Dancing Digital/No Boundaries Archive Project:
Prototyping an Extensible Framework
for Access to Dance Knowledge

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April 30, 2024

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Introduction

This Final Position Paper covers the second NEH-funded phase of the Dancing Digital Project. In keeping with the Digital Humanities Advancement Grant program's values of "experimentation, reuse, and extensibility," this Level II project leveraged artist/scholar/educator Gesel R. Mason's existing collection *No Boundaries: Dancing the Visions of Contemporary Black Choreographers* and the open-source software *CollectiveAccess*[1] to create a working prototype for an online resource that 1) provides online access to important full-length recordings of works by historically underrepresented Black choreographers, 2) models how to imaginatively combine these full-length recordings of dance with innovative features and supporting materials that enrich dance study across humanities disciplines, 3) creates a scalable, open-source, digital framework that broadens the focus from one choreographer's work to the possibility of an interconnected field-wide archive, and 4) documents and shares the process, constructing a road map for other artists and organizations seeking to provide access to their collections.

Background

In Dancing Digital's first NEH-funded phase (2019-2021), Principal Investigator Rebecca Salzer convened a group of nineteen dance scholars, educators, archivists, artists, and legal and technical specialists for a three-day symposium at the University of Alabama. The convening was designed to acknowledge and build upon existing and historical dance access projects by involving representatives from each, including The Digital Library Planning Project (Sali Ann Kriegsman)[2], Dance Heritage Coalition's "secure media network" pilot (Dr. Libby Smigel)[3], New York Public Library Digital Collections (Dr. Eugenia Kim),[4] USC/Glorya Kaufman School of Dance's Dance Heritage Video Archive - which inherited the assets of the Dance Heritage Coalition pilot (Patrick Corbin and Dr. Alison D'Amato),[5] and OnTheBoards.tv (Lane Czaplinski).[6] Directors of ground-breaking projects in dance and digital humanities[7] and dance and technology[8] were also represented and contributed to the conversation. During the symposium, the group discussed ongoing field-wide challenges to access, including the lack of gender, racial/ethnic, and stylistic equity among current online dance offerings; the lack of searchability across content sources; the fragmentation, instability, and unsustainability of dance

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1 *Collective Access.* www.collectiveaccess.org/. Accessed 18 June 2020.
2 Led by Alberta Arthur, the project ran from 2001-2003.
3 Smigel directed the project, which ran from 2007-2014.
4 Led by the Jerome Robbins Dance Division and NYPL Labs, the project ran from 2010-2013. Dr. Kim served as project coordinator from 2012-2013.
5 "Dance Heritage Video Archive." *USC Digital Library,* 2020, digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15799coll105. Accessed 18 June 2020.
6 *On the Boards*. www.ontheboards.tv/. Accessed 18 June 2020.
7 Harmony Bench, Mapping Touring (movementonthemove.osu.edu/project-mapping-touring) and Dunham's Data (www.dunhamsdata.org/#section-about), Melanie Aceto, Dance Lineage (www.choreographiclineage.buffalo.edu/)
8 Hannah Kosstrin, KineScribe (u.osu.edu/kinescribe/), and Sybil Huskey, Video Collaboratory (videocollaboratory.com/)

collections; the ways that intellectual property concerns have limited the availability of full-length dance works and perpetuated geographical barriers to access by preventing even digitized collections from being streamed,[9] and financial barriers for artists and arts organizations to accessing the technical and archival expertise necessary to record, preserve, and publish dance works. The group also designed a menu of new features and tools that could activate dance films and videos for scholarship and education.

Following the symposium, the Project Director and members of the working group presented Dancing Digital's initial findings at five national conferences.[10] These presentations generated conversations with specific constituent groups such as the National Dance Education Organization and the International Association of Blacks in Dance which, in turn, contributed to and refined the project's environmental scan. The symposium and the group's subsequent outreach reinforced and clarified its understanding of the need among scholars and educators for an online resource that integrates equitable, un-excerpted, searchable, and stable dance recordings with rich humanities content. The group then began seeking a collection for which it could build a prototype.

They found the ideal collection in Gesel Mason's *No Boundaries* project, which preserves, celebrates, and highlights African American artistry in the face of a history of cultural silencing and erasure. Beginning in 2001, Mason gathered, commissioned, and performed a collection of solos by prominent African American choreographers whose contributions spanned seven decades, including Kyle Abraham, Robert Battle, Rennie Harris, Dianne McIntyre, Donald McKayle, Bebe Miller, David Roussève, Andrea E. Woods Valdés, Reggie Wilson, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar. Mason also documented the rehearsals and performances as well as interviews with the choreographers and dance scholars. *No Boundaries* received a National Dance Project Tour Only Grant in 2008/09 from New England Foundation for the Arts, two Metro DC Dance Awards in 2007, and was supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and National Performance Network. Recognizing the growing need for a permanent archive of prominent African American choreographers as well as the impermanence of her own body as the living archive of these seminal artists' visions, Mason had begun exploring how *No Boundaries* could more enduringly preserve, provide access to, and interact with these legacies. Realizing the symbiotic nature of their project's goals, Mason and Salzer began collaborating in February 2020.

