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# Miriam's Dance as Embodied Prophecy (Exodus 15:20–21)

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The discursive labeling of Miriam as prophet constructs her drumming, dancing, and singing as prophetic acts; her actions simultaneously reshape the prophetic role as participatory, creative, and relational. A theoretical frame drawn from dance studies and the new materialist philosophy of Karen Barad supports the argument that the drumming, dancing, and singing of Miriam and the women of Israel in Exod 15:20–21 are a prophetic performance that gives shape and expression to the subjectivity and agency of God and people after the moment of transition between the victory at the Reed Sea and the journey to Sinai. The collaborative prophetic activity of drumming, dance, and song celebrates divine dynamism and responsiveness, enacts healing for a traumatized people, and entrains their bodies for life in covenant community.

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> Dancing, of all human art and cultural forms, is arguably the most bodied, the most mind-body integrative. Dancing is the body.
>
> —Sam Gill[1]

> If I could say it, I wouldn't have to dance it.
>
> —Isadora Duncan

Exodus 15:20–21 identifies Miriam as a prophet at the moment when she undertakes to lead the women of Israel in drumming, dancing, and singing. I argue that these actions are a form of embodied prophecy that mediates in multiple ways. It mediates knowledge about God and divine power of possibility—possible movements, actions, and relationships—to and for God's people. The coordinated,

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[1] Sam Gill, "Dancing Ritual, Ritual Dancing: Experiential Teaching," in *Teaching Ritual*, ed. Catherine Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 45–56, here 50.

responsive, and artful movement of bodies through space and time also mediates the people's praise to God. To make this case and to elaborate what and how this prophetic performance mediates between God and people, I use an analytical framework drawn from three disciplines: biblical scholarship, dance studies, and philosophy.

The article is divided into four parts. The first section notes both the lingering effects of mind–body dualism on scholarly construals of biblical prophecy and the intervention posed by recent attention to embodiment in the study of ancient prophecy. A survey of diverse forms of embodied prophecy culminates in the proposal that Miriam's narrated activity of drumming, leading the women in dance, and singing should also be understood as embodied prophecy. Section II reviews previous scholarship on Exod 15:20–21, ranging from historical and literary-critical analyses, to feminist interpretation, to musicoarchaeology. This section both sets the stage for recognizing Miriam's actions as prophetic and identifies interpretive biases that have obscured the prophetic character of Miriam's drumming, dancing, and singing. In section III, neuroscience and critical dance studies furnish insights into the mediatory functions of Miriam's drumming and dance. Comparison with three examples of dance in the modern period, namely, the Senegalese *sabar*, African American social dance, and the global flash mob One Billion Rising, illuminates key features of the dance Miriam leads: its interactive and creative character, its relation to past and future, and its capacities to enact relationship, social change, and healing in the face of trauma. The concluding section deploys the new materialist philosophy of Karen Barad to illuminate the mediatory interplay between the actions of drumming, dancing, and singing, on the one hand, and the discourse of Miriam's song, on the other. Together they constitute what Barad calls intra-action, a relational becoming in and through which subjectivity and agency are formed. That is, God's and the people's very being, identity, awareness, and capacity for action in relation to one another take shape in the coordinated activity of drumming, dance, and song. This analysis contributes to a more expansive, embodied, and intra-active model of prophetic mediation.

First, I offer a note regarding methodology. I am concerned in this article with the representation of prophecy within biblical literature rather than a reconstructed historical phenomenon "behind" the text. It is nonetheless the case that historical phenomena, lived practices, and literary representations are mutually shaping. I thus integrate findings from within the field of biblical studies with insights from disciplines outside of biblical studies, ranging from neuroscience to philosophy. Among the latter disciplines, dance studies will prove to be most central to my argument. A question arises as to the applicability of modern dance studies to the study of an ancient text. Dance is present across all cultures, and evolutionary biologists and anthropologists alike have identified certain common functions of

dance across cultural settings.[2] Among those common functions are communication and "group cohesion"[3] as well as "signal[ing], form[ing], and negotiat[ing] [social identities] through bodily movement."[4] Yet, as a cultural form, dance and its functions can also be analyzed only in relation to those diverse settings.[5] This study borrows from comparative cultural studies a commitment to an inclusionary and inter- and multidisciplinary methodology that resists essentialism by attending to particularities of context.[6] Comparative examples of dance from modern cultures have been chosen that share formal and contextual similarities with the dance portrayed in Exod 15:20–21 in order to illuminate its implied functions within the narrative world of Exodus.

