

## Crowded White Spaces: Dîner en Blanc and the Place-Based Contingencies of Choreography

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If whiteness is inherited, then it is also reproduced. (Ahmed 2007, 154)

Thousands of people, dressed all in white, and conducting themselves with the greatest decorum, elegance, and etiquette, all meet for a mass “chic picnic” in a public space.

(Dîner en Blanc International, n.d.)

In the thick of the afternoon rush hour on Thursday, August 23, 2018, I joined thousands of white-clad bodies in a cross-city migration to a secret location (unknown even to us) in Vancouver, Canada. Following precise online instructions, we gathered at transit hubs, on commuter train platforms, and along sidewalk corridors, conspicuously monochrome against the mixed palate of the everyday. We knew one another by our white clothing, by our awkward corralling of tables, chairs, food containers, and wine bottles, by our over-packed wagons and dollies bearing loads held together by bulging bungee cords: the lighthearted white of our dinner apparel set against the teeth-gritting effort of managing cumbersome props. Each of us had a ticket—a coveted ticket, we are invited to think—to Vancouver’s version of the global Dîner en Blanc (“Dinner in White” in French) picnic event. This single-night, pop-up picnic takes place each year in cities around the world, drawing thousands of participants—each outfitted according to a strict, all-white dress code—to a secret outdoor location to share in an evening of Parisian-inspired fine dining. The organizing structure of the event draws on the conceits of its genre: an extended version of a flash mob, with its emphasis on being *in the know*.<sup>1</sup> However, whereas a flash mob presumes to embrace an attitude of inclusivity (an implicit claim I will return to test more fully), Dîner en Blanc is self-reflexively designed according to an exclusionary framework, one that amplifies the importance of preexisting social networks and leverages the flash mob’s structural desire for belonging.

Curious about the performance of togetherness, I take a place-based and contextual approach to flash mobs in order to consider the stakes of gesture, history, and location in the constitution of embodied assembly. Using Dîner en Blanc (Dîner) as a case study, I draw on my sensory

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ethnography and choreographic analysis of Vancouver's 2018 picnic, along with research on place, guest/host dynamics, and assembly, to consider a local expression of this global event.<sup>2</sup> I engage with decolonial literature (Ahmed 2007; Kuokkanen 2007; Watts 2013; Robinson 2017, 2020; Robinson et al. 2019), research on colonial performances (Bachelor, Rackow, and Valenzuela 2019; Couture 2019), and an examination of choreographic gesture (Noland 2010; Foster 2011; Hudson Bell 2014) to explore the implications of Diner's geographical positioning on the unceded traditional territories of the x<sup>w</sup>məθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. With attention to Diner's cultivation of an imagined "chic" Euro-cultural prestige and the prescribed physicality affected by this conceit, I examine the micro-choreographies of belonging and exclusion that are built into the event. My analysis of Vancouver's Diner frames the event as an amplification of the exclusionary ethos that so often structures public assembly—in which the quality of being *in on it* is set against the everyday rhythms of life that are cast as background to the "scene" of a given assembly.

A bit tongue-in-cheek, admittedly, I bring Diner's signature aesthetic, its all-white dress code, into conversation with the event's citation of the cultural practices of an imagined French high society. I extend the metaphor of whiteness beyond Diner's attire to draw out the event's cultivation of a set of aesthetically whitewashed choreographies that orient participants toward embodiments of whiteness. Even as I recognize the heavy-handedness of this sort of chromatic analysis, I also see the value in an approach to Diner that aims to understand how the event functions to hold space for whiteness on unceded Indigenous lands. In this way, I engage with Diner as a choreographic proposition with social, ethical, and dramaturgical consequences.

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Photo 1. *Diner en Blanc, Vancouver 2018*. Photo by author.



Following Stó:lō artist and scholar Dylan Robinson's insistence that the way "we name our positionality—as guests, uninvited, visitors, settlers, invaders, arrivants—speaks to how we understand the

terms of occupation, and relationships to Indigenous peoples” (Robinson et al. 2019, 20), I will take a moment to articulate my own “orientation” (Ahmed 2007). I write from my perspective as an uninvited settler of mixed European ancestry (German, Irish, British, Welsh) based in Vancouver, Canada, a city constructed on the unceded traditional territories of the Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. English-speaking, middle-class, able-bodied, cisgendered, and white-skinned, I have been born into a set of privileges that means I do not, as Robinson puts it, feel the way my “discipline perpetuates heteronormative/settler colonial/anti-BPOC (Black, People of Colour) . . . viscerally, in the pit of [my] stomach” (Robinson et al. 2019, 21). It is from my position of implication with colonial systems that I formulate this critique of a cultural practice that “reproduce[s]” whiteness in Sara Ahmed’s sense (2007, 154)—and my critique is undeniably “complicit with its object” (149). I approach *Dîner* in an effort to examine what the event’s performance of “whiteness’ *does*,” how it functions, in a context in which whiteness has an “ongoing and unfinished history, which orients bodies in specific directions, affecting how they ‘take up’ space” (150; emphasis added). As an embodied researcher, I come to movement analysis and ethnographic research with dance training rooted in somatic, release, acrobatic, and contemporary techniques in the Western theatrical tradition, and as a dance scholar with an investment in site-responsive practice and the context-specific signifying power of gesture. It is from this positionality that I examine how *Dîner*’s expanded dramaturgies and choreographies hold space for, and orient bodies toward, whiteness.

