

Protest Dance and the Picket Line

Striking as site-adaptive choreography

Zoe Fruchter
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Celeste Miller
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Grinnell College is known for being an institution that values social justice. The College was founded by a group of New England abolitionists with social-reformist ideals who set off West to found an institution that embodied their values. Later, the College served as a stop on the underground railroad and as the site of Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1967 speech, "Remaining Awake Through a Revolution," presented at a convocation at which King Jr. received an honorary degree.

These examples institutional social justice work are points of pride for many Grinnellians, and frequently cited by institutional marketing. But the throughline of social activist work on campus derives from student work that is often at odds with the College administration; students disrupting the status quo in order to uphold Grinnell's commitment to a social justice. Grinnell students, like many other undergraduate and graduate students across the country, vehemently protested against the Vietnam War, dotting the grounds of campus with white crosses. As a result of these protests and the shooting at Kent State University, the class of 1970 did not have a graduation ceremony (Campus).

Today, student activism is again central to the political discourse in the United States. Gun violence, police brutality, catastrophic environmental damage and misogyny at the highest levels of our government have been the subjects of national protests. While Grinnell students have participated in these protest, recent activism on campus has targeted internal, institutional issues. In 2016, Grinnell College Student Action (GCSA) led an extended series of actions protesting the College's financial investments in the fossil fuel industry. At the height of the protests, students-activists led a march to Nollen House, the location of senior administrative offices including that of Grinnell College President Raynard Kington.

Although discussions around divestment have continued, protests regarding the College's relationship with the Union of Grinnell Student Dinings Workers (UGSDW or the Union, in this paper) have been prevalent throughout Grinnell's 2017 and 2018 academic years. The Union was founded in 2016 to represent student Dining Hall workers; it was and continues to be the United State's first union for undergraduate student workers. UGSDW successfully held an election administered by the National Labor Relations Board to unionize and has negotiated on behalf of those workers, since.

Currently, the Union is attempting to expand their membership to encompass all student workers on Grinnell's campus, not just dining workers. The College has vehemently opposed Union expansion on the grounds that students attend Grinnell primarily to learn and that jobs on-campus serve an educational purpose. This dispute resulted in an historic and contentious NLRB hearing as to whether these workers were employees of the College entitled to collective bargaining. The NLRB ruled in favor of the Union and the College has since appealed this verdict. Following the announcement of the College's intent to appeal, UGSDW held a meeting to plan a strike.

The proposed strike was similar to that conducted by GCSA on divestment. Both actions were aimed at changing an institutional policy or decision made by the Grinnell College administration and both actions manifested, or propose to manifest, that intention spatially and through movement — a strike. This paper will look at the proposed Union strike through the lens of dance theory, specifically site-specific dance theory and the intersections between site specific dance, site adaptive dance, choreography and improvisational scores. I will explicate the conflict

between Grinnell College and the Union using these lenses, thus foregrounding dance theory in this place-based, contemporary, institutional discourse.

Protest-Dance not Dancing Protest

“We didn’t have all the sophisticated modern technology for war... for us, toyi-toyi was like a weapon of war,’ said activist Vincent Vena ... speaking of the South African toyi-toyi dance practiced under apartheid.”(Thompkins).

The practice of dance, like all art, inherently contains the potential for disruption, a potential naturally allied with social justice work.

The intersections between activism and modern dance are varied and diverse, and any attempted taxonomy would have to be an incomplete//evolving//morphing one. But it is important here to distinguish between two types of activism-centered dance: protest-dance and dancing protest. In this paper, protest-dance refers to the form of dance being utilized for the purpose of a protest action. Dancing protest refers to dance that aligns itself with a protest or social justice cause. This is a subtle distinction, but an important one.

Case study: Round Dancing

In her chapter, “Walking with Relatives: Indigenous Bodies of Protest, from the book Unruly Rhetorics: Protest, Persuasion, and Publics, Joyce Rain Anderson explains the Native American art form of round dancing: “Round dancing is said to originate with the Cree people, and it is considered a healing dance. Although it is now commonly a pan tribal social dance, it is still used in ceremony. As a social dance, it encourages more people to join the dance while it fosters a sense of identity within Native communities” (Anderson 51). In this case, round

dancing is dancing protest, with the dance evoking resistance against the violent, forced dispersion of Native communities by the United States government. Yet, round dancing is also utilized as a form of protest-dance. Rain Anderson says of this phenomenon: “bodies enact these dances at malls, city plazas, and other places that have significant meaning; the drums and dancing bodies reinvent and reconstruct the meaning of the space, reclaiming it as Native space” (51). In this second example, dance serves as the medium for the protest itself.

