RECONSTRUCTING DANCER IDENTITIES:
IMPLICATIONS OF A GLOBAL PANDEMIC FOR FREELANCE CONTEMPORARY DANCERS IN AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND

BY: *Emma Cosgrave, Independent dance artist*

ABSTRACT

The Coronavirus (Covid-19) continues to reshape many lives socially, politically, and economically. Choreographic practice, performance, and those involved in dance are also affected in different ways. This article investigates the research question: How might the event of Covid-19 prompt the transformation of freelance dancers' identities? Through a qualitative narrative inquiry, three freelance contemporary dancers from Aotearoa/New Zealand were interviewed. From a thematic analysis of the data, the theme of alienation and adaptability were drawn out. This research reveals that the event of Covid-19 has caused freelance dancers to question their identity and precarity within their communities and shifted their position to advance a sense of security. The stories shared by the dancers revealed that industry practices and conditions for freelance contemporary dancers in Aotearoa/New Zealand need redevelopment for greater sustainability, relevance and inclusion, which could pave the way for industry changes to occur post-covid-19.

Keywords: *Covid-19, freelance contemporary dance, identity, alienation, adaptability*

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The event: An introduction

> *The New Zealand Prime Minister announces on 23rd March 2020 that the pandemic of Covid-19 requires Aotearoa/New Zealand to enter into lockdown. A feeling of uncertainty washes over me, and I wonder how Covid-19 will affect the dance projects I have planned nationally and internationally. I nervously check my emails to see how the situation is in Europe and Canada. Many explain that their dance projects are no longer going ahead. A feeling of shock washes over me, and I begin to feel lost in who I am as a freelance contemporary dancer without dance work. I feel unsettled about the growing uncertainty of how a global pandemic will affect the wider dance community in Aotearoa/New Zealand* – Self Reflective Narrative

Covid-19 has altered the world, influencing various economic, social and political realms (Fernandes, 2020; Tisdell, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic could be what Slavoj Žižek (2014) describes as an 'event', a situation that occurs suddenly and without warning, interrupting the flow of individuals' lives. Žižek (2014) suggests an event can be something that comes from nowhere and appears in different forms: for example, a global crisis, a political decision, a natural disaster, or the beginning of a new art form. An event has the potential to cause change in society. The pandemic could be an event that might trigger unprecedented and ongoing challenges in the ways freelance contemporary dancers practice their art form. With theatres closed, performances cancelled and transitioning online, dancers have had to reimagine new ways of working to sustain their artistic practices, professional identities, and sense of well-being (Weber, 2020).

I am privileged to live in Aotearoa/New Zealand, where government action has been swift, with one of the lowest transmission rates in the world. The New Zealand government released a wage subsidy package for all workers, part or full time, to receive payments over sixteen weeks. This package helped freelance contemporary dancers to feel secure financially. Pre-covid-19, freelance contemporary dancers worked in contract employment in and across different dance sectors: for example, performance, choreography, education, arts administration, production and academia (Aujla & Farrer, 2015, 2016; Roche, 2015, 2018). In Aotearoa/New Zealand, freelancers worked towards financial stability through employment relationships nationally and internationally. They travelled to other cities and countries to develop their dance careers (Heyang & Martin, 2020). Working in various dance sectors at the same time can be challenging for dancers, as each sector has different employment expectations that require dancers to negotiate diverse understandings of professional practice, time management, and project based or company values (Barbour, 2008).

A freelance contemporary dance community is fluid and interchangeable, where the power dynamics within the choreographer-dancer relationship, between late-career to early-career artists, or between dancers can influence feelings of belonging and alienation for freelance contemporary dancers (Cosgrave, 2019). Karen Barbour (2008) mentions that what the professional dance industry in Aotearoa/New Zealand may be

missing (in problematic leadership hierarchies) is respect and acknowledgement for all involved in each project. Problematic leadership practices of viewing the dancer as not an equal collaborator have an impact on a dancer's self-esteem and their ability to take agency in working contexts (Barbour, 2008; Cosgrave, 2019; Knox, 2013). These realities that dancers experience in navigating different professional practices could exist within the current Covid-19 climate in Aotearoa/New Zealand. However, these issues most likely have evolved, shifted and manifested in diverse ways.

