

Melissa Melpignano

Repairing the World: A Quest for Dignity in Dance. For Naomi Jackson, in memoriam

*Denigrating the enemy means denigrating one's own struggle. [...] a zest for lying,
a zest for defaming the enemy, that offends my deepest sense of human dignity.¹*

*Human rights, at their core, are about recognizing, valuing,
fostering and protecting the inherent dignity of all human beings equally –
not just a selected few. It is only when the thread is interwoven
between dance, dignity, equality, justice, and peace,
as articulated in the Universal Declaration [of Human Rights],
that dance might truly be said to function as a human right.²*

This article honors the life and contributions of dance scholar Naomi M. Jackson, who passed on June 19, 2025. Dr. Naomi Jackson was a trailblazer and a catalyst for collaborations. Her work at the intersection of human rights advocacy, social justice, and ethics has opened new avenues of inquiry within Dance Studies. Additionally, her research on Jewish performance helped establish what is now recognized as the subfield of Jewish Dance Studies.

Dr. Naomi Jackson was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, to a working-class, secular Jewish family with roots in the United States and the United Kingdom. Her mother was a visual artist and her father an architectural historian. She earned Bachelor's degrees in Art History and Philosophy from McGill University in Montreal, Canada, and a Master's in Dance Studies from the University of Surrey in the UK before completing her PhD in Performance Studies at NYU in 1997. Beginning in 1995, she taught at Arizona State University in Tempe, where she served as Professor in the School of Music, Dance and Theatre. During her time in New York, she held faculty positions at The Juilliard School and Queens College. She also contributed to the field of Dance Studies as a board member of the Society of Dance History Scholars and the Congress on Research in Dance³. On June 3, 2023,

1. Martin Buber, *Letter of October 16, 1914 to Frederik van Eeden*, in Nahum Glatzer – Paul Mendes-Flohr (edited by), *The Letters of Martin Buber: A Life in Dialogue*, Syracuse University Press, New York 1991, pp. 162-166: p. 163.

2. Naomi Jackson, *Dance and Human Rights*, in Alexandra Kolb (edited by), *Dance and Politics*, Peter Lang, Bern 2010, pp. 195-222: p. 201.

3. In 2018, the two organizations merged into the Dance Studies Association.

Naomi shared with the participants of the “Dancing Jewish” mailing list⁴ – of which I am part and which she considered an extended family, a *mishpachah* – that she had been diagnosed with leiomyosarcoma. She provided a succinct yet detailed account of her prognosis and asked for support from anyone who could share meditations or somatic exercises to help her navigate this moment. Many responded with dances and dance prompts, which Naomi performed and posted on her social media in the following weeks. While I remember the shock of reading that email, I remember even more powerfully the vibrant and lively energy emanating from her words. In the months that followed, Naomi continued to share updates and participate in the mailing list’s conversations whenever her condition allowed. This past April, she shared that she had suspended treatment and begun a process of farewell, primarily through emails, phone calls, video messages, video dances, and letters.

Dance, Ethics, and the Pursuit of Dignity: Naomi Jackson’s Research and Advocacy

In her most recently published article, *Self-Reflexivity of a Dance Scholar*, Jackson proposes three main conceptual umbrellas – or «tensions» – through which to consider her work and, perhaps, the work we all undertake in dance: «structure and unpredictability»; «care and respect»; and «debate»⁵. She also identifies three methods that informed her research: imagination as shift-maker; feminist, relational, and care ethics; and Jewish ethics and philosophy (particularly through the lens of Martin Buber). With these principles in mind, I offer a synthesis of Naomi Jackson’s major publications in the hope of encouraging deeper engagement with her work and underlining its relevance in today’s world.