Strike as Choreography

In his book Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics, Mark Franko chronicles the Revolutionary Dance Movement of the 1930s, during which Marxist activists utilized modern dance practice to produce radical dance work aiming to mobilize the proletariat. Franko explores the relationship between technique and social activist dance, arguing that mass dance provides a means of creative production and revolutionary action. In other words, that mass dance is protest-dance where the act of dancing is the protest. He quotes Jane Dudley, a dancer who worked with Hanya Holm and Martha Graham:

“The simple, fundamental steps — the walk, the run — are the most useful and effective. Think of the possibilities in the walk — marching, creeping, hesitating, rushing forward, being thrown back, the group splitting apart, scattered in all directions, uniting, coming forward, backing away, being thrown down, rising up. For this one does not need ‘steps,’ *bas de basque [sic]*, *tour jete*, etc. All that is important is the movement of the group in space” (Franko 29).

The idea that all movement is dance, was popularized and codified within the post-modern dance movement beginning in the 1960’s. But Dudley’s points, made in the 1930’s, are salient to the

use of dance as protest — that the seemingly pedestrian movements of a protest action can be classified as dance.

Diane Aldis describes the elements of dance on her as-titled pedagogical website: “The Elements of Dance.” She claims that body, action, space, time, and energy are the foundational concepts of dance (Aldis). A strike embodies these five elements and thus can be classified as dance.

- 1) **Body**: A strike is fundamentally about bodies and their presence, the bodies of workers either present at work or present elsewhere.
- 2) Striking, aka being absent from work, whether just not going to work or protesting instead, is an **action** performed by a body.
- 3) This brings us to the third element: **space**. In a strike, striking workers (bodies in action) often march through space, make shapes within a space or around a certain space.
- 4) Fourth, in terms of **time**, a strike’s efficacy is often dependent on its duration — the force behind a strike derives from its impact on the employer’s day, week, month, or even year. The UK miners’ strike, a well-known major industrial strike against British coal mining companies in the 1980s, lost employers 26,000,000 person-workdays, making it one of the largest strikes of the twentieth century (Velden). This measure of scale centers time as one of the most important elements of a strike.
- 5) Aldis states that **energy** “taps into the nonverbal yet deeply communicative realm of dance” and refers to *how* the movement occurs. The energy of a strike is inherently confrontational. In a strike, pedestrian movement such as collective walking is made dynamic by the energy of confrontation.

In his text Critical Moves, Randy Martin asserts that “Politics goes nowhere without movement. It is not simply an idea, decision, or choice taken at a moment but also a transfigurative process that makes and occupies space” (3). Martin clarifies this transfigurative process of mobilization as **choreography**: “Dance has much to offer this problem of theorizing

participation and mobilization, for dance emerges through the mobilization of participation in relation to a choreographic idea” (4). Martin’s notion of the choreographic idea as “mobilization of participation” maps almost seamlessly onto the project of a strike. To use Martin’s language, a strike is the mobilization of bodies away from work and towards an alternative, common site in service of a larger ideal: resistance. A strike is not only protest-dance but protest-choreography, movement in service of the choreographic idea, that idea being resistance against an oppressive employer.