The question driving this research is: *How might the event of Covid-19 prompt the transformation of freelance dancers' identities?* Two sub-questions also arose from the main question. Firstly, how might the Covid-19 pandemic foreground a sense of precarity for freelance dancers? Secondly, how might the Covid-19 pandemic, as an event, influence freelance dancers' self-esteem? By the time this article is published, there will be further changes to the freelance contemporary dance community. I hope this article is a starting point for people to build discussions around rethinking unsustainable dance practices in the freelance contemporary dance community in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Before embarking on the narratives from Beth, Jamie, and Kasey (names replaced with pseudonyms), which I gathered through fieldwork research conducted from March to December 2020, I offer a brief overview of the key ideas about this investigation. I then deliver a short articulation of the research methodology and present the findings of alienation and adaptability.

Reflecting on the now: A contextual overview

Globally, as of 28th September 2021, there have been 232,075,351 confirmed cases of Covid-19 worldwide, including 4,752,988 deaths (World Health Organisation, 2021). The pandemic has struck many businesses, families and individuals, leaving them feeling uncertain, alienated, and disorientated (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). Mallory Braus and Brenda Morton (2020) share that right now, stress levels are high, and individuals are finding it "difficult to deal with situations of self-containment, quarantine, and alienation" (p. 267). Freelance dancers are not immune from sudden changes in their dance careers from working in multiple short-term employment situations (Aujla & Farrer, 2015; Roche, 2015). However, working under tight restrictions of physical distancing, lockdown, and international travel, have meant dance communities are needing to adapt (as it is an ongoing crisis) to current rehearsal and performance practice.

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the number of Covid-19 cases remains extremely low. Earlier in March 2020, the New Zealand government set up a four-tiered Alert Level system to help prevent the virus from spreading (Strongman et al., 2021). As of 28th September 2021, Aotearoa/New Zealand is in level three lockdown after three months free of Covid-19. Between 7th October 2020 – 19th June 2021, for the majority of the time, Tamaki Makaurau/Auckland has been in level one (all businesses and services open) with a Trans-Tasman bubble open with Australia. Although life is relatively normal in Aotearoa/New Zealand, there are still unknowns about the virus, and life after Covid-19 will not return to what it once was.

Remarkable changes have been made to the New Zealand dance industry as a result of the pandemic. Covid-19 has given artists in Aotearoa/New Zealand the option to work from home and make use of online platforms (Heyang & Martin, 2020; Weber, 2020). Although online dance platforms were in use before the Covid-19 pandemic (Weber, 2020), pre-covid-19 there were few online systems in place to give dancers and individuals who work in the arts the choice to stay at home. The pandemic has encouraged people to adopt creative practices for online digital spaces (Romero-Ivanova et al., 2020) and connect with dance practitioners and events globally through online mediums such as Zoom (Weber, 2020; Martin & Heyang, 2020). Although online platforms have provided opportunities for dancers to connect with dancers, choreographers, dance teachers, and wider audiences around the world (Weber, 2020), the general public in Aotearoa/New Zealand is hungry for live performances.

To understand what life is like for freelance contemporary dancers in Aotearoa/New Zealand, I discuss life pre-covid-19. Pre-pandemic, freelance dancers experienced challenges in knowing when to speak up during encounters of power within the choreographer-dancer relationship (Cosgrave, 2019). This may be because dancers experienced fear of losing their job if they challenged authoritarian methods (Cosgrave, 2019). Others felt they were interrupting the choreographic process if they needed to take a break to manage their needs (Sikorski, 2018). In some dance projects and companies, choreographers may be demanding in their expectations of dancers, "requesting actions they may have felt unable to refuse' (Barbour, 2008, p. 41). There may also be limited time to create a dance work (Barbour, 2008), and with less time, the choreographic process might focus less on the connections taking place between people (Risner, 2002). There is also the possibility that dancers experience limited recognition of their artistic contributions in the making of dance work (Barbour, 2008). Rachel Farrer (2014) states that the dancers' contributions to the dance work seem to be viewed more "as responses to a choreographer's creativity, rather than valued as creativity in their own right (p. 95). Farrer (2014) hopes to re-direct the conversation so that dancers could receive more credit for their creative contributions. At the same time, dancers may also experience encounters of personal growth, agency, and creativity in diverse choreographic processes (Cosgrave, 2019; Knox, 2013).