## “Thousands of People, Dressed All in White”

Founded by François Pasquier, *Dîner* began in Paris in 1988 as a public gathering of friends and acquaintances around a gourmet dinner. The event has grown into a gathering of nearly ten thousand participants in Paris in recent years, while also popping up in a wide range of cities globally—more than eighty cities in over thirty-five countries, worldwide. Although *Dîner* began as an ad hoc (if large-scale) picnic event, the structure of *Dîner* events has been guided since 2012 by *Dîner en Blanc International*, a Canadian-based company that oversees *Dîner* events around the world. At its core, *Dîner* cultivates a sense of mystery and exclusivity. The location of the picnic is kept secret even from participants until they arrive, guided by hosts, to the picnic site. “At the last minute,” the *Dîner en Blanc International* website asserts, “the secret location is revealed to thousands of friends who have all been patiently waiting to learn where ‘*Dîner en Blanc*’ will take place. Thousands of people, dressed all in white, and conducting themselves with the greatest decorum, elegance, and etiquette, all meet for a mass ‘chic picnic’ in a public space.”

The cultivation of an inner circle is explicit in the event’s organization. In order to purchase a ticket, you must be on the waiting list, which you “make” most easily by either being or knowing a previous attendee. As the Vancouver *Dîner en Blanc* website attests, Phase 1 of registration is extended only to “Members and Leaders’ Friends,” Phase 2 invites “Sponsored Guests,” whereas Phase 3 (the general “Waiting List”) catches anyone else who registers in advance—something you may be inspired to do by a personal invitation from a friend, by the happenstance of having witnessed a previous event or its news coverage, or by the flood of pictures posted to social media post-event. In 2018, the Vancouver event hosted over four thousand guests, leaving thousands more on the waiting list. Conceived of as “first and foremost, a dinner among friends” (*Dîner en Blanc International*, n.d.), existing social networks shape attendance at *Dîner*, and position you either inside or outside of this event’s circle. Although these are Vancouver-specific numbers, the link between *Dîner* and exclusiveness is global, spurring headlines like this one in *Forbes*: “*Dîner En Blanc*, the Secret ‘Dinner in White’ Is Coming: Have You Been Invited?” (Rodriguez 2018).

Vancouver’s 2018 *Dîner* encouraged a heightened version of social media presence by the way it led with its Concord Pacific-sponsored Instagram competition. My first in-person interaction at the event, for example, involved being handed an information sheet on the competition and being

reminded, “Be sure to post!” This raises questions about the narcissistic neoliberal subject in performance (Zaiontz 2014; Harvie 2013) and the ever-entwining realms of live and digital performance (Bay-Cheng et al. 2010; Kuling and Levin 2014; McLeod 2014). The link between the event’s popularity and its exaggerated presence on social media fulfills Paolo Gerbaudo’s claim that social media functions as a “vehicle for the creation of new forms of proximity and face-to-face interaction” (2012, 13), but one that is delimited by the homogeneity characteristic of online social circles.

It is easy to dismiss Diner as a classist and narcissistic event. Numerous authors in the popular press have done so. For example, anticipating the 2018 event in Vancouver, *Vancouver Magazine’s* (*VanMag*) food critic, Neal McLennan, titled his 2018 opinion piece: “Diner en Blanc is Deeply Uncool.” (Also published by *VanMag* in 2018, this piece sparked a head-on rebuttal from the Vancouver producers.) It is worth drawing out some of the criticisms of the event. In its Vancouver 2018 iteration, the DIY (do-it-yourself) picnic cost more than \$100 per couple (and only couples, not individuals, are invited) to attend. The price of a ticket to Diner does not include a meal. Although many Diner events offer a catering option for additional cost, the concept of the event is that attendees prepare and transport their meals to the picnic. They must also gather white tablecloths (cloth, not paper), white napkins (again, cloth), non-disposable white dishes, silverware, white tables, chairs, baskets, clothing, shoes, and so on—some of which are likely to be purchased specifically for the event. It is undeniable that access and privilege underpin the event. Essentially, as critics have put it, Vancouver’s Diner attendees pay over \$100 to bring their own food to a public park (McLennan 2018). In my experience, Diner participants seemed to recognize the absurdity of the event’s conceit: I watched fellow picnic goers toggle between self-reflexive laughter and annoyance as we all—separately, together—lugged our tables, chairs, and picnic baskets up transit escalators, into over-crowded commuter train cars, along suburban sidewalk corridors, and across grassy fields.

Indeed, it is hard to justify the price tag on this DIY picnic without a full understanding of Vancouver’s public space regulation policies. In an effort to balance the story—and to situate this event in a broader conversation about performance and the regulation of public spaces—let me offer more detail about the cost of producing Diner in Vancouver. Whereas in many cities globally, the event is unofficially permitted to run under the radar of public space policy and policing, in Vancouver, the regulated nature of public space requires that the event be entirely above board, requiring liquor and music (SOCAN: Society of Composers, Authors, and Music Publishers of Canada) licenses, security teams, consult with the transportation authority, and more. Ticket costs go toward, as the producers put it in their *VanMag* rebuttal, “municipal and provincial permitting, security, compensation for local artists and performers, sanitary facilities, sound and lights, site set-up and post-event cleanup. That leaves a whopping \$3.09 per ticket for overhead and salaries to our hard-working staff” (Social Concierge 2018). The producers insist that they incur a financial loss each year they stage the event. The bottom line: the tight regulation of public space means that Vancouver’s iteration of the event is particularly expensive and cumbersome to organize.