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9 New York Public Library Jerome Robbins Dance Division's Audio and Moving Image Archive is an example of this. While thousands of recordings were digitized, only a small percentage is streamable outside the library's walls.
10 Digitorium 2019, Women in Dance Leadership 2019, National Dance Education Organization Conference 2020, Joyce/NYU American Dance Platform 2020, International Association of Blacks in Dance Conference 2020

Project Activities

Throughout the process of building the No Boundaries Archive, Mason and Salzer have been guided by their own embodied experiences as dancers and dance-makers – especially Mason's experience as the performer and, therefore, living archive of the *No Boundaries* materials. Working with software developers Whirl-i-Gig and archivist Ellen Kamoe, and using the open-source software CollectiveAccess, Mason and Salzer developed features for the No Boundaries Archive that invite users to flow between the written and embodied. One such feature enables users to clip, annotate, order (or choreograph) videos from the collection, and then save and retrieve the results as a playlist. This playlist feature is imagined as especially useful for the classroom, allowing educators to curate and easily call up relevant video materials.

Another feature geared toward educators and scholars is the "compare" feature, which is intended to allow observation of how a dance might evolve over time by allowing the user to play two videos side by side. For example, in the case of Bebe Miller's 1989 dance "Rain," a user can examine performances of "Rain" over the span of twenty-nine years by comparing a video of Miller performing the work the year it was created with a video of Mason performing it in 2018. This particular comparison also provides a window into the ways different interpreters/performers of the same choreography affect its impact and meaning.

While the digital archive is open to all users, there is a registration process for those who want to access the "playlist" and "compare" features. This is specifically to guarantee that users' clips and annotations are both savable and retrievable. Registration asks for first and last names, email address, a security question, and a password. None of this information is shared or used for any promotional purposes.

As part of the iterative research of creating the No Boundaries Archive, Mason and Salzer developed a metadata structure that builds on Dublin Core while also being informed by community practice, critical dance studies, and the rich specificity of *No Boundaries*. To give an illustration of this, when Mason and Salzer studied the vocabularies of multiple other performing arts archives and subject authorities, they found that a common property used to describe dance artists was "ballet master." While applying a commonly used property might increase an archival item's discoverability, "ballet master" is a wholly inappropriate term to describe any of the artists in the No Boundaries Archive. Not only does the word "master" have exclusionary and racist connotations, but when the term "ballet" is used as a default label for multiple dance forms, it makes that aristocratic, European dance style the standard. Instead the dance artists in the No Boundaries Archive are described as either "performers," "dancers," or "choreographers."

The *No Boundaries* Archive, currently in [BETA form](#), will soon be migrated to https://www.noboundariesarchive.com.

Salzer and Mason have also continued to document their collaborative work on the Dancing Digital Progress Blog, which can be found at: http://www.dancingdigital.org.

The full digital configuration of the No Boundaries Archive is freely available via GitHub: https://github.com/collectiveaccess/pawtucket2/tree/project/dancingdigital

Findings

Throughout the process of building the *No Boundaries* Archive, Salzer and Mason looked for ways to better consider the people (and bodies) involved in building and sustaining digital projects. As a strategy to reduce the manual labor of data entry, the research team explored how the archive could automatically ingest information about the artists, organizations, and works represented in the collection directly from existing subject authorities. They surveyed the Library of Congress, Getty's Union List of Artist Names, the Virtual International Authority File, and Wikidata, among others, and discovered not only a dearth of information about the specific *No Boundaries* artists across all of these authorities, but also a lack of information about dance artists and dance art more generally. Because this lack was even more pronounced for women and BIPOC dance artists, Mason, Salzer, and software developers Whirl-i-Gig began to envision how the *No Boundaries* Archive could not only ingest existing data but also contribute new data about some of the missing voices. Taking this idea further, the research team began to explore how bi-directional data exchange with Wikidata could be integrated into the No Boundaries configuration of CollectiveAccess software.

The next step after this exploration has been to imagine how the No Boundaries Archive, along with other existing archives, might be integrated with Wikidata to share and aggregate data, creating a centralized dance data hub, or what we are calling the Dancing Digital Commons (DDC). To experiment with the concept of a DDC, Jacob's Pillow Archives and Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) Hamm Archives agreed to give the research team access to their data. Both digital repositories are built using CollectiveAccess, the free, open-source software also used to build the *No Boundaries* Archive - and originally chosen by Mason and Salzer with this kind of interoperability in mind. The Jacob's Pillow Archives hold a rich collection of dance materials from the early 1930s through today, including "a strong area of holdings [that reflect] an extensive history of presenting performers of the African Diaspora since 1942."[11] BAM's Hamm Archives "contain approximately 3,000 linear feet of materials dating from 1857 to the present."[12] Many of the *No Boundaries* artists have performed at both Jacob's Pillow and BAM, increasing the potential for connections within the data. Because Jacob's Pillow and BAM are

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[11] "Archives," Jacob's Pillow, accessed June 4, 2023, https://www.jacobspillow.org/archives/
[12] "The BAM Hamm Archives," BAM Archives, accessed June 4, 2023, https://levyarchive.bam.org/About/Index

world-renowned presenters of emerging and established performing artists, their decades of records could be critical to creating a critical mass of rich data with which to launch the DDC in the future.