Jackson’s first book, *Converging Movements: Modern Dance and Jewish Culture at 92nd Street Y*⁶, emerged from her doctoral research. While centering on the practices and interests of Jewish practitioners at a New York City performance venue, the book moves beyond individualized pioneering narratives of North American modern dance. Instead, it reveals the rich cultural, artistic, and political environment Jewish and non-Jewish immigrant dancers shaped at “the Y”. *Converging Movements* grapples with the very emergence of the concept of «Jewish identity»⁷ and its inherent tensions. The book illustrates the shifting political and social imaginaries that Jewish dancers envisioned for them-

4. The name of the mailing list echoes the title of Rebecca Rossen’s book *Dancing Jewish: Jewish Identity in American Modern and Postmodern Dance*, Oxford University Press, New York 2014.

5. Naomi Jackson, *Self-Reflexivity of a Dance Scholar: The Place of Structured Improvisation, Care, and Debate*, in «Dance Research Journal», vol. LVI, nn. 2-3, 2024, pp. 96-111.

6. Naomi Jackson, *Converging Movements: Modern Dance and Jewish Culture at 92nd Street Y*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Connecticut 2000.

7. *Ivi*, pp. 17-18.

selves and their communities, highlighting the intersection of Zionist, socialist, and leftist projects, as well as the friction among intergenerational pedagogical approaches. Particularly prominent is the political role of women in embodying «a new form of Jewishness»⁸. For example, Jackson demonstrates how Anna Sokolow anticipated by two decades – in the 1940s – the changes that second-wave feminism would later activate.

The history Jackson reconstructed offers valuable tools for interrogating the contemporary conflation of Judaism and Zionism in public discourse. Her chapters trace how responses to antisemitism and the construction of Jewish and diasporic identities at “the Y” shaped a U.S.-based definition of “Israeli dance”. For instance, Jackson sheds light on Benjamin Zemach’s pivotal role as «one of the first to establish a connection to Zionism and to create his version of Jewish dance» in the United States during the 1920s⁹. She identifies a crucial element in Zemach’s creative process – one that illuminates how experience and ideology converge. «In creating his dances», Jackson explains, «he used a process of abstraction to create powerful images of the Jewish spirit – crystallized, timeless images of the praying Jew, the devout Yeshiva student, and the wandering Jew who fights for justice in the world»¹⁰. In 1929, Zemach created a pantomime ballet that critic John Martin heralded as «the first Jewish ballet in history»¹¹. Jackson suggests that Zemach employed abstraction «to construct a representation of Jews as living in a world of unsettling forces, superstition, and spirit»¹², thereby drawing on characteristic tropes of nineteenth-century ballet. Indeed, twenty-five years after its publication, *Converging Movements* continues to offer vital theoretical and historical insights for scholarly engagement.

Following Jackson’s first monograph, the edited collection *Right to Dance: Dancing for Rights*¹³ arguably inaugurated what has become a substantial body of literature at the intersection of dance and human rights. Though primarily focused on the Canadian context, the eleven contributors Jackson gathered survey the broad spectrum of political functions dance has covered and can cover – from a tool for regime alignment to a catalyst for shifts in the social imaginary. In the early 2000s, the volume contributed to the field’s efforts to firmly deromanticize dance and frame it within debates at the intersection of law, policymaking, and ethics. The book also intercepted, and possibly anticipated, larger debates around “human rights” as a universalizing framework in the postcolonial, neo-imperial, and post-9/11 Western world¹⁴. The volume appears particularly relevant today for its historical and theoretical examination of the relationship that dance, dancing bodies, and forms of suppression –

8. *Ivi*, pp. 16, 176.

9. Cf. *ivi*, pp. 177-179.

10. *Ivi*, p. 179.

11. *Ibidem*.

12. *Ibidem*.

13. Naomi Jackson, *Right to Dance: Dancing for Rights*, Banf Center Press, Alberta 2004.

14. I’m referring here, for instance, to Slavoj Žižek, *Against an Ideology of Human Rights*, in Kate E. Tunstall (edited by), *Displacement, Asylum, Migration*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 2005, pp. 56-85.

including censorship, bans, and cancellations – as well as mass and systemic violence.