## I. Embodied Prophecy

What counts as prophecy? What was prophecy in biblical literature? Prophecy has frequently been construed as oracular utterance, revelatory words about the present and future, divinely authorized verbal communication, or a message channeled by a human on behalf of the deity.[7] Biblical scholars have increasingly moved

[2] See Bernhard Fink, Bettina Bläsing, Andrea Ravignani, Todd K. Shackelford, "Evolution and Functions of Human Dance," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 42 (2021): 351–60.

[3] Fink et al., "Evolution and Functions," 352.

[4] Jane C. Desmond, "Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies," in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond, Post-contemporary Interventions (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 29–54, here 29.

[5] Desmond, "Embodying Difference," 29.

[6] Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, "Comparative Cultural Studies and the Study of Central European Culture: Theory and Application," in *Comparative Central European Culture*, ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Purdue Books in Comparative Cultural Studies 1 (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2002), 1–32.

[7] For example, Herbert Huffmon defines prophecy as "inspired speech at the initiative of a divine power, speech which is clear in itself and commonly directed to a third party" ("Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy," *ABD* 5:477–82, here 477). Drawing on a definition by Manfred Weippert ("Prophetie im Alten Orient," *Neues Bibel-Lexikon*, ed. Manfred Görg and Bernhard Lang [Zurich: Benziger, 1997], 196–200), Martti Nissinen offers the following definition: "In scientific usage, prophecy today mostly means the transmission of a linguistic or metalinguistic message that a person—ie a prophet or a prophetess—receives without inductive techniques (allegedly) from a deity in order to forward it to an individual or collective addressee. The constitutive elements of prophecy are therefore 1) the deity as the sender of the message, 2) the oracle (or metalinguistic act) as the substance of the message, 3) the transmitting person (the prophet or prophetess) and 4) the receiving person or group of people" ("Prophetie [Alter Orient])," 1.2 in WiBiLex 2007, https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/31348/. See further discussion in Anathea E. Portier-Young, *The Prophetic Body: Embodiment and Mediation in Biblical Prophetic Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 12–14.

toward a more expansive framing of prophecy as a form of intermediation, yet, in seeking to identify the distinctive characteristics of *prophetic* intermediation, "oral proclamation" or "inspired speech" continues to occupy center stage.[8] Construals of prophecy as a strictly or primarily verbal phenomenon follow in the path of centuries of mind–body dualism—an understanding of the human person in which intellect or mind is viewed as separate from body. Historically, this dualism both divorces words from the body and values intellect and words as divine, holy, and noble, while devaluing the body and its actions as base and shameful. Frequently attaching to a binary construction of gender, such dualism similarly may value cultural forms associated with men and devalue cultural forms associated with women. This may in turn limit the scope of activity that modern interpreters judge to be prophetic. In such a dualistic frame, moreover, a prophet's words typically represent the will of the (disembodied) deity in a unidirectional flow. Where the body enters the picture, it is accommodation or accident. Such a model neglects the embodied character of communication itself. It also forecloses the possibility that prophecy mediates in more ways than communication of a message.

Participating in a broader turn to the body within biblical scholarship, analyses of embodiment in biblical prophecy paint a different picture.[9] In the programmatic introduction to her analysis of prophetic masculinity, Rhiannon Graybill insists on the body's centrality to biblical prophecy, which she redefines as "embodied practice": "The body is essential to prophecy. The body of the prophet is not simply a vessel that is filled with the prophetic word, or a channel through which prophecy passes. Instead, prophecy is staged on and through the body, and cannot occur without it. Prophecy is embodied practice."[10] Martti Nissinen's analysis of ecstatic prophecy in ancient West Asia and in biblical literature highlights the body's importance both to ritual performances and altered states of consciousness associated with prophecy in these ancient contexts.[11] Central to biblical portrayals of prophecy, moreover, are such embodied phenomena as affect and movement and diverse forms of prophetic action from feeding and healing to sexuality and childbirth. Prophecies often took the form of symbolic action, including sometimes elaborate and risky public performances that enrolled their audiences as active participants in the drama.[12] These diverse prophetic actions surface an additional

[8] Brad E. Kelle, "The Phenomenon of Israelite Prophecy in Contemporary Scholarship," *CurBR* 12 (2014): 275–320, here 293.