Freelance dancers in Aotearoa/New Zealand may feel alienated when they cannot find a balance between paid work and dance opportunities (Sanderson, 2017). Creating independent dance works can be challenging as dance is among the less funded (Weber, 2020). Creative New Zealand (2019) in their annual report acknowledge that sustainability as an independent dancer in the field is challenging. They share that "dancers were the lowest remunerated, with the median income for dancers being less than the adult minimum wage" (p. 43). In light of the new funding announcement (29th September 2021) of up to $22.5 million to provide confidence for cultural performances and events in Aotearoa/New Zealand, there has been concern for freelancers whose employment fits outside of "the funding umbrella of large organisations" (The Big Idea, 2021, p.1). Cat Ruka (The Big Idea, 2021) explains that "severe financial hardship has become so synonymous with being an independent artist that we've come to accept it"

(p.1). While it is too early to see how accessible this funding will be for independent artists in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Ruka (The Big Idea, 2021) states: "you can't blame independent creatives for having their guard up. They've been burnt before" (p.1). These issues that are happening in Aotearoa/New Zealand and beyond could be addressed if the dance community respond mindfully as a field to the Covid-19 crisis.

Some of the challenges listed above, particularly around the power dynamics between dancer-choreographic relationships, might have resulted from the belief that the choreographer is the centre of knowledge production within dance-making (Fensham, 2008). For dancers, their embodied experience of dancing could be viewed as being in service to the choreographer. Viewing the choreographic process as a micro-economy, Sarah Foster-Sproull (2021) proposes the notion of a prosumer-dancer as an active contributing member of the choreographic team. Her (Foster-Sproull, 2017, 2021) research reimagines the choreographic process as a consumer-oriented, service-driven environment, within which the choreographer is providing the service of the dance-making process to the dancers. Foster-Sproull's (2021) perspective of the choreographer as a 'service-provider' troubles assumptions that a Choreographer, Director, or Artistic Director could expect dancers to be compliant with all the challenging creative demands. The act of philosophically disentangling hierarchical choreographer-dancer power structures seeks to centre focus on dancers' experiences of the choreographic process, and centre dance as an embodiment of cultural knowledge and an expression of unique identities (Foster, 1986).

Navigating to a new way of working in the world can leave people feeling to be in a state of in-betweenness and ambiguity, causing fluid and incomplete identifications (Daskalaki & Simosi, 2018). Exploring identification and identity could help understand the three dancers' narratives in this research. Gert Biesta (2017) suggests that people reshape their perceptions, attitudes and feelings based on their experiences. Kath Woodward (2004) explores identity as an interrelationship between an individual and their social surroundings. In dance, Lynda Mainwaring (2019) discusses identity for dancers as being enmeshed in the body through "performance, training, the aspirations, structures and messages of the dance culture and the environment with all its trimmings" (p.1). A dancer's identity may then be tied in with who they are and what they do for a living. Jennifer Roche (2015) extends this notion, explaining that the body can unconsciously take in and express "inscribed cultural belief systems and embedded societal rules" (p. 110). These cultural inscriptions, including the 'new normal' of the Covid-19 pandemic, may then become a part of a dancer's 'moving identity' in future dance processes (Roche, 2015). For dancers, questioning their identity, who they are, how they are perceived by others, and what will their career look like, are ongoing questions that have been around for a long time (Clements, 2021). Some dancers may feel that time is running out for them (Clements, 2021). In this current Covid-19 landscape, the uncertainty of when the pandemic will end has caused dancers concern for their identity and career.