Right to Dance laid the ground for a second volume, *Dance, Human Rights, and Social Justice: Dignity in Motion*, co-edited with Toni Shapiro-Phim¹⁵. In her preface, Jackson traces the project's genesis to a series of dance-based gatherings with refugees and survivors of torture and violence – gatherings conceived as acts of care and «as a form of participatory justice»¹⁶. She also acknowledges that «more scholarly research [is needed] to fully understand how [this kind of programming] should, and does, achieve beneficial results»¹⁷. Jackson's and Shapiro-Phim's work has since flourished into a rich body of literature and practices.

In Jackson's words, the book is «an ambitiously inclusive international anthology»¹⁸, featuring thirty-five artists, scholars, and activists who examine how dance contributes to both «oppression and its subversion»¹⁹. The volume addresses contexts of «genocide, slavery, forced displacement, terrorism, and other forms of violence», «systemic poverty and homelessness», «other types of manipulation and/or discrimination based on age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability, criminal record, and nationality»²⁰. It also emphasizes «the proactive use of dance by individuals and groups to promote ideals such as equality, freedom from want and fear, and peace»²¹. Echoing Hannah Arendt, the editors underscore that «the emphasis is on action and the need to take steps to ensure that all human beings are treated fairly and with dignity»²².

In a 2009 panel titled *Rights to Move: Choreographing the Human Rights Struggle*, Mark Franko acknowledges Jackson's groundbreaking contribution to the field, and starts the conversation by outlining the four frameworks through which Jackson and Shapiro-Phim articulated the relationship between dance and human rights in their introduction:

1) Regulation and exploitation of dance activity and dancers by governments and other groups with authority, as well as abusive treatment of dancers within the dance profession; 2) choreography involving human rights as a central theme; 3) the engagement of dance as means of healing victims of trauma, societal exclusion, and human rights abuses; 4) broad-scale social/political movements and smaller-scale local practices in which dance plays a powerful role in providing people agency in fighting oppression²³.

15. Naomi Jackson – Toni Shapiro-Phim (edited by), *Dance, Human Rights, and Social Justice: Dignity in Motion*, Scarecrow Press, Lanham 2008. The publication is an outcome of the 2005 *Congress of Dance Research* conference centered on dance and human rights that Jackson organized with Dena Davida in Montréal, Canada. As this paper shows, Jackson's academic and personal investment in fostering intellectual gatherings and interconnections is one of the ways in which she has impacted and expanded the field of Dance Studies.

16. *Ivi*, p. x.

17. *Ibidem*.

18. *Ibidem*.

19. *Ivi*, p. xv.

20. *Ivi*, p. xvi.

21. *Ivi*, p. pp. xv-xvi.

22. *Ivi*, p. xvi.

23. *Ivi*, p. xxii. See also Kendall Thomas – Thomas Keenan – Mark Franko, *Dialogues: Genesis and Concept of Human Writes*, in «Dance Research Journal», vol. XLII, n. 2, 2010, pp. 61-72.

Dance, Human Rights, and Social Justice remains not only a touchstone for approaching the intersection of dance and livability, but also profoundly relevant today for its transnational inquiries into dance, systemic violence, genocide, peace, liberation, the «freedom of individuals to control their own bodies», «freedom of expression», and the various forms of «assaults on human dignity»²⁴. The collective work within this volume already engages with questions that Jackson would later explore in her final monograph, *Dance and Ethics*²⁵. Particularly evident is her concern for the «often overlooked ways in which dance and dancers participate in acts of abuse and humiliation, as well as in efforts to fight oppression and create a more just world»²⁶.

Together, *Right to Dance* and *Dance, Human Rights, and Social Justice* activated an organized artistic and academic discourse that, since the early 2000s, has expanded into specialized law and policy journals and in the public sphere.

A series of essays published between *Dance, Human Rights, and Social Justice* and *Dance and Ethics* bridged Jackson's realms of inquiry, expanding the conversation to include ecology, dance in the digital realm, dance curatorial practices, and the specificities of interrogating and creating dance through ethics and Jewish ethics as frameworks.