Despite the ticket cost and the limitations in attendee reach, the event appeals to a desire to assemble and to connect across difference. Driven by a twinned social and aesthetic impulse, the performance of togetherness enacted by Diner events differs from issue-based or political assemblies, like protests and rallies. The people I encountered at Diner were drawn to the event by its mystique, its elegance, its promise to bring strangers together around the same table, and its unconventional use of everyday spaces. As someone invested in a study of expanded choreography and performance’s publics, I can see the appeal of the event as a memorable night of social mixing, and one that benefits from an edge of urban pranksterism. Indeed, in my experience of the mass migration toward the picnic site for the 2018 Vancouver event, I felt reverberations of Michel de Certeau’s insights about pedestrian movement: “Their story begins on ground level, with footsteps” (1984, 97).

Together, we embodied a version of de Certeau's "improvisation of walking privilege," with its power to disrupt urban order (98): we were the "masses that make some parts of the city disappear and exaggerate others, distorting it, fragmenting it, and diverting it from its immobile order" (102). There is potential to read Diner as a productive re-choreographing of public space, wherein picnic attendees disrupt the daily vocabularies of urban movement and refunction public places for temporary assembly.

However, it is worth noting that in the same city, we can find examples of low-barrier events driven by a similar impulse to gather and to refunction public space. Consider Diner's Vancouver-based counterpart, the expressly anti-Diner event that gathered on the same night annually between 2015 and 2019: *Ce Soir Noir*. *Ce Soir Noir* is unticketed, unsanctioned, anti-chic, furniture free, and dressed in black. As the event's Facebook page describes it: "This is no chic-picnic. It's actually not fancy whatsoever. It's also free" (quoted in *Georgia Straight* 2015). Attendees are encouraged to bring friends, come with a ground blanket, show up with food to share, and offer donations to Backpack Buddies, a local nonprofit dedicated to addressing child food scarcity. Word about *Ce Soir Noir* events was circulated predominantly through Facebook, and event organizers were surprised to draw over 1,500 people to their first iteration of the event. Granted, organizers did not incur the costs of licensing and permitting for the "barely organized" event (William-Ross 2019); but they did capture the ethos of communal re-functioning of public space, and without the exclusivity that structures Diner.

Rather than critiquing the participants or the organizers of the "chic picnic" (Diner en Blanc International, n.d.), my interest in examining Diner emphasizes the spatial context of the Vancouver event—that is, Diner's placement on unceded Indigenous lands—which clashes with Diner's citation of Euro-French culture, its exclusionary structure, and its visual celebration of whiteness. A self-conscious citation of "high French society" as the event website claims—"is that different," quips *VanMag's* McLennan, from "French high society?" (2018)—defines the aesthetic of the event. Although this orientation grew naturally out of the event's Parisian origins, it takes on contextual nuance when it is exported to other locations. Diner participants are guided by the event rules and protocols into an image of mandated gentility, one that amplifies its connection to French dining and social etiquette. Intersecting with the financial and social exclusivity of the event, then, is another crucial issue: this invitation to inhabit an imagined version of a powerful social echelon of one of the two major colonial forces in Canada has complicated implications on unceded Indigenous lands—even though the French have not been the primary colonizers on the west coast.<sup>3</sup>

## Hosting on Unceded Land

Of course, even independent of the stark settler-colonial histories that still structure both formal and informal uses of these lands, practices of public performance—and I extend this research to include flash mobs and similar pop-up events—have been criticized for their underlying impulse to *take place*, if only temporarily (Levin and Solga 2009). As I have mentioned, Diner attendees gather conspicuously at public transit stations throughout the city's core; they migrate through the city in a flamboyant display of white-clad mystery and solidarity; and, upon arrival at the secret location (which is variously visible to the public, depending on the year), they proceed to set up, eat, and mingle in full view of the uninvited. Although Diner en Blanc International has been staging the outdoor picnic event in Canadian cities since 2012 (and the Parisian version of the event has been running since 1988), this sort of public pop-up dining phenomenon seems to be increasing in popularity within Canadian cities over the past half decade. Think of the Dinner in the Sky event and other ticketed instances of private and bourgeoisie dining in public space, like the Dinner With A View controversy at the Bentway in Toronto (Biesterfeld 2019)—a dining event that brought its clear, table-for-two domes to Vancouver in 2020. In each instance, these events serve patrons

gourmet meals in public spaces in and with a full view of passersby, simultaneously casting diners as performers of bourgeois food culture and as audience to the surrounding everyday rhythms. Of course, we can think also of the fundamental differences between eating in public as it is performed in these pop-up dining events versus the dynamics of living in public that are explored by Judith Butler in her examination of public assembly (2015): specifically, and contrary to these pop-up dining events, Butler notes the vulnerability experienced by those who enact private practices in public spaces out of necessity (rather than as a mode of entertainment). Although, as with Diner, I see in these pop-up dinner events a productive desire to reengage with public space and to agitate the boundaries between public and private, I also recognize an orientation toward a distinctly bourgeois performance of privilege. Diner *performs* as a public event: organized around a desire to bring together a diverse range of strangers into a temporary and convivial community (Diner en Blanc International, n.d.), Diner embodies a generative longing to come together in an expanded imagining of public life. But for whom? The event temporarily occupies a patch of public land (parks, squares, and even parking lots) with its security teams, wristbands, and access for the select few, rendering otherwise public spaces private for the night. Amplifying a signature characteristic of all flash mobs, Diner is simultaneously an acutely public and ostentatiously private event.