In the making: Methodological approach

A qualitative narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004) was selected to gather the experiences of three freelance contemporary dancers: Beth, Jamie, and Kasey. The three dancers participated in an earlier research project that I completed between 2019 - 2020. I selected Beth, Jamie and Kasey as they were actively involved in the New Zealand dance industry during the Covid-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, I worked with Beth, Jamie, and Kasey on various projects, making me an intimate insider in this research. I received ethical approval for this research from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee.

Stories from the narrative approach offered understandings of the experiences of the researcher's participants, as it "made the implicit explicit, the hidden seen, the unformed formed, and the confusing clear" (Chou et al, 2013, p. 59-66). A narrative can be an "oral, written, or filmed account of events told to others or oneself" (Smith, 2000, p.328). Semi-structured interviews was selected to gather stories from the participants (Grau, 2007; Richardson, 1990). During the interview, I encouraged each participant to share their lockdown stories, followed by questions about how their dance practice might have shifted and evolved through the pandemic. Between each interview, I reflected on each participant's ideas and examined any literature needed for this article. No adjustments were made on how I was going to approach the next interview. This decision was to ensure no pre-assumptions were forming about what the participants would share.

The data was analysed using a thematic approach. Within a thematic approach, the researcher is encouraged to engage in the analysis as a witness to their participants' narratives (Nowell et al., 2017). In doing so, I thought about the literature and theories that could help deepen the themes revealed during the thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). This involved going back and forth between the participants' quotes, the literature, and examining my own perspectives as a Maori (Ngāti Pukenga) freelance contemporary dancer in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Working in this way allowed me to process the dancers' experiences in depth (Risner, 2002).

The thematic analysis helped summarise the participant's narratives to find similarities and differences as starting points for potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher began by reading all of the transcribed data, highlighting quotes that revealed a clear emotional meaning of what each participant was expressing (Reissman, 2005). She then used a systematic process for coding data by categorising these themes using a template (Creswell, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017). The template served as a tool for organising segments of similar or related text in the participants' narratives, providing a clear way of finding evidence (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). The researcher first looked at each quote shared by the participants. She then listed a few different understandings of what they might be telling her. From here, she unpacked potential themes that their narratives could reveal. Once she had all of the analysis individually, the researcher drew out common themes. Finally, the ideas that had the most data became her overall themes for this study. The themes selected were alienation and adaptability.

The results, analysis and discussion are treated as an integrated whole in the following sections of the article.

Results, analysis and discussion

The interviews with Beth, Jamie and Kasey revealed two key findings of *alienation* and *adaptability*. These feelings appeared to have stemmed from dancing in and out of multiple lockdowns, government alert level changes, restrictions, and navigating to a new way of working while past belief systems remained. The following sections explore the three dancers' narratives and related literature on alienation in adapting to a new normal and identity.

Alienation

The event of Covid-19 has been an experience that Beth, Jamie, and Kasey have faced in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Despite having some forewarning due to the pandemic escalating overseas, the impacts of restrictions and moving into lockdown in Aotearoa/New Zealand came as a shock for many dancers. Losing dance work caused Beth, Jamie, and Kasey to feel they were not valued in their dance communities, questioning their sense of purpose and motivation for why they dance. Beth discovered that:

> People need dance and art during the pandemic, and I am not an essential worker, so I cannot provide them with this public service. I am privately dealing with the feeling of not being essential or valued enough in the dance community. If I am not doing what I love, it does feel like I have lost a part of my identity as a dancer.