*Ecology, Dance Presenting, and Social Justice*²⁷ examines conceptualizations of sustainability and resilience in dance curation and choreography following the 2008 global financial crisis – triggered by the collapse of the U.S. housing market and the failure of overleveraged financial institutions. The essay establishes theoretical foundations for concepts Jackson would continue to engage with over the next decade.

Drawing from philosopher Avishai Margalit's work on dignity and decency, Jackson defines dignity as «a notion that is central to consideration of humane treatment and is closely linked with a belief in inherent rights due an individual in any society. Treating someone with dignity means recognizing others as full moral subjects, which in turn entails existing in a reciprocal and symmetrical relation to others»²⁸. Positioning dignity within a triad alongside equity and empathy, Jackson explores complex dance curatorial models that highlight the tension between advocacy and exclusion while fostering non-vertical modes of selection and inclusion. Such models are based on mutually beneficial networks of support that acknowledge the interdependency among institutional economic needs,

24. Naomi Jackson – Toni Shapiro-Phim (edited by), *Dance, Human Rights, and Social Justice*, cit., pp. xx-xxi.

25. Naomi Jackson, *Dance and Ethics: Moving Towards a More Humane Dance Culture*, Intellect, Bristol-Chicago 2022.

26. Naomi Jackson – Toni Shapiro-Phim (edited by), *Dance, Human Rights, and Social Justice*, cit., p. x.

27. Naomi Jackson, *Ecology, Dance Presenting, and Social Justice*, in Guy Cools – Pascal Gielen (edited by), *The Ethics of Art: Ecological Turns in the Performing Arts*, Antennae, Valiz-Amsterdam 2014, pp. 197-228.

28. *Ivi*, p. 205.

audiences' expectations, and artistic projects.

Jackson examines different dance presenting modalities and concludes that dance curating platforms often operate by proclaiming lofty values while activating ecosystems of interdependent relations that do not always benefit all parties involved. Ultimately the essay cautions against assuming a social justice potential in systems of production that frame themselves as ecological or inherently democratic.

Continuing the conversation on dance presenting platforms as possible sites of political intervention and imagination, Jackson poses a series of questions in *A Rhizomatic Revolution? Popular Dancing, YouTubing, and Exchange in Screendance*²⁹ about how dance moves in the digital realm – particularly on YouTube. She highlights the tension between the utopian aspiration of democratizing bodies and practices and the precarity of digital visibility. In other words, she examines the social justice potential the internet could offer versus the capitalist mechanisms of investment and pressure it exerts.

While substantial literature in dance studies and media studies has addressed these issues since 2016, Jackson's essay can be considered part of the foundations reflections upon the ethics of making and circulating dance in the digital realm. In questioning whether a platform like YouTube operates rhizomatically, Jackson examines not merely the mechanisms of transmission that the internet enables, but rather what values permeate this process. She highlights how YouTube's system of monetization ultimately undermines the possibility of harnessing the internet's rhizomatic potential for progressive politics – even when the content itself claims such politics.

Bridging her research on converging dance practices with her experience as a dance educator in the university setting, *Moving comfortably between continuity and disruption: Somatics and urban dance as embodied responses to civic responsibility*³⁰ asks: «How can a dance artist best promote the quality of life in a community and contribute to civic life?» – especially «when different conceptions of artistic dance citizenship collide?»³¹ Writing at a time when dance programs in U.S. university increasingly moved beyond Eurocentric frameworks, Jackson uses Arizona State University's curricular changes as a case study. She highlights the contrasts between somatic and postmodern dance training – associated with «egalitarian conceptions of democracy»³² – and urban dance forms invested in “battling”. Jackson shows how their discourses converge in jointly shaping dancers' social roles and values. While somatics generally positions artists as nurturing facilitators and urban dance forms frame artists as

29. Naomi Jackson, *A Rhizomatic Revolution? Popular Dancing, YouTubing, and Exchange in Screendance*, in Douglas Rosenberg (edited by), *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies*, Oxford University Press, New York 2016, pp. 695-714.