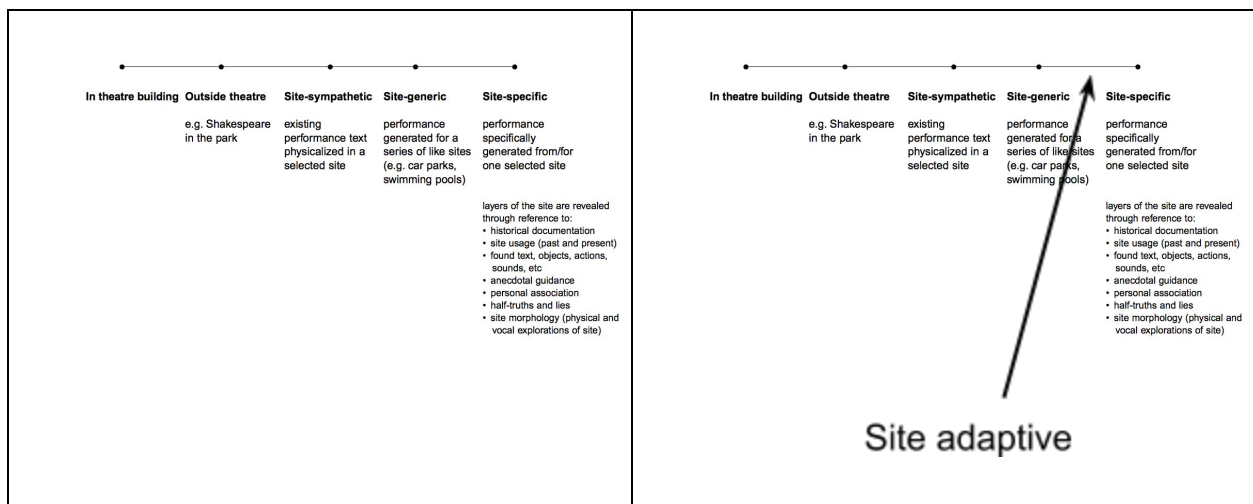
Strike as Site-Adaptive Choreography

Martin names choreography a transfigurative process, claiming that it “makes and occupies space.” In his text, he conceptualizes this space-creation as bridging the gap between the thinking mind of political ideology and the acting body of social mobilization/dance . But what function does the environmental, physical, built, constitutive nature of this space serve? What is the relationship between this newly constructed space and that space which was previously understood to exist in a location? In order to answer that question we need to investigate the term space, and its relationship to choreography.

Space is not merely a byproduct of three-dimensionality, such as movement, but also a text. The text of a space can be seen as “place,” or the assigned meaning, implications, and connotations of a space. The dancers of a choreography, also a text, have a relationship to the text of the space. This intertextuality, this interaction, produces the sub-genre of dance known as “site-dance.”

Site-dance has many definitions or maybe even no definition, and I do not want to apply a singular external definition of site-dance to this paper. Instead, I suggest that we employ the concept of inductive reasoning for the upcoming discussion of site dance. Inductive reasoning allows for uncertainty in a conclusion but holds that the premises of that conclusion are true. Therefore, although site-dance remains specifically undefined in this paper, I maintain that logically definitions of sub-groups of site dance can exist. These sub-groups, however, also have a myriad of definitions and delineations. Suffice it to say, there are other interpretations of the categories I apply in this paper, but the important identifying of the sub-genres are that they are distinguishable from each other.

Fiona Wilkie breaks down the “levels of site specificity” as applied to site specific dance in her article “Mapping the Terrain” (149):



I think that Wilkie’s definitions are an extremely functional model for site-dance, but additionally propose to insert choreographer Stephan Koplowitz’s category of “site adaptive work” into Wilkie’s taxonomy. Victoria Hunter summarizes this category in the introduction to Moving Sites: Exploring Site-specific Dance Performance: “[site adaptive work] involves a process in which all artistic decisions are inspired by the site, its design, history, current use and

community, however the site in questions is generic and the work can be re-made and adapted to numerous sites” (16).

A strike, in this case the potential strike of the UGSDW against the Grinnell College administration is therefore a **site-adaptive** choreographic work. The choreography, the mobilization of bodies from one site to another, is adaptable to different sites of institutions. The basic choreography of the 1984 UK miners strike is the same as that of the Union workers, and as any other strike. The choreography of a strike is what allows it to be called a “strike” and not just a protest action. This is why a strike is not **site specific** choreography, because the choreography remains constant from site to site. Yet the choreography is not **site generic**, where existing performance text can be physicalized in different, specified types of sites, because the choreography is inspired by the site to which the choreographer (strike coordinator) has adapted it. In the Union strike, the workers are specifically choreographed to form their strike line around Nollen House, a site which has unique historical and usage connotations which caused the strike choreographers to select the building. Therefore, the strikers perform **site-adaptive** choreographic work: very much inspired by the specific site of Grinnell College, but only one example of the employment of this spatial choreography.

Breaking the Picket Line, a Site Specific Score

On November seventh of this year, the Union met for the first time to discuss strike action. A group of 69 UGSDW members gathered in Main Quad to vote on three measures proposed by the Union’s Board of Directors. The gathering marked UGSDW’s largest ever

meeting. Another 60 student-workers voted in an absentee ballot emailed to union members on Wednesday afternoon.

Students at the meeting were supportive of the Union's position, booing President Kington's All-Campus Memo announcing intent to appeal. Almost every student-worker in the room supported the authorization of a strike and the message behind the strike: that the College, in failing to come to the bargaining table with the Union, had crossed a line in terms of their respect for student workers. But some members questioned the logistics of the strike as pertaining to their economic well-being, as many student-workers rely on their income from on-campus jobs to survive at Grinnell.

"I was a little worried, you know it [the email invitation to the meeting that UGSDW members received from the Union] was like 'emergency meeting,' ... I was worried about rushing to decisions that I may not agree with ... for me it was important to know that the interests of those students — who would have a very, very strong legitimate reason for crossing the picket line — that those were heard," - Dean Burrell '22, a student and mailroom employee.

Students like Burrell advocated that, in imposing a fine on students who crossed the picket line, the Union had failed to take into account the external elements of students' lives that would be affected by a strike action. The Union argued that the message and movement of the strike took precedence over these concerns.