The demo Wikidata integration model we created in collaboration with BAM and Jacob's Pillow can be found at: https://collectiveaccess.github.io/Wikidata-Integration-UI/. The demo has two tabs. The "Search" tab pulls data from Wikidata according to properties the research group determined were relevant to dance-making and performance. A more thorough examination of properties across Wikidata and performing arts archives would be a first step in building a more comprehensive prototype DDC. The "Search" tab can be used by entering a dance artist's name in the "Search" field. Then, under "Filters," a user can select the properties they would like to see illustrated. For example, if the user selects "choreographer" from the list of properties, they will pull up all the current Wikidata records for this person's choreography. They can also select "All" under "Filters" to see every property and relationship Wikidata has for this artist. Selecting "Iterations" at the bottom of the screen will also change a user's results. For example, if the user enters "2" iterations when searching for an artist's students, they will also see that student's students.

An important result of this experiment was a graphical representation of inequity in the Wikimedia landscape. For example, when Wikidata was accessed on May 30, 2023, George Balanchine, a white, male choreographer, had 90 Wikidata records associated with him. Martha Graham, a white, female choreographer, had 38 records. Alvin Ailey, a prominent African American choreographer who created 79 dances and whose company performed for an estimated 25 million people in the United States and abroad, had 10 records associated with him. Five of those were the organizations that granted him awards (Kennedy Center Honors, Guggenheim Fellowship, etc.). Only one was a work of his choreography.

The "Compare Sources" tab pulls and aggregates data from four sources: Wikidata, BAM, Jacob's Pillow, and the No Boundaries Archive. A user can choose to see a visual representation of data from any of these individual archives or from all four combined. Please note that even though Jacob's Pillow and BAM have data from as far back as 1857, this "Compare Sources" demo is only pulling data about artists included in the No Boundaries project.

Evaluation

While more formal evaluation of the No Boundaries Digital Archive will occur in future phases of the research, the research team shared and received feedback about the prototype-in-progress at a variety of local, national, and international convenings. These included:

- LD4 Art & Design Affinity Group, virtual, "Dancing Digital and the No Boundaries Archive Project" 2023
- International Association of Blacks in Dance Conference, Toronto, "The Past into the Future: Building a Digital Home for "No Boundaries" 2023
- Art Libraries Society of North America Arts 53rd Annual Conference, Mexico City, Mexico, "Dancing digital: linked data for diversity in contemporary data archives"
- Art Libraries Society of North America, New York Chapter, "Dancing digital: linked data for diversity in contemporary data archives" 2022
- National Dance Education Organization Conference, Atlanta, "Dancing Digital and No Boundaries: An Online Archive in Process" 2022
- Dance Studies Association International Conference, Vancouver, BC, "Access as Activism: Building a Digital Home for No Boundaries" 2022
- Dance/USA Connect Conference, Denver, "Digital Archives for a Digital World" 2022

At these presentations, the interest in and need for shared digital tools and configurations for publication of cultural heritage materials was made clear. Several dance artists expressed interest in using the No Boundaries Archive's digital configuration to publish their own archival content, and galleries, archives, libraries, and museums professionals expressed an interest in exploring how Wikidata integration might enhance the discoverability and sustainability of their collections.

Mason and Salzer have increasingly been invited to present their work at other convenings, and they have submitted an invited chapter on their collaborative research to the upcoming *Routledge Companion to Performance and Technology*.

Through their work together on this project, Salzer and Mason have also become Contributing Fellows with the AVAnnotate Extensible Workflow Project led by Tanya Clement, director of the Initiative for Digital Humanities at the University of Texas at Austin, and funded by the Public Knowledge program at The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The Dancing Digital/*No Boundaries* team has begun using AVAnnotate, "a workflow and platform for sharing annotations of audio and video artifacts and making digital exhibits with AV material,"[13] to augment the features and functions of the No Boundaries Archive.

Continuation and Long-term Impact

The research team is looking forward to pursuing multiple new strategies to support the dance community with practices and procedures that facilitate the publication of more archival dance materials online, while also creating much-needed data exchange between archives and the community. A central goal of these strategies is to amplify the digital narratives of historically

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[13] "About", AVAnnotate, accessed June 4, 2023, https://av-annotate.org/about/

disadvantaged artists and institutions, reduce barriers to preservation and access, and map out ontologies and authorities that place dance archives at the forefront of data justice. Salzer and Mason have submitted proposals that would allow them to further refine and test the No Boundaries Archive, and to make the No Boundaries Archive's configuration and tools more easily accessible by creating comprehensive documentation for software developers, archivists, and end-users. Salzer and Mason look forward to working in collaboration with other performing arts archives and individual members of the dance community toward democratizing the digital dance landscape.