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, not all dancers experienced the same as Beth because everyone worked in various dance sectors that required different expectations around online engagement. Beth's experience might indicate that her self-worth derives from a lack of access to her employment in the current Covid-19 landscape. I view that the Covid-19 lockdowns does not meet the needs for Beth to self-actualise in her dance sectors, making her question herself and her work. This leads me to question whether Beth's alienating experiences can prompt freelance dancers to evaluate what they need to exist in and with the world, and acknowledge what desires will or will not serve them. As Biesta (2017) suggests, when an individual encounters interruption (such as the Covid-19 pandemic), they have an opportunity to figure out "which desires are going to help in our attempts at existing in and with the world in a grown-up way, and which desires are going to hinder us in that task" (p. 149). Biesta (2017) might be suggesting that people look closely at what they need in their life to feel at home in their communities despite ongoing challenges.

Like Beth, Jamie felt she was no longer needed as a dancer during lockdown. She stated:

> I feel like I am contributing nothing to the dance industry. I feel lost in who I am as a dancer because I am unable to practice my art or it seems irrelevant when the pandemic needs other voices right now. I am slowly losing more of my work, and it has left me at the point where I feel devalued as a dancer. I was not worried financially as I had the Covid-19 wage subsidy, but

rather my purpose and motivation are gone. The pandemic has allowed me to reflect on how I was feeling about the New Zealand dance industry pre-covid-19.

Physical distancing and isolation come with risks, including feelings of loneliness (Weber, 2020). Ongoing changes and the lack of employment that Beth and Jamie are experiencing lead to fluid and incomplete identifications (Daskalaki & Simosi, 2018), causing feelings of uncertainty, isolation, and alienation (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). Identity is informed by the self, others, and their socio-cultural landscape (Glăveanu & Tanggaard, 2014), and Covid-19 is also a part of this influence. Beth and Jamie may not be able to see their worth because they have been taught to place value on who they are based on what they do. Feeling lost seemed to influence how the dancers viewed their dancer identity because they no longer had access to their employment. I sense that the dancers feel guilt for resting and are placing their self-worth on doing well in their careers. At the same time, the pandemic has allowed opportunities for people to pause and reflect on who they are and what they wish to do (Jacobs et al, 2020). Dancers may then have to reinvent how they would like to work in a post-covid-19 world (Heyang & Martin, 2020). From my findings it could be that to re-invent subjectivity, individuals need to use what they know in their world to seek actions of change. With this in mind, can Beth and Jamie's experiences of feeling lost prompt freelance dancers to think of themselves beyond dance and tap into other aspects of their professional identities? Can this sense of feeling lost prompt them to reconstruct their identities as they adapt to new modes of performances and dance? Dancers who look at new platforms, approaches, and methods to their work open up new practices and feelings to emerge.

In these times of uncertainty, engaging in creativity can help someone cope with sudden changes (Kapoor & Kaufman, 2020). However, engaging in creative tasks and planning around the unknown while the pandemic is ongoing is a challenge for Beth. She recalled:

> I am not sure what to do as an artist during this time. Do I plan to work to be a busy freelancer? Or to be a broke artist over the summer with no work? Or do I choose a different career entirely that is more stable during this pandemic?

Many people like Beth, who could not work from home during the lockdown, had considered a new career pathway (Bick et al., 2020). Dancers who rely on live performances as their employment may not return to work until the pandemic is taken care of, and its ending is unknown. Not being able to return to work can create feelings of alienation in people (Ratcliffe, 2009) as work has become a part of their routine.

The lack of direction for Beth, Jamie and Kasey might stem from how the New Zealand dance industry operated pre-covid-19. Barbour (2008) notes that dancers may place value on themselves and their success based upon how much dance-related work they have. Finding fulfilment in dance post-covid-19 will require taking a step back from the concepts, constructs, and practices that occurred pre-covid-19 in Aotearoa/New Zealand in order to find new knowledge systems moving forward. Each individual has a

choice as to how they view their inner world (Biesta, 2017). If dance can talk about past knowledge systems through performance and highlight areas of change, then dance might have the power to implement improvement in society post-covid-19.