[9] Two recent examples are Amy Kalmanofsky, "Postmodern Engagements of the Prophets," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Prophets*, ed. Carolyn J. Sharp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 548–68, here 557–61; and, in the same volume, Louis Stulman, "Prophetic Words and Acts as Survival Literature," 319–33, here 326–30.

[10] Rhiannon Graybill, *Are We Not Men? Unstable Masculinity in the Hebrew Prophets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5.

[11] Martti Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy: Near Eastern, Biblical, and Greek Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 171–91.

[12] Extended treatments of prophetic symbolic action include Georg Fohrer, *Die symboli-*

feature of prophecy that a dualistic model typically excludes: it is not unidirectional, after all, but interactive and (to anticipate a concept explained later in this article) intra-active.

Prophets were frequently creative, even artistic. Biblical literature credits prophets with the composition and performance of poems and songs and portrays their performance of something very much like theater.[13] Could it be that the most noticeably embodied of all art forms, dance, was also a form of prophetic activity?

It is not incidental that Miriam leads the women in movement at this critical juncture in Israel's story. Immediately preceding the report that Miriam drummed, led the women in dance, and sang is a refrain that summarizes the astonishing event of the Reed Sea crossing as a miracle of motion: "Israel walked on dry ground in the midst of the sea" (Exod 15:19; see also Exod 14:22, 29; Josh 4:22; Neh 9:11; Ps 66:6; cf. Exod 14:16).[14] The refrain names movement at the meeting of impossible and possible, obstacle and miracle, unmaking and making, ending and beginning. It is at this juncture of impossible possibility, miracle in motion, that Miriam is introduced as prophet (Exod 15:20). And, while Moses and the Israelites are credited (15:1) with a song that rehearses the drama of divine victory and foretells the people's future with God, Miriam and the women contribute rhythm and dance, which, to borrow phrasing from dance and performance scholar Daniela Perazzo Domm, "engage with the paradoxical tensions between doing and undoing inscribed in the world's becoming, and grapple with the entanglement of the possible with the impossible."[15] Immediately following the dance, the people again walk, leaving sea behind and entering wilderness (15:22), journeying by stages (17:1) until they reach Sinai (19:1). When God initiates the covenant with them there, God names Godself as the one who caused the people to come out (הוצאתיך)

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*schen Handlungen der Propheten*, ATANT 25 (Zurich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1953); Kelvin G. Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts: Rhetorical Nonverbal Communication*, JSOTSup 283 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999); Åke Viberg, *Prophets in Action: An Analysis of Prophetic Symbolic Acts in the Old Testament*, ConBOT 55 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2007).

[13] Regarding prophetic performance, see Johanna Erzberger, "Prophetic Sign Acts as Performances," in *Jeremiah Invented: Constructions and Deconstructions of Jeremiah*, ed. Else K. Holt and Carolyn J. Sharp, LHBOTS 595 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 104–16; Jeanette Mathews, *Performing Habakkuk: Faithful Re-enactment in the Midst of Crisis* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012); William Doan and Terry Giles, *Prophets, Performance, and Power: Performance Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (London: T&T Clark, 2005); David Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament* (London: Epworth, 1990); Bernhard Lang, "Street Theater, Raising the Dead, and the Zoroastrian Connection in Ezekiel's Prophecy," in *Ezekiel and His Book: Textual and Literary Criticism and Their Interrelation*, ed. J. Lust et al., BETL 74 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1986), 297–316.

[14] All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

[15] Daniela Perazzo Domm, "Im/possible Choreographies: Diffractive Processes and Ethical Entanglements in Current British Dance Practices," *Dance Research Journal* 51 (2019): 66–83, here 66.

from the place of their enslavement (20:2; cf. Deut 5:6).[16] That is, God is the one who set the people in motion toward freedom and covenant.