30. Naomi Jackson, *Moving Comfortably Between Continuity and Disruption: Somatics and Urban Dance as Embodied Responses to Civic Responsibility*, in David Elliott – Melissa Silverman – Wayne Bowman (edited by), *Artistic Citizenship: Artistry, Social Responsibility, and Ethical Praxis*, Oxford University Press, London-New York 2016, pp. 163-188.

31. *Ivi*, p. 163.

32. *Ivi*, p. 166.

historically conscious civic provocateurs, together they articulate notions of «dignity, respect, equity, and responsibility»³³, shaping a movement-based ethics that resides in the tension between softness and strength, individual reflection and collective activism.

Extending her discourse on the politics of dance curation, Jackson traces a brief genealogy of this practice in *Curatorial discourse and equity: Tensions in contemporary dance presenting in the United States*³⁴. She underlines how the rise of curation in dance – borrowing rhetoric from the visual arts – has produced a more conceptual, theory-driven approach aligned with European “conceptual choreography” and the visual art market.

Jackson considers the arc of Trajal Harrell’s career and draws on examples from performances by Marina Abramović and Deboarh Hay to demonstrate how curation has championed experimental, queer, and historically underrepresented work. However, she also shows how it has fostered insularity and economic inequity based on arbitrary criteria of aesthetic legitimacy determined by curators and institutions. Finally, Jackson calls for democratizing curation by adopting methods such as open submissions rather than internal nominations, and by expanding artist-led platforms and barter-based economies. Persevering in her advocacy, Jackson urges a curatorial ethic grounded in the redistribution of access, shared decision-making, transparency, and inclusion.

Connecting her interest in conflict in curation to her ongoing research on social justice and human rights, Jackson focuses on conflict in relation to Jewishness and Zionism in the chapter *The Ethics of Binding: Untangling the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict through Jesse Zaritt’s Dancing Body*³⁵. Jackson uses Zaritt’s personal and artistic journey as the primary evidence and framework for her theoretical argument. Raised in an American conservative religious and Zionist family, Zaritt became disillusioned with the Israeli ideological system after living in Israel in the early 2000s and experiencing «the inequality between Israelis and Palestinians»³⁶. This realization prompted a personal and choreographic process «to untangle myself from a distorted perspective on Israel»³⁷. Zaritt’s framework of “untangling layers” structures Jackson’s analysis.

Moving in close proximity to Zaritt’s choreographic works, Jackson articulates these layers of tensions as spaces of in-betweenness and ambiguity where binary oppositions problematically coexist.

33. *Ivi*, p. 167.

34. Naomi Jackson, *Curatorial discourse and equity: Tensions in contemporary dance presenting in the United States*, in Dena Davida – Marc Pronovost – Véronique Hudon – Jane Gabriels (edited by), *Curating Live Arts: Critical Perspectives, Essays, and Conversations on Theory and Practice*, Berghahn, New York 2019, pp. 101-113.

35. Naomi Jackson, *The Ethics of Binding: Untangling the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict through Jesse Zaritt’s Dancing Body*, in Dina Roginsky – Henia Rottenberg (edited by), *Moving through Conflict: Dance and Politics in Israel*, Routledge, London-New York 2020, pp. 145-167.

36. *Ivi*, p. 146.

37. *Ibidem*.

For instance, Zaritt describes how his training in Gaga revealed a «radical un-fixedness»³⁸ that simultaneously creates the illusion of «false availability»³⁹. In affective closeness to Zaritt's experience, Jackson argues that his dancing body can serve as an ethical site for «deliberating»⁴⁰ – not resolving – conflict by embodying multiplicity and challenging binaries.

Zaritt is among the forty-seven contributors to *The Oxford Handbook of Jewishness and Dance*⁴¹, which Jackson co-edited with Rebecca Pappas and Toni Shapiro-Phim. The volume emerged from the “Jews and Jewishness in the Dance World” conference Jackson organized with Liz Lerman at Arizona State University in 2018.