On reflecting on dance post-covid-19, Kasey shared the following:

> The pandemic helped me realise that some of the previous processes I was in within my dance community were unhelpful to the development of my career. Some of these were because of the power hierarchies, belief systems, and expectations of me as a dancer. I often struggled to communicate my needs to the choreographer and director of a company because I was worried whether doing so would make me difficult to work with or result in losing my job. As we enter into a more post-covid-19 realm here in Aotearoa, I have had more conversations on how as freelancers we can shift past ideologies, expectations of freelance dancers, and power relationships to a more open, community-led, collaborative, non-hierarchical way of working. The pandemic has enabled these conversations to come to the forefront.

Kasey's narrative reveals that the pandemic has helped her reflect on the freelance dance industry in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Perhaps pre-covid-19, freelance dancers felt they were unable to take action in unfavourable encounters to secure their work and safeguard their well-being (Barbour, 2008). Kasey found it challenging to speak up during encounters of power. A community-led approach to dance making could be helpful for Kasey to communicate her needs with ease. In dance, this may focus on the choreographer or person in charge to offer the dancer opportunities to make decisions (Foster-Sproull, 2017). Adopting a prosumer-dancer lens to the creative process (Foster-Sproull, 2021) may place dancers at the centre of choreographic practice and provide dancers with opportunities for self-actualisation. Working in this way enables the role of the dancer to shift into being a creator and co-owner of the product that is being made (Foster-Sproull, 2021). Kasey's narrative captures a sense of hope that conversations surrounding how to better improve workplaces after the pandemic are in the making. The event of Covid-19 might then have the potential to shake up structures of sustainability, inclusivity and resources in the dance community that may not have worked previously.

Adaptability

Beth, Jamie, and Kasey each had a different journey in adapting to a new working life. For Jamie, she felt comfortable knowing she was not alone. She stated:

> Knowing everyone was in the same position as me, with no dancing and forced to rest, brought comfort to my experiences during the lockdown. Before Covid-19, I felt like I always needed to have dance work to feel valued in my dance community. Having time to rest has helped me feel like I do not need to compare myself and my career to other dancers. The dance industry is on one playing field because we all are affected by the pandemic at the same time.

Jamie seemed content with herself by relating her situation to her peers. Jamie reveals the potential that before Covid-19, the dance community in Aotearoa/New Zealand

may not have been as inclusive as imagined. Like Jamie, Beth found she "had to re-examine and move away from societal ideals surrounding productivity and achievement to feel comfortable dancing from home". Productivity is challenging during a crisis (Oberfield, 2013), as people have to do something different outside of their routine. Adaptation during Covid-19 involves a reworking of embodied and social practices in order to survive (Thomas, 2019). The undoing process is necessary to build common ground, collaboration, and connection with everyone (Thomas, 2019). Inclusivity seemed important for Jamie to feel less alone during the lockdown, where she was no longer worried about sustaining her dancer identity. The event of Covid-19 allowed Beth to question her precarity, and to make changes in how she relates to her wider dance community.

Unlike Jamie, Kasey found that level two in Tamaki Makaurau/Auckland was much more challenging because "everyone was trying to be normal, but everything is not normal!" In Aotearoa/New Zealand, level two meant people could return to work with restrictions and physical distancing in place. Covid-19 appeared to create resistance for Kasey to "pursue desires without any consideration for the world" (Biesta, 2017, p. 350). Pursuing desires in this way meant that Kasey could move through her world with ease. She could find her middle ground between world destruction (pursuing desires without any consideration) and self-destruction (a world resisting what an individual desires). For a person to thrive in their community, there needs to be a mutual interaction between self and environment, and both entities require change towards each other (Biesta et al., 2015).

Motivation and re-imagining expectations are beginning to shift in light of Covid-19 (Aboagye et al., 2020). Coming to terms with the new normal has enabled dancers to keep moving forward in their careers. Highlighting Kasey's encounters as an example, she shares the following:

> The environment and atmosphere in Aotearoa/New Zealand is very sterile and strange. I have to keep a two-metre distance from everyone else, and I am made anxious by all of the procedures in place that are here to protect me. Dancing during this time feels impossible in these conditions. I am questioning who I am without dance, and what I can then offer my community. I am using the time during lockdown to figure out how to reimagine a way to work through the pandemic as a dancer. For example, by maintaining fitness for when I return to dance, applying for funding, and engaging in online dance events nationally and internationally.