I must take a brief detour here to qualify my choice to analyze Diner as a flash mob: although I find the literature on flash mobs useful and relevant for framing my study of the event, it is important to note that the original version of Diner preexisted the coining of “flash mob” in 2004 (Wasik 2006, 57) by more than a decade and a half. Although Diner is commonly referred to as a flash mob in the press, Diner en Blanc International explicitly rejects this classification: “To be noted, Le Diner en Blanc is neither a simple picnic, nor a flash mob. In fact, it is primarily a meeting of friends who share simple and universal values and who take pleasure in finding each other on a yearly basis at this beautiful event which has been taking place since 1988” (Diner en Blanc International, n.d.). Although the early iterations of the event in Paris may not fit the description of a flash mob, the explosion in the event’s popularity in recent decades, the technological shifts in publicizing and organizing the event, and the rise of the flash mob genre more generally bring me to flash mob literature in my analysis of the Vancouver 2018 event. Diner is structured by features that define the genre: a carefully orchestrated, yet apparently spontaneous assembly of strangers gather in a public space to “creat[e] a scene” (Gore 2010, 125). Whereas the early years of the event relied on word of mouth to garner guests, the current global expressions of Diner depend on digital pre-event organization and post-event afterlife.

Modeled on mid-twentieth-century performance innovations and relying on twenty-first-century communications technologies, the flash mob is now two decades old and has become an overwhelmingly popular form that serves various ends, from human rights activism to commercial marketing (Gore 2010; Muse 2010; Ducomb and Benmen 2014; Foster 2015). However, despite their growing popularity and global reach, flash mobs are rarely taken seriously as experiences of community, space, and movement that extend beyond the moment of instantiation. Indeed, the flash mob is plagued by its own origins: with a disdainful tone, self-proclaimed inventor of the flash mob, Bill Wasik, characterizes the practice as a “pointless aggregation and then dispersal,” and dismisses the potential of the form as “the most forgettable hipster fad of the past five years” (2006, 57). In her bid to take flash mobs seriously, Susan Leigh Foster pushes for a study of the form that integrates and extends beyond a parceled study of a given event’s digital backend, its specified task, text, or movements, or participating publics; instead, she calls for a robust, context-specific, dramaturgical, and choreographic approach to studying flash mobs (2015, 207). It is precisely the place-based and extended dramaturgy of the Vancouver Diner event that concerns me here.

The relationship between the event’s overwhelmingly private “publics” and the land the event temporarily occupies is complicated in each iteration of the event in the over eighty cities (over thirty-five countries) worldwide in which Diner takes place. However, ongoing considerations about performance, public space, and unceded lands in the settler-colonial city known as

Vancouver (Couture 2019; Dangeli 2016; Dunn 2016; Lachance 2018) make this locational expression particularly fraught. Although Vancouver was incorporated as a settler city in 1886, the Indigenous peoples and nations who have been stewarding the lands since time immemorial never surrendered, abandoned, or otherwise relinquished their claim on the land. Instead, as performance scholars Selena Couture and Heather Davis-Fisch outline in their special issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* (2018) commemorating Canada's 150th anniversary, "The government of Canada pursued a strategy of cultural genocide against Indigenous peoples—a strategy which allowed settler Canadians to gain access to Indigenous lands and the resources within these lands" (5). With this present history in mind, it seems important to query the ethical responsibilities of—as another set of recent guest editors of *Canadian Theatre Review* (2019) articulate—"being hosts and guests on stolen, colonized land" (Bachelor, Rackow, and Valenzuela 2019, 6) in the context of Diner.

Calling into focus "those acts that, in their hospitality, are hostile" (2019, 6), Brian Bachelor, Hannah Rackow, and Denise Rogers Valenzuela cite Dylan Robinson in his assertion that to host is to "signal sovereign control over the rules of the space and the authority under which rules are enforced" (quoted in Bachelor, Rackow, and Valenzuela 2019, 5). In the case of Diner, the hierarchy of "hosting" is worthy of note. Hosting the 2018 event: VanDusen's joint owners, the City of Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation and the Vancouver Botanical Gardens Association; the event sponsors, including Concord Pacific—a dominant Vancouver-based development company with its own complex relationship to (calling up Robinson) "control" of land; Diner en Blanc International, which provides each local iteration of the event with a strict rulebook for the event; and Diner en Blanc Vancouver, with its various layers of hospitality, including a nested structure of Table Leaders, Group Leaders, and Branch Leaders that serve as embodied interfaces for picnic participants. My experience of participating in the event was defined by the strict rule set that was broadcast via online registration interfaces, pre-event PDF circulations, and pre-event check-ins with my Table Leader. In these ways, Diner functions as what Rauna Kuokkanen has called a "guest-master," defined by a willingness to "acknowledge itself as a guest on the lands of others, at least rhetorically, without actually following the protocols of its hosts, or asking permission" while claiming "practical control of its hosts' house" (2007, 133–134).<sup>4</sup> The presumption to host on unceded land is by no means unique to Diner, but the event exaggerates the issue, fashioning a version of hosting that seeks to transport its participants out of the complicated specificities of its platial context and into an imagined microcosm of Parisian aesthetics, right down to the miniature Eiffel Tower on site during the 2018 Vancouver event.