The abundance of accounts from scholars and artists foregrounds the historical and ethical tensions within Jewish identity across the Western diaspora and in Israel-Palestine. Engaging with Jewish memory, spirituality, and overlooked identities at the intersection of theory and practice, several contributions illuminate the ambiguities of Zionism, the conflicting politics of memorialization, and the difficulties in navigating and interconnecting the multiple experiences of “Jewishness”. Within the context of these tensions, authors invoke the Jewish ethical principle of *tikkun olam* (repairing or healing the world).

The book reflects a deeply engaged curatorial process that Jackson led, and the connections to themes and values from her scholarship are evident. *The Oxford Handbook of Jewishness and Dance* is perhaps the volume in which Jackson's conversation with the writings of Martin Buber resonates more profoundly. Indeed, staging such a polyphony of accounts may have been necessary to manifest and affirm the sense of infinite individual and collective responsibility that the task of repairing the world demands.

In Jackson's final monograph, *Dance and Ethics: Moving towards a More Humane Dance Culture*⁴² many of the key principles and concerns of her work converge and deepen. What would «a life well-lived in dance» look and feel like?⁴³ The book unpacks and dismantles the power dynamics that underlie Western theatrical dance and training, confronting the instances of pain, hurt, and exclusion that many practitioners have experienced – and inflicted. Yet in line with Jackson's engaged scholarship, it also «provide[s] models and emphasize[s] those approaches and action that create a more humane and peaceful world»⁴⁴.

While this statement dwells in the liminal space between activist commitment and utopia,

38. *Ivi*, p. 152.

39. *Ivi*, p. 164.

40. *Ivi*, p. 145.

41. Naomi Jackson – Rebecca Pappas – Toni Shapiro-Phim (edited by), *The Oxford Handbook of Jewishness and Dance*, Oxford University Press, New York 2022.

42. Naomi Jackson, *Dance and Ethics*, cit.

43. This question, with variations in phrasing, occurs throughout Jackson's entire production.

44. Naomi Jackson, *Dance and Ethics*, cit., p. 25.

Jackson's writing moves within the concrete space of the dance studio, the production meeting room, or the newspaper page of a dance review. Jackson exposes how entrenched hierarchies in training (Chapter 3), rehearsal and performance (Chapter 4), dance criticism (Chapter 5), dance presenting (Chapter 6), and dance leadership (Chapter 7) have historically normalized abuse, discrimination, and exclusion. She then demonstrates how models rooted in the cultivation of dignity, respect, care, and accountability can foster what Jackson calls «a more humane dance culture»⁴⁵. These models aim to resolve the dangerous separation between dancer and human being, inviting to consider «striving towards being a decent person, especially a caring person, as you pursue a career in dance»⁴⁶. The book concludes with the words «dignity and respect for all»⁴⁷.

In *Dance and Ethics*, as well as in her previous publications, Jackson draws on the work of ethicists, philosophers, educators, and dance practitioners to define dignity as the possibility of being recognized as a full moral subject in relationships based on reciprocity, accountability, and respect for one's corporeal reality. Jackson suggests that dignity is an inherent human right dependent upon our interpersonal interconnectedness. As such, institutions and individuals need to share responsibility for its actualization and protection⁴⁸.

Drawing on Martin Buber's thought and ethicists such as Margaret Walker, Jackson's work argues that dignity in dance communities emerges from the quality of interpersonal engagement: it is realized when people are met with attentiveness, respect, and moral accountability. This lively invitation to foster dignity for all – across the multiplicity of dance practices, experiences, and settings in which we encounter one another – captures the principle of Naomi Jackson's legacy.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that Naomi Jackson also published numerous academic book reviews, often to support emerging scholars and ideas. Earlier in her career, this academic genre allowed her to critically reflect on the field of Dance Studies and on the burgeoning «critical dance scholarship that began in the mid-1980s in the United States»⁴⁹ and beyond. Through these reviews, she examined the necessity of revising dance pedagogy – particularly the teaching of dance histories – in higher education⁵⁰.

45. *Ivi*, pp. 56, 218.

46. *Ivi*, p. 29.

47. *Ivi*, p. 225.