Kasey feels a sense of struggle in her dance practice from the Covid-19 limitations. Kasey identifies some of the fundamental things she needs to do to feel active as a dancer. Creating freedom during times of resistance means identifying past processes that did not work to find new ways of doing (Thomas, 2019). However, doing so requires consistency and it can be particularly challenging to readapt life around the demands of Covid-19. Paul Gyllenhammer (2009) asserts that "failure to fit within rigidly defined norms can unnecessarily corrupt an otherwise optimal sense of life" (p. 58). Kasey appears to be questioning her precarity during lockdown, and finding solidarity with

other people. Covid-19 has shaken normalities and presents challenges that dancers face in highly different ways. Forming relationships therefore becomes a source of support and learning, promoting belonging particularly in times of crisis (Barr, 2013).

Feelings of what might come out of Covid-19 in Aotearoa/New Zealand caused excitement for all three dancers. Kasey shared that "even though my future in dance is uncertain, the event churned up so much discussion, and inward-looking amongst people, and that is exciting!" In a time of immense isolation, uncertainty, and alienation, Kasey reveals a sense of hope and a shift from the challenges she faced earlier in lockdown. She continued to say that "I feel like now, as we move out of lockdown, theatres are opening up again. More audiences I have noticed are sitting in seats. There is a deeper appreciation for what dancers do in society!" Covid-19 seems already to have changed or challenged notions in dance practices pre-covid-19, possibly shifting dance practices to more sustainable, relevant and inclusive ways for freelance dancers in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Jamie also noticed that during lockdown, "choreographic works for the theatre were performed in home garages and on the street!" In the past, going to the theatre was a privilege for people to witness dance, whereas changing the narrative that dance can be performed anywhere is one form of shifting Western concert dance ideologies (Burt, 2017).

Kasey, Jamie and Beth's experiences suggest that it may be necessary for the dance community as a whole to think about new ways of relating and engaging with one another. The effect of Covid-19 in Aotearoa/New Zealand is that freelance contemporary dancers are coming to terms with their previous dancing identities and work through reflection and re-evaluating where they see themselves in the future.

Not all dancers adjusted with ease to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions in Aotearoa/ New Zealand. Kasey had the desire to be invisible on social media because of the overwhelming feeling that Covid-19 was having on her well-being. Kasey discussed that "Instagram is becoming the new CV to stay relevant as a dancer in Aotearoa/ New Zealand. I do not have a desire to share my creative practice online or engage in creativity over lockdown. I don't want anyone to think that I am not progressing so I shut down my social media". Kasey raises the concern that people will view her as a non-dancer if she does not post her creative practice and dance work online. It is common to feel doubt in a crisis because the shock may simultaneously affect determinants of social behaviour (Elcheroth & Drury, 2020). Like Kasey, Jamie felt alone when comparing herself to others on the internet, saying, "I feel like I am a nobody. I do not want to post anything on social media because I have nothing going on. People are going to forget about me!" Without someone even knowing it, their environment and other people subconsciously influence their thoughts and feelings (Shutz, 1970). Kasey and Jamie's narrative highlights the fact that not everyone will easily adapt to a crisis. Dancers may not feel they want to continue their dance practice during this time. The digital realm is a platform that provides access and sharing between people nationally and internationally. However, at the same time, it appears Kasey and Jamie are questioning why they feel they need to maintain their dancing identities online. Covid-19 seems to

help Beth, Jamie, and Kasey to question how and why they are thinking and feeling the way they do, which has resulted in a common goal for all to want to do better in their communities post-covid-19.