## II. Exodus 15:20–21 in Previous Scholarship

The details of Miriam's and the women's performance are reported in Exod 15:20–21:

| | |
|---|---|
| ותקח מרים הנביאה | And Miriam the prophet, sister of Aaron, took the |
| אחות אהרן את־התף בידה | hand-drum in her hand. |
| ותצאן כל־הנשים אחריה | And they went out, all the women, after her, |
| בתפים ובמחלת | With hand-drums and with dances. |
| ותען להם מרים | And Miriam chanted[17] for them: |
| שירו ליהוה כי־גאה גאה | "Sing[18] to YHWH, for he is gloriously exalted |
| סוס ורכבו רמה בים: ס | Horse and rider he cast in the sea." |

Miriam is here identified by two titles: one naming her mediatorial role as prophet, the other a familial relationship that locates her within a network of kinship, authority, and belonging. Of the numerous references to Miriam in the Hebrew Bible, it is only here that she is called a prophet. The title's inclusion is thus marked, drawing reader's attention to her prophetic role precisely at the moment when she takes the drum and initiates the shared performance.

Some scholars have inferred from this detail that the performance of drumming, dancing (or, more precisely, leading others in dancing), and singing portrayed in Exod 15:20–21 is a form of prophecy, and that is the position I take here.[19]

[16] See also Exod 7:5; 12:42, 51; 13:3, 9, 14, 16; 14:11; 16:6, 32; 18:1; 29:46; 32:11, etc. The assertion that God brought Israel out is part of the "little historical credo" identified by Gerhard von Rad, *Das formgeschichtliche Problem des Hexateuchs*, BWANT 78 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1938).

[17] The Septuagint here reads ἐξῆρχεν, meaning "began," "initiated," "led," or "took the lead." This verb can also have the meaning "to teach" (LSJ, s.v. "ἐξάρχω"). For the translation of ותען as "chanted," see Carol Meyers, "Miriam's Song of the Sea: A Women's Victory Performance," TheTorah.com (2020), https://thetorah.com/article/miriams-song-of-the-sea-a-womens-victory-performance.

[18] The LXX, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, and the Vulgate read "let us sing" (first-person plural). Hanna Tervanotko regards the MT as more likely original (*Denying Her Voice: The Figure of Miriam in Ancient Jewish Literature*, JAJSup 23 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016], 47–48).

[19] Wilda Gafney names the song as prophecy (*Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008], 80). Contra Rita J. Burns, who minimizes the significance of the prophetic title here (*Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only through Moses? A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam*, SBLDS 84 [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987], 41–48), Ursula Rapp writes, "Prophetin wird sie dann nicht genannt, weil für Frauen in Israel keine anderen Titel verfügbar gewesen wären und auch nicht, weil eine postulierte Quelle, wie die eines 'Elohisten,' bedeutende

Yet others are agnostic or disagree. Athalya Brenner states that, despite the use of her title, "the exact nature of her prophetic abilities is not explained."[20] Rita Burns argues that Exod 15:20–21 does not "attribute true prophetic activity to Miriam" and thus her prophetic title is anachronistic.[21] For Esther Hamori, Miriam's poem's genre, victory song, holds no intrinsic association with prophecy; her creativity is artistic but not portrayed as divinely inspired. Most determinative is the content. Both her poem and the Song of the Sea that precedes it report divine action but "[do] not convey divine speech."[22]

These objections rely on prior judgments about the form and content of prophetic activity. Hamori, for example, understands prophecy as a form of divination, which she defines as "any type of action culturally understood to allow acquisition of knowledge otherwise restricted to the divine realm." Forms of divination, including prophecy, extispicy, necromancy, and dream interpretation, "differ in their details, but not in their fundamental assumptions and goals."[23] Yet the range of activities in which the prophets of Israel and Judah are said to engage in their roles as prophet (or seer, etc.) is broader than acquisition and communication of