"The one thing I'm one-hundred percent certain about is that, as a union, we should not endorse any one of us crossing our own picket line. How we'd like to talk about making sure that is clear to everyone, and what repercussions would be for basically breaking the trust of every single one of us in this room... as far as I'm concerned, that's pretty inexcusable, just to cross a picket line established by your fellow members." - Cory McCartan, student and union advisor.

This motivational and prioritization conflict between two sects of the Union force can also be seen as a conflict between two forms of dance: that of choreography, and that of the

improvisational score. The Union leadership, as expressed in McCartan's words, sought to impose the set movements of strike-choreography upon Union members, requiring each member to prioritize the actions of the choreography above the movement cues given by other aspects of their lives: go to a job site to make money to pay for tuition; deliver mail to professors that rely on this service. The students concerned about breaking the picket line sought to introduce these additional movement possibilities into the dance, wherein the choreography was not binding and was responsive to the site of Grinnell College in terms of economic and personal constraints.

Thus, crossing a picket line represents participation *not* in a site-adaptive **choreographic work**, but in site-specific **score**. I would define a score as an improvisation where personal and group movements that are triggered by events or occurrences. A score differs from a choreography in that there are a multitude of outcomes for the dance, and also the expectation of this multiplicity. In her article "What's the score? Using scores in dance improvisation," Olivia Millard complicates the Nelson Goodman's theory of scores as manifestations of authorship: "As you can imagine there are as many ways of using scores as there are choreographic processes. Rather than guaranteeing or stabilising a work as Goodman suggests, each user of scores in dance improvisation finds her own use and meaning for them." Millard continues to explicate the "use of a score to support the possibility of not knowing."

This "possibility of not knowing" is within the core of the hesitation that student-workers expressed at being bound to strike choreography. What about the unknown? What about the outside? They view the strike as part of a score, with participating in the choreography being a cued action contained within the greater structure of their life at Grinnell, not the force which directed all of their movements. The site specificity of Grinnell College defines what those cues

are. To use Wilkie's definition of site specificity, the historical, personal, half-truth layers of the site, are revealed through the choices the strikers make — whether to break the picket line and go to work or not depends on a variety of institutional, personal and political factors not captured by the monolithic message of a site-adaptive strike choreography.

Extension: Dance, Site Specificity, Labor and the Larger World

“Exploring what dance and political theory offer each other in no way collapses the two” (Martin 5).

Thus, the strike organizers viewed their action as site-adaptive choreography, adapted from centuries of social movements and protests. Concurrently, the workers who debated breaking the picket line saw the strike action as a site-specific score, one influenced by various outside institutional factors. This classification of political dynamics using modern dance theory is certainly compelling — but to what end? What is the result of such a classification?

Dance theory analyzes the movement of the body, the performance of presence and mobility, and the connotations that arise when movement intersects with personal, institutional and environmental forces. The debate between the organizers of the strike and those who hesitated to join such an overt action focused mainly on the political ideologies behind each decision. This focus resulted, at the meeting, in an circular and frustrating argument between two parties who did not realize they were arguing from two vastly different understandings of the strike itself. Movement theory forges a deeper understanding of what factors influence crossing a picket line, and the context of those factors. Ultimately, using dance theory to draw a distinction between the two perspectives of the strike creates a structure for more effective and equitable inquiry into the opinions and motivations of each group.

Within this project it is important to assert that the relationship between dance theory and this instance of political dispute one of reciprocity. The political dispute helps to clarify the difference between sub-categories of site-specificity. Asserting an example of site work distinct from dances performed and profiled in the modern dance world shows that dance theory informs politics and politics inform dance theory.

In the epigraph for this section, Martin describes how dance and politics are deeply intertwined. Carol Brown, in her chapter of Moving Sites quotes a 2006 interview with philosopher Jacques Ranciere in which he argues that politics can be characterized as an aesthetic activity. Ranciere states that art is political because it frames a specific space-time sensorium, which defines ways of “being together or being apart, of being inside or outside, in front of or in the middle of, etc” (Hunter 204). Just as dancers’ embodiment of these dynamics in a choreographic work is imbued with the political connotations, these same dynamics in the political sphere are imbued with artistic connotations. Politics are not just an aspect of artistic practice but rather politics are a creation of an artistic practice, whether or not the practitioner is aware of their creative project as artistic or not.

My use of dance theory to analyze a labor movement seeks to foreground dance theory as the primary analytical mode of what I have only seen analyzed with political language and theory. We use political theory to analyze dance and other works of art, why not the other way around? Dance theory is rich and has much to offer the political realm. To segregate such a hefty body of theoretical work does a disservice to that body itself and the movement of all bodies throughout the spaces and places of our world.

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