Overall, the narratives shared by Beth, Jamie and Kasey remind us of how important connection and relationships are in a time of physically distanced dancing, learning, creating and sharing. During level one in Aotearoa/New Zealand, dancers could return to work. Beth "immediately felt calmer as dancing at home felt pointless while the world was facing Covid-19". The dancers' different experiences with withdrawal from dance earlier in lockdown might be because there are no feelings of familiarity in their community. Finding a sense of belonging in their dance community during Covid-19 appeared to be vital for Beth, Jamie, and Kasey in sustaining their dancer identities in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Although alienation can be a driver for unfulfilling and problematic experiences leading to identity displacement for who they are, these experiences lead to new beginnings. I can see that Aotearoa/New Zealand is in a unique position as we have had short lockdowns, meaning dancers can enter in and out of society again, with room to reflect and adjust their creative practice accordingly. We have been able to move forward beyond Covid-19 and have had a glimpse of what life may be like post-covid-19.

Conclusion

In a complex world with rapid changes from Covid-19, it has become a challenging time for a dancer with various economic, political, and social factors bringing immense uncertainty. The experiences offered by Beth, Jamie, and Kasey illuminate some challenges freelance contemporary dancers are facing in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Alienation and adaptability were two key propositions discussed in this research. The immediate issues of the Covid-19 pandemic for these dancers included the loss of opportunities for them to share their perspectives, access employment, as well as economic insecurity, the threat of isolation causing alienating experiences, identity crisis, loss of intimacy and physical touch. Not only has this article suggested the dance practices that existed before Covid-19 were potentially not always inclusive for freelance contemporary dancers, but the research has also revealed that the pandemic has helped freelance dancers question their identity and precarity within their communities and to shift their position to advance a sense of security.

This article has revealed that not all dancers in Aotearoa/New Zealand will have adjusted with ease to the new way of working during the pandemic. The limitations of the pandemic compromised dancers' well-being, where they began to question who they are without dance in their communities, and whether they would like to continue working as a dancer post-covid-19. The dancers also questioned how they are going to stay relevant in the New Zealand dance industry during the pandemic. Shifting normalities led to feelings of alienation and insecurity about their previous dancing identities. At the same time, this shift allowed Beth, Jamie and Kasey to reconsider what working as a freelance dancer meant for them, which required a personal transformation process. The findings from this study suggest that restrictions in freelance dance environments that existed before Covid-19 were exacerbated by the crisis.

For dancers to reclaim and thrive in their communities post-covid-19, one solution might be for them to reconstruct their environment in accordance with the current conditions they need to evolve in. One way of doing this is for dancers to keep finding ways of adapting to change in their dance sectors, and asking for what they might need. Focus groups could be held to better understand what dancers need post-covid-19. Taking an inter-generational approach is appropriate given the multi-needs of freelance contemporary dancers in Aotearoa/New Zealand to sustain and expand knowledge for senior practice, mid-career freelancers, and to give further knowledge to emerging artists. Further consideration can be given to how freelance contemporary dancers sustain their dancing careers in a time where physical distancing and working online are present. These provocations lead to questions such as: How might freelance dancers engage with the shift to online platforms? What might come out of this process, and what might be lost?

Communicating without intimacy and physical touch, as shared in this article, may create alienation surrounding dancers' identity and work within their communities. Finding connection has been significant, as in Aotearoa/New Zealand, I have noticed an increase in dance classes, performances, meetings, and discussions when New Zealand enters level one. Dancers are grasping every opportunity to work and sustain their creative practice. This level of awareness for one another brings people together. Valuing differences in others could help deconstruct ideologies regarding the role dancers play in society. Doing so can bring closer attention to the diverse pedagogies, practices, and diverse ways of engaging and relating with one another.

This article offers a snippet of hope that despite Covid-19, dancers can find a sense of connection not only in themselves but also in their communities. Alternative structures to how the freelance dance industry operates are in the making. It is exciting, because emerging from this challenging global pandemic, there may yet be a cultural awakening. Rather than looking to return to normal, we should focus on how freelance dancers can continue to shift ways of working that did not serve us or our way of being in the world.

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