In her analysis of colonial performance in/of Vancouver, Selena Couture (2019) offers an insightful framework for studying the implications of settler performance on unceded land. She draws from Sara Ahmed's "A Phenomenology of Whiteness" (2007), extending Ahmed's insistence that "whiteness holds its place through habits (i.e., bodily and spatial forms of inheritance) and that 'spaces acquire the shape of bodies that 'inhabit' them'" (Couture 2019, 55; quoting Ahmed). Couture applies Ahmed's understanding of the production of whiteness to an analysis of the "construction of whiteness through performance" (54). She teases out the place-based function of performance, examining "the constructed nature of white settler identity in Vancouver and the use of performance to make and maintain colonial space" (7), even as she also asserts performance as a key tool used by Indigenous peoples to assert their continued presence on and claim to the land. This is a position confirmed by a range of dance scholars, including Jacqueline Shea Murphy (2007), Tsimshian artist/scholar Mique'l Dangeli (2016),<sup>5</sup> and Cree artist/scholar Karyn Recollet (2015),<sup>6</sup> among others. Couture rearticulates Ahmed's assertion that "white space can be created through the privilege assumed via the right to movement and that this is particularly significant in an area that is considered to be for the recreational use and enjoyment of the public" (2019, 56). Following Couture and Ahmed, it is worth considering how Diner renders its site a "white space" (Ahmed 2007, 159). In the case of Diner, whiteness is, of course, the key visual signifier

that unifies the event; but whiteness is more too. Whiteness also constitutes the signature “styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, habits” of the event (2007, 154).

In this current climate of reconciliation in Canada—in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada with its ninety-four “calls to action”<sup>7</sup>—Vancouver’s version of *Dîner* will need to begin to reckon, at some level, with the fundamental problem I am working to identify. Land acknowledgements are the most common expression and the first step in this direction, though a range of Indigenous and settler scholars and artists critique typical land acknowledgements as perfunctory and ineffectual (Robinson et al. 2019; Gaertner 2020). However, deeper engagements with reconciliation may prove difficult within the confines of the rule set provided by *Dîner en Blanc* International. How *Dîner* Vancouver grapples with this issue will be a study in a wider-reaching issue that frames Indigenous-settler relations: when the content, form, and embodied experience of a cultural practice are deeply immersed in colonial power structures and epistemologies, (how) can that practice live responsibly on unceded land?

## Culinary Choreographies

I went to *Dîner* equipped with sensory ethnography (Pink 2015) and performance ethnography methods to study the event in its choreographic capacity, from the inside. I sought to understand how the various phases of the event (transit, setup, dinner) physically arranged its participants, and which gestures were prescribed, modeled, or invited through the framing strictures of the event. As my guest (registration is only possible in pairs, not solo), I invited a movement specialist from within my contemporary dance community, Alison Denham. Together, we identified a handful of movement tropes that defined the choreographic landscape—the event’s movement vocabulary. Within the expanded understanding of choreography that characterizes my approach, one that recognizes “the choreographic” as “participat[ion] in a scene of address that anticipates and requires a particular mode of attention” (Joy 2014, 1), I approach choreography as “a plan or score according to which movement unfolds” (Foster 2011, 2). My analysis is framed by Andrew Hewitt’s understanding of “social choreography—as the performance of social and aesthetic order” (2005, 35). With an eye to the “urban choreographies” (Klein 2017) that characterize Vancouver,<sup>8</sup> I approach *Dîner* as a conscious intervention in, and re-scripting of, the everyday choreographies of urban circulation—one that energizes “the production of attention by means of bodily practices (gestures, facial expressions, movement, dance), theatrical settings (stage, costumes, music), and choreographic tools (organization of bodies, rhythm, dramaturgy)” (2017, 131).

One overwhelming element of *Dîner*’s choreography is its prescribed use of props. As I have described, the cross-city migration to the picnic site is characterized—particularly for those navigating public transit, but also for attendees who booked a spot on the chartered busses—by prop management. Moving tables (which must be white, folding, and between twenty-four and thirty inches), chairs (white, folding), and baskets (white) through the city and across the picnic site conscripts attendees into a responsive physical relationship with *Dîner*’s required objects. Lugging, tugging, or pushing, bodies are bent to the effort of transport. Once on site, picnic participants proceed through a tightly scored setup of these props, locating their designated Table Leader in a predetermined zone within the picnic area to receive instructions about acceptable table placement. Tables are arranged in straight, parallel lines—a grid cutting through the soft contours of Vancouver’s 2018 site within VanDusen Botanical Gardens. According to *Dîner en Blanc* International’s stated expectation, guests are to wait for their entire row to set up before taking a seat (*Dîner en Blanc* International, n.d.).