48. Elaborating on Martin Buber's meditation on relational existence in his book *I and Thou* (translated by Walter Kaufmann, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1970 [1923]), Victoria Marks and Hannah Schwadron add «we» to Buber's «I» and «you», expanding the necessary scope of human relationality. This idea was presented at «Jews and Jewishness in the Dance World» conference and, then re-elaborated in Victoria Marks – Hannah Schwadron, *I, You, We: Dancing Interconnections and Jewish Betweenness*, in Naomi Jackson – Rebecca Pappas – Toni Shapiro-Phim (edited by), *The Oxford Handbook of Jewishness and Dance*, cit., pp. 277-287. Jackson reprises Marks' and Schwadron's contribution to make an argument about collective participation and reciprocal listening as forms of resistance for a more humane world in Naomi Jackson, *Dance and Ethics*, cit., p. 220.

49. Naomi Jackson, *Recent Trends in Dance and Cultural Studies*, in «Dance Chronicle», vol. XXIV, n. 2, 2001, pp. 243-248: p. 243.

50. Naomi Jackson, *Moving History / Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader (review)*, in «Theatre Journal», vol. LV,

A Personal Note

The *Jews and Jewishness in the Dance World* conference, which marked my first in-person encounter with Naomi, brought together more than one hundred practitioners and scholars, all weaving long-lasting collaborations, friendships, projects, questions, and debates⁵¹.

While Naomi Jackson's work broadly informs my research on conflict and un/livability through the lens of dance and choreography, being accepted to that conference as a doctoral student proved personally life-changing. Naomi attended my talk and afterward took the time to discuss both my argument and my dissertation at large. Following the conference, she invited me to contribute what became my first main academic publication in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewishness and Dance*⁵². Yet what I treasure most about that editorial process is the encouragement and energy which her rigorous feedback radiated.

Ultimately, being included in that anthology represented not only an important academic milestone but also a welcome into a community of scholars and practitioners to which I did not originally belong. I now believe that our shared «love of debate and questioning»⁵³ in pursuit of more dignified ways of moving and being forms the invisible thread that connects me to Dr. Jackson's work.

When Hannah Schwadron announced a panel to honor Naomi Jackson at the last Dance Studies Association conference, with Naomi scheduled to participate virtually, I planned to share my gratitude. When, a few days after the announcement, Naomi passed and the panel became *in memoriam*, I found myself unable to share my personal experience during that beautiful, moving, and yet joyful gathering⁵⁴. Although Naomi and I met in person only three times, we exchanged several emails, and her impact on me has been profound.

Her scholarship touched many scholars and artists, as did her presence – her charisma was unmistakable in person, and her energy and directedness are palpable in her writing. After her passing, participants in the mailing list that emerged from the *Jews and Jewishness in the Dance World*

n. 3, October 2003, pp. 551-552: p. 552.

51. To capture the plurality of the event, our friend Vic Marks eloquently said, «we were Israeli Jews and American Jews, Zionist Jews and non-Zionist Jews, secular Jews and religious Jews, Ashkenazi Jews and non-Ashkenazi Jews, born Jews and converted Jews, socialist Jews, scholar Jews, dancing Jews, scholarly dancing Jews, filmmaker Jews, healer Jews, Yiddish affiliated Jews and Hebrew affiliated Jews, Jews with pointe shoes and Jews with bare feet...», (Victoria Marks – Hannah Schwadron, *I, You, We*, cit., p. 285, recited in Naomi Jackson, *Self-Reflexivity of a Dance Scholar*, cit., p. 107). The conference also included practitioners and scholars of non-Jewish heritage who were deeply invested in Jewish dance.

52. Melissa Melpignano, *Choreographing Livability after Oslo: Israeli Women Choreographers and Collective Responsibility*, in Naomi Jackson – Rebecca Pappas – Toni Shapiro-Phim (edited by), *The Oxford Handbook of Jewishness and Dance*, cit., pp. 565-588.