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Figuren mit diesem Titel ausgestattet hätte, sondern weil Mirjam hier als Prophetin Geschichte auf Gott hin deutet, also prophetisch handelt" ["Therefore, she is called 'prophet' not because no other titles were available for women in Israel, nor because a hypothetical source such as an 'Elohist' would have assigned this title to important figures, but because Miriam here, as prophet, points history toward God, that is, she acts prophetically"] (*Mirjam: Eine feministisch-rhetorische Lektüre der Mirjamtexte in der hebräischen Bibel*, BZAW 317 [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002], 232). Klara Butting similarly counters the assertions of Brenner and Burns by arguing for the prophetic character of the performance (*Prophetinnen gefragt: Die Bedeutung der Prophetinnen im Kanon aus Tora und Prophetie*, Erev-Rav-Hefte: Biblisch-feministische Texte 3 [Knesebeck, Erev-Rav, 2001], 43–44). Phyllis Trible likewise states, "As 'the prophet,' she has already spoken for God at the sea" ("Bringing Miriam Out of the Shadows," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus and Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 6 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995], 166–86, here 175). In light of Miriam's performance, Trible considers Jer 31:4 ("Again you will adorn yourself with timbrels, and will go forth in the dance of the merrymakers" [Trible's translation]) to be an "eschatological vision of Hebrew prophecy" (182). Joseph Blenkinsopp compares Miriam's performance in Exod 15:20–21 to that of "the female seer or kāhina of the pre-Islamic Arabs" (*A History of Prophecy in Israel*, rev. and enlarged ed. [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996], 51). Martin Noth supports her classification here as an "ecstatic" because of the close association of "ecstasy and (cultic) song" (*Exodus: A Commentary*, trans. John S. Boden, OTL [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962], 123).

[20] Athalya Brenner-Idan, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative*, 2nd ed., T&T Clark Cornerstones (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 53. She further states, "no hint as to the nature of Miriam's prophetic activity has been preserved in biblical sources" (62).

[21] Rita Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken?*, 41; cf. 5 n. 13. For Burns "true" prophetic activities might include delivering an oracle, predicting the outcome of a battle, or advising on military strategy (47).

[22] Esther J. Hamori, *Women's Divination in Biblical Literature: Prophecy, Necromancy, and Other Arts of Knowledge*, AYBRL (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 73.

[23] Hamori, *Women's Divination*, 4.

knowledge. That is, biblical evidence suggests that, for some biblical writers, prophecy is not *only* or *simply* a subset of divination as defined by Hamori. Prophetic activity includes modes of divination and very often conveys divine speech but may also mediate more than knowledge.[24] Some knowledge, meanwhile, is expressed not through propositions or commands but through art; some knowledge is stored in muscles and cells; some knowledge is realized and revealed in the movements of the body.

While the verb *prophesy* is not used in Exod 15:20–21, nor is an oracle mentioned, scholars recognize as forms of prophetic activity both actions ranging from symbolic actions to intercession and healing and speech forms reflecting diverse literary genres. The absence of explicit markers such as an authentication formula or the verb "to prophesy" does not exclude Isaiah's song of the vineyard (Isa 5:1–6), for example, as a prophetic speech act. While this example does not make of every love song a prophecy, it highlights an expectation that Israel's prophets could make creative use of existing cultural and artistic forms in their role as prophet. It could be argued that contextual clues make clear that the lyrics of Isa 5:1–6 express divine subjectivity and thus divine speech, while, as Hamori argues, Miriam's song does not. I argue later in this essay that, as a form of intra-action, the dance of Miriam and the women does give expression to divine subjectivity, which takes shape in the relational becoming expressed and achieved in their drumming, dancing, and singing.

An argument Hamori makes elsewhere supports the inference that Miriam's performance in Exod 15:20–21 is prophetic activity. There is another biblical passage where a woman is introduced as a prophet but not directly credited with uttering a verbal prophecy: "And I went to the prophet, and she conceived and gave birth to a son" (Isa 8:3). Hamori argues that when the unnamed woman in Isa 8:3 gives birth, that birthing is prophetic activity (in this case, a prophetic symbolic action) in part because in this verse she is "introduced as a prophet."[25] A similar principle can be applied to the interpretation of Exod 15:20–21: the fact that Miriam's prophetic title is included at Exod 15:20 and nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible strongly supports an interpretation that she is