From here, the specific uses of the various culinary props contained in the white baskets or bags choreograph participant physicality, akin to Robin Bernstein’s “scriptive things” (2009), which “broadly structur[e] a performance” (69)—or, as Rebecca Schneider puts it in her description of



Bernstein's concept, "initiate and choreograph behavior" (2015, 10). Diner's mandated prop management sets the scene for a series of culinary engagements with "scriptive things" that signify beyond their enactment: "These things are citational in that they arrange and propel bodies in recognizable ways, through paths of evocative movement that have been traveled before" (Bernstein 2009, 70). Indeed, Diner's tables and chairs (in their precise arrangements), non-disposable plates and glasses, and fine food eaten from silverware animate—even as they also echo—a set of culinary habits at the nexus of class and race: they "hail" in Althusser's sense, demanding a "bodily response" that interpellates the individual into a particular ideology (73). Choreographed by a curated collection of "scriptive things," Diner invites its guests to perform a physical repertoire of dining that reaches away from its spatial context (a park picnic), and toward a Euro standard of utmost "decorum, elegance, and etiquette" (Diner en Blanc International, n.d.).

As dance scholar Melissa Hudson Bell establishes in her study of food-oriented performance, food studies scholars examine communal dining in terms of belonging, offering theoretical frameworks for understanding the social orchestration of class, geography, and culture that unfolds inside the sharing of food (2014, 60).<sup>9</sup> Hudson Bell's understanding of the classed and raced stakes of communal food consumption apply to this reading of Diner: "The inclusion of food can amplify the disconnect between how many . . . audience members view themselves (as liberal, global, multicultural) and how they comport themselves (largely according to genteel European standards" (110–111). The expressed expectations for comportment during the Diner events orient bodies toward those "genteel European standards," rendering the picnic site a "white space" in Ahmed's sense.

Beyond the gestures of dining, deep engagement with materials shaped another expression of physicality in this iteration of Diner: a stilted, sinking, stumbling walk that I witnessed almost ubiquitously across the bodies at the event who tried to navigate the uneven, grassy ground in high heels.<sup>10</sup> Although the Vancouver event organizers encouraged participants to bring comfortable shoes for the walk between the closest train station and the picnic site (Le Diner en Blanc 2022), the expectation is that attendees will change into their "elegant" shoes upon arrival. To examine this signature, heel-sinking gait at the 2018 Vancouver Diner event, I use performance studies scholar Marlis Schweitzer's research on "choreographic things" (2014). Schweitzer builds on Bernstein's "scriptive things" to develop her assertion that costumes choreograph the body (2014): "Thinking about costumes as performing things that move us as much as we move them opens up a new perspective on the co-constitutive relationship between humans and nonhumans" (38). Schweitzer applies this new materialist perspective to her embodied encounter with dancer Maud Allan's historic Salomé costume at the Dance Collection Danse archives in Toronto, Canada, reflecting on the capacity of costumes to generate and capture movement histories (37). Schweitzer's understanding of the causal relationship between costume and movement "refuses to consign props, costumes . . . and other theatrical objects to their 'traditional' role as background," seeing them instead as "active agents performing alongside rather than behind or in service to human performers" (Schweitzer and Zerdy 2014, 6). Examining Salomé's iconic beaded skirt and brassiere, Schweitzer insists on the role of costumes in "shaping, molding, protecting, disguising, or transforming the physical form, while marking gender, class, age, and various other identity categories" (38). Schweitzer's particular emphasis on the gender and class information contained in costumes is a useful framework for understanding the awkward, high-heeled display of femininity that was so common at Vancouver's 2018 Diner event. The "choreographic thing" of the high heel "shaped" and "molded" the gait of picnic participants, simultaneously establishing a classed set of gender coordinates.

However, there is more at work in this scene. There is also a quality of what Paul Carter (1996) and, following him, André Lepecki (2006, 2008) identify as a colonially driven desire in Western theatrical dance (and Western society more generally) to flatten the ground to ease movement creation and execution. As Lepecki summarizes Carter's argument: "Western dance relates to its ground only through the ground's leveling, through its demise, its forgetting" (2008, 52). In a curious and unintended reversal, Diner's desire to forget its physical ground, to mandate "elegance and glamour" in

white (Diner en Blanc International, n.d.), functioned against itself to highlight the ways in which the land will not be forgotten. Heels sunk into soft grass and ankles wobbled on uneven ground, scoring a cumbersome step that drew attention downward, to the ground surface. Taken together, the prescribed materials of Diner (props and costumes) and its site-specific placement animate “a dance of cross-species and cross-material affective engagements that . . . set old postures choreographed for subject/object relations spinning” (Schneider 2015, 9).