53. Naomi Jackson, *Self-Reflexivity of a Dance Scholar*, cit., p. 98.

54. Dr. Naomi Jackson's life and legacy were honored at the last Dance Studies Association conference in Washington DC, on June 28, 2025, in a beautiful, moving, and smile-inducing gathering, convened by Hannah Schwadron and Rebecca Pappas.

conference shared an overwhelmingly warm abundance of anecdotes about, gratitude for, and love toward Naomi.

The Collective Quest for Dignity and Decency in Dance and Discourse

In Naomi's last article in «Dance Research Journal», the idea of decency intertwines with that of dignity. Decency as a value stems from her upbringings with «secular Jewish parents that valued decency»⁵⁵. It informed her desire «to be a decent human being»⁵⁶, «to cultivate a decent community»⁵⁷ through action («I aim to... act decently»)⁵⁸. As Martin Buber suggests in the open epigraph to this article, in times like those we are living through – when adversarial politics transforms into violence and the denial of basic rights – we cannot conceive of dignity as a mere transactional good or privilege. To pursue dignity, Jackson seems to suggest, decency becomes a horizon on livability: «I and Thou and We/Decent together»⁵⁹.

In the twenty-first century, the word “decency” has reemerged prominently in the intellectual and public discourse around politics, democracy, and ethics. It was likely a topic Naomi would have loved to explore further. In *Dance and Ethics*, she writes, «I advocate for dance artists to reflect on what I means to be a decent human being, especially a caring individual»⁶⁰. Earlier in the same chapter⁶¹, which centers on how to collectively shape “a more humane dance culture”⁶², Naomi emphasizes, for instance, the importance of articulating shared values and implementing «procedural fairness»⁶³ in processes – whether in a dance company, a university, a classroom, a community, or any other collective setting.

Decency also emerges as a key value in relation to one of the key themes in Naomi's work: debate. From writing about sites of violence and conflict to moderating a mailing list with scholars and artists broadly invested in Jewishness and dance, Naomi demonstrated genuine curiosity about informed opinions and differing points of view – including radical and non-majoritarian ones – when grounded in reasoned argument and a sense of humanity. These principles mirror the Jewish ethical values of *emet* (commitment to integrity and truth), *pikuach nefesh* (prioritizing saving a life), and

55. Naomi Jackson, *Self-Reflexivity of a Dance Scholar*, cit., p. 96.

56. *Ivi*, p. 97.

57. *Ivi*, p. 98.

58. *Ivi*, p. 101.

59. *Ivi*, p. 97.

60. Naomi Jackson, *Dance and Ethics*, cit., p. 219.

61. See Chapter 7, in *ivi*, pp. 197-225.

62. As in the full title of the book, *Dance and Ethics. Moving Towards a More Humane Dance Culture*, cit.

63. *Ivi*, p. 206.

tzedakah (justice for the minoritized), and establish the boundaries of meaningful debate. As a scholar, a dance scholar, and a Jewish dance scholar/scholar of Jewish dance, Naomi states it clearly: «I am drawn to the non-formulaic», «I frequently play the devil's advocate», «reveal[ing] places of harmony and places of tension»⁶⁴.

Naomi Jackson's commitment to bringing people – many people – together, engaging with conflict and moving through tensions is reflected in a body of research that can guide us as we navigate increasingly polarized, authoritarian, and violent politics. Her work offers pathways for thinking and taking action to foster more humane communities in the ongoing effort to repair the world (fig. 1).



Figure 1: The energetic hora that concluded the *Jews and Jewishness in the Dance World* conference at Arizona State University in 2018, an event that consolidated the expansive subfield of Jewish Dance Studies, established long-lasting collaborations and friendships, and inspired landmark publications as well as enduring conversations and debates. This still image, reshared by Janaea Rose Lyn in the *Dancing Jewish* mailing list to remind us of our interconnectedness, serves as a tribute to the connections and friendships Naomi Jackson cultivated and a testimony of the converging communities of artists and scholars she brought together. Photo by Tim Trumble.

64. Naomi Jackson, *Self-Reflexivity of a Dance Scholar*, cit., p. 98.