jews and Jewishness in the Dance World” conference, but of leading to an even greater appreciation for scholarship in dance on this important issue.