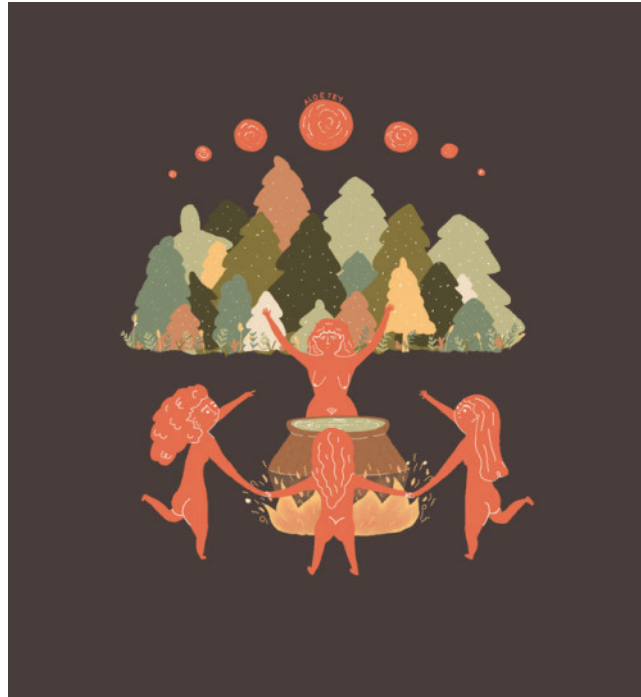


# Dance with the Multitudes

By Nam Phuong Doan '18



*Image by Jay Gorgonia*

Before consciousness fully hits me, my body has already followed Aviva and Luana, the two friendly girls I just met, to the center of Washington Square Park. We are dancing to the Afro Latino rhythms of the awesome street band. More people join us, creating a circle of moving bodies with a variety of choreography. People start dancing in pairs, then triplets, and back to solos. Hip swings, double turns, free-range steps, port de bras. The musicians play to the physical responses of the avid audience. No written scripts, only spontaneous convening.

This is me, dancing in the park, with complete strangers.

It has always been a battle to accept my body and feel comfortable within my own skin. I wonder if that moment of spontaneous dancing with strangers in the park happened because I was finally transformed internally as a sign of post-twenty maturity, or because I was consoled by the collective movement. When you're among a "do-it-who-cares" multitude, you don't feel so naked anymore. Collective dancing and other cultural activities that tease out spontaneous social interactions are not new at Washington Square Park. The presence of street performers and art pop-ups have been one of the defining characteristics of this place. Is the vitality of the public space, especially in an urban setting, dependent on some degree of unpredictable social

convening and play? How would one individual navigate their sense of belonging when the politics of self and of space coincide?

Space is the location, the geographical environment which we occupy. Place is the personal geography, the lived human experience. According to Lucy Lippard in The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicentered Society, place is “the intersection of nature, culture, history, and ideology,” and “the external world mediated through human subjective experience.” When entering a new space, we develop our sense of place by attaching meanings to it. We build our identity from the relationship with the place, which includes people and other components of the landscape. What fascinates me about a public space is how people become hyper-aware and simultaneously oblivious of their own existence. There is terror in performing the self in front of the public gaze, as much as there is comfort in taking refuge in the multitude. One can feel powerful and powerless at the same time. Thus, the elements of play and spontaneous interplay intervene that established dynamic of power and challenge our ideas of self among others. When people dance together in a park, it suddenly becomes blurred who is at the center and who is on the margins. We are brought to a common ground and connected by a nonverbal language system that doesn't exclude anyone.

When I was studying abroad in Buenos Aires, I spent an evening with Frío Cero, an initiative by Red Solidaria (Solidarity Network) to serve food to homeless people at Plaza de Mayo. Plaza de Mayo is the main square at the center of the city, in front of La Casa Rosada, the Argentine President's office and executive mansion. I normally saw protests and parades happening there on a weekly basis. Yet, every Friday night, random people from all walks of life, from bankers, chefs, artists, to students, doctors, and freelancers share a very human moment together in the most politically active and historically chaotic public space of Buenos Aires. That night, my professor, university friends and I made paper puppets, told stories, and danced with the homeless children. The food, the music, the dance, and the most frivolous chit chats broke down the physical, socio-economic and cultural barriers. I've never had so much fun dancing with such eager “partners,” whose heights only reach my lower belly (some of them still babbled). Moments of convening like that are significant in an ordinary way. Even though they cannot change the deep-rooted structure of power, they contribute to reimagining social relations in terms of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and intersectionality, and pushing forward for the construction of a more inclusive, invigorating living landscape.

In an urban context, the commodification of social values and fetishized sense of belonging can exacerbate the conditions of alienation. Human and spatial relationships are involved in economic and cultural transactions, while “belonging” is marketed and sold to city dwellers who can afford it. They often want to avoid vulnerability, discomfort and chaos by searching for familiarity, quotidian and safety in a space. In turn, having an open system of public spaces where people can engage freely in impromptu social exchange and collective activities helps shape a healthier and less consumptive urban narrative.

In her essay “The Wrong Place,” Miwon Kwon wrote about the “wrong” place—a strange place in which people feel foreign and intimidated because they don't have a clear idea of their own identity in relation to the surroundings—and the “right” place—a familiar place in which people feel comfortable and unthreatened because they have a certain idea of who they are among others. Yet, the “wrong” place is not necessarily wrong or bad and vice versa. One can learn and grow faster in an unfamiliar place and from unfamiliar interactions. Vulnerability is the precondition

for resiliency. In addition, embracing both the intimidation and reassurance experienced in a public space is important for our understanding of identity, community, and environment. Engaging in spontaneous social interplay can help us become less “in our heads” and less ignorant, as well as being more open, communicative, and considerate.

After dancing in the park together together, Aviva, Luana and my friend group exchanged contact information. We went out to salsa dance the next day. I made new friends and heard so many fascinating human stories. I was empowered by the offer of chaos, chance, coincidence, and humanness at public spaces in Buenos Aires and New York City. Creating public spaces that can bring people together is vital for the building of community, and challenging structural systems of power and conventions in the fabrics of everyday life. Facilitating the convening of the selves is nurturing the commons for a sustainable future.

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