The topographical determination of movement that characterized this element of Diner aligns with Mohawk and Anishinaabe sociologist Vanessa Watts’ insistence on the “land’s intentions” (2013, 22). For Watts, who draws from Haudenosaunee (as well as Anishinaabe) cosmologies, the land of Turtle Island is the flesh of Sky Woman (First Woman in Anishinaabe teachings): “In becoming land or territory, she becomes designator of how living beings will organize upon her. Where waters flow and pool, where mountains rise and turn into valleys, all of these become demarcations of who will reside where, how they will live, and how their behaviours toward one another are determined” (23). Visible in the awkward navigation of picnic goers towing teetering towers of tables, food, chairs, and more across a lumpy grass field, visible in the sinking spikes of the high heels, the land asserted itself in the awkward, tipping, tripping choreography that characterized the evening for many guests. Between the “choreographic thing” of the high heels (and the cumbersome dinner props) and the choreographic topography of the sloping grass field,<sup>11</sup> attendees were cast into a humbling kinetic experience that the colonial enterprise would like to forget: “the grooves of the particular terrain” (Lepecki 2008, 52).

The particularities of terrain were also rendered visible against the stark white of the participants’ clothing. For me, in my borrowed white jumpsuit, the surrounding grass and dirt (not to mention food and wine) all felt slightly menacing; I experienced them as potential stains. Expanding “choreographic things” (Schweitzer 2014) toward choreographic topographies, I want to spend a moment considering how Diner’s white costuming orients picnic goers within their environment. The decision to mandate white apparel is situated as a pragmatic choice by Diner’s founder, François Pasquier, who insists that, in the early years of Diner, picnic goers wore white simply so that “participants could recognize each other and distinguish themselves from one another in the park” (Rodriguez 2018). The dress code is strictly enforced: failing to meet its stipulations regarding both color and formality could result, prospective participants are reminded in the lead-up to the event, in being turned away on spec. The Vancouver organizers make a claim for the white dress code as egalitarian: “It serves to put everyone on the same level” (*VanMag* rebuttal 2018). Although we can query the exclusiveness at the core of this claim, I am also compelled to think seriously about the ways in which this dress code *did* function to generate a shared orientation among participants. In my experience, this impractical costuming cast picnic goers into an exaggerated choreography of delicacy: moving through the landscape as gingerly as possible, trying to avoid contact in order to keep the whites white. The disassociation from ground that is choreographed by the white clothing invites participants of Diner to relate to the surrounding environment with a settler-colonial orientation, returning to Lepecki’s attention (via Carter) to the colonial desire to flatten land in order to ease movement (2008). In this way, the all-white costuming of Diner events puts participants at odds with their environment—even as it also exaggerates the impossibility of maintaining safe distance from place. The inevitable smudge from dirt or a grass stain function to visually assert the “land’s intentions” (Watts 2013, 22).

The inextricable connection between place and movement runs through other key choreographic moments that migrated across bodies during Vancouver’s 2018 iteration of Diner, gestures that I want to examine for their capacity to reproduce cultural norms. Carrie Noland’s understanding of the link between culture and gesture is particularly instructive here. For Noland, “Gestures are a type of inscription, a parsing of the body into signifying or operational units; they can thereby be seen to reveal the submission of a shared human anatomy to a set of bodily practices specific to one culture” (2010, 2). Crucially, gesture is, according to Noland, bound to place as much as it is to gender or ethnicity: “Location is one of those messy contingencies” that makes a singular



Photo 2. *Dîner en Blanc, Vancouver 2018: arrival at picnic site. Photo by author.*

reading of a given gesture impossible (2008, xv). This claim is central to my analysis of the Vancouver Dîner event: “When gestures change location, when they migrate from one site of performance to another, they in fact confront different reception and may even be experienced in a new way” (xvi). The function of a set of gestures sited in Paris, France—gestures that support a white-clad gourmet picnic in a public place—is radically different from the function of the same set of gestures in Vancouver, Canada. Because gesture can be “harnessed to represent but also to construct ethnicity, sexuality, or class status,” and because the migration of a gesture across bodies and across sites fundamentally alters its meaning (xvi), I extend my place-based analysis of Dîner to examine a last set of choreographies that are common across Dîner en Blanc events, flashes of unison that cast participants in a performance of togetherness regardless of context and despite difference.

## A “Collection of Singularities”

Let me finish with an analysis of the most clearly prescribed choreographies of the evening, each distinguished by their solicitation of pan-event unison. First, consider the “napkin wave” that kicks off the dinner; once picnic goers are set up and ready to eat, we are invited to partake, together, in a lassoing celebration of arrival. At once, we are signaled to wave our napkins above our heads in a circular motion, creating a wash of waving white. This gesture renders the white napkin a momentary extension of our bodies, a common appendage that circles through the air above our heads. The napkin wave draws attention away from kinetic specificities of land or body; instead, the gesture funnels energy upward, toward the thing held, the prop. The napkin twirl lifts collective focus to the shock of white that temporarily covers over both body and site. This gesture also functions to carve out a kinespheric perimeter around the one who twirls: my napkin circles above my

head, defining the extent of my personal space while brushing up against the edges of my neighbor's boundary.<sup>12</sup> Thousands of individual bodies co-commit to the action and to the image, painting the space white with their napkins. I've already acknowledged that the white/whiteness metaphor is a bit overdone in my analysis, but I will return to it now because it feels apt—not only because white is the single defining aesthetic marker of the picnic, but also because the emphasis on whiteness is reiterated in the unison choreographies that cut through Diner events.

Whiteness functions as the gathering idea of Diner, a mechanism for generating a feeling of togetherness across participants: the uniform all-white attire and the unison white napkin twirl constitute an aesthetic of belonging wherein assembly is oriented toward whiteness. Moreover, as I've argued, various elements of the event invite us to inhabit a positionality of what Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō) calls "settler orientations toward the world" (2020, 2): from culinary choreographies to mobilities attuned to the preservation of our white outfits. However, this sense of belonging, of being *in on it*, remains superficial. Following instructions, paint-by-number, we work together to create the appearance of a uniform whole, and what we create is just that: the image of togetherness. Recall de Certeau's description of urban mobility: "Their story begins on ground level, with footsteps" (1984, 97). His description explores the paradox of moving separately, together: "They are myriad, but do not compose a series. They cannot be counted because each unit has a qualitative character: a style of tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation. Their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities" (97). These insights gesture toward the limits of the "temporary community" Diner generates (Dolan 2005). Generating a convivial "collection of singularities" (de Certeau 1984, 97), the event proposes an immiscible version of assembly. The couples who attend the event together sit together at their own table facing one another, their physical orientation highlighting the event's reinforcement of existing social networks, rather than a genuine social expansion or intermixing. In the end, we do not share a table with strangers; instead, we each eat at our own table—separately, together.

The immiscibility of Diner's assembly is performed vividly in the second explicit choreographic imperative of the event. "The sparkler moment," as event insiders call it, is the last unifying gesture of the evening. Whereas the "napkin wave" reaches across Diner events globally, written into the guiding franchise documents that each producer of the event must adopt and enact, "the sparkler moment" is an unofficial, optional add-on taken up by many participating cities. At the end of the night in Vancouver, participants are reminded of the sparkler they received upon arrival—the one Diner prop we did not have to haul across the city. By this time, the sun has slipped below the horizon, and the ambient light is dim. The whiteness of the mass that has occupied VanDusen gardens is now subdued, hard to see in the fading light. Together, we are instructed to light our long silver sparklers, and as we do, the area glows again with a soft, dancing white light. We hold our sparklers up and out, careful of our surroundings. We watch the light travel downward along its metal stem until it extinguishes, and we slip into dusk again. Although the gestures invited by the sparkler lighting are understated in kinetic terms—body static, arm uplifted and outstretched, gaze oriented—the brightness of the light and the risk that attends holding fire command full attention. In this way, the sparkler, like the napkin wave, achieves significant symbolic effect: it reestablishes the boundaries of each participant's solo kinesphere and extends a visual signifier of whiteness up and away from our bodies, up and away from the site. In this moment, it becomes clear that the point of the event has not been to be on, or with, or of the land; instead, it is to be lifted up and out of the specifics of land and site, out of the kinetic individuality that animates even the most prescribed of gestures. The point here is to be transported into a "sparkling" moment (Social Concierge 2018), a pixilated wash of white that could be anywhere.

## Notes

1. For a history of flash mobs, see Walker (2013), and for a study of flash mobs and choreography, see Foster (2015).

2. Of course, my analysis straddles a significant gulf in the experience of embodied assembly. I attended Diner pre-pandemic, and my engagement in an analysis of the event has unfolded slowly throughout these past few pandemic years. Although an examination of pandemic assembly is beyond the scope of this study, I turn to the question of embodied assembly in the context of COVID-19 more fully in a co-authored chapter in the anthology *What Makes an Assembly?* (Gerecke and Levin 2023).

3. In fact, French Canadians constitute a marginalized group within the country, a group that has fought hard for cultural and language rights throughout the country's history. Another study of Diner could examine the event for the productive celebration of French culture in this national context. However, in Vancouver, on unceded Indigenous land, in a city where both poverty and food scarcity are pressing issues that affect Indigenous people disproportionately (Robertson 2007), Diner's politics are problematic.

4. Kuokkanen writes with reference to universities that operate on traditional territories.

5. For a compelling study of the interlacing of Indigenous dance, protocol, and land claim, see Dangeli (2016).

6. Recollet (2015) contextualizes urban performance within the framework of the flash mob, making connections between long-standing practices of Indigenous resistance and more recent expressions, including #Idle No More. In Recollet's words: "Since the arrival of European settlers, Indigenous peoples have been engaged in embodied acts of defiance, producing intervening sovereign acts to challenge encroachments of non-Indigenous development and resource extractions on contested Indigenous territories within the Canadian nation-state" (129).

7. Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. The TRC ran between 2008 and 2015, providing a space for survivors and those impacted by residential schools to share their stories.

8. For another compelling analysis of the city as a choreographic force, see Kwan (2013).

9. With relevance to Diner, consider sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of class and French dining culture in *Distinction* (1984), and the lineage of thought that builds from Bourdieu's work.

10. Most of these bodies read as female, though certainly there were differently gendered bodies that challenged the hetero expectations baked into the dress code.

11. For another detailed examination of the connection between flattened land and place-based choreography see "A Choreopolitics of Topography" (Gerecke 2019).

12. Writing in 2023, the napkin twirl calls up the COVID-19 kinespheric restrictions that dominated movement choices during the height of the pandemic—or, in Kate Elswit's terms, the "coronasphere" (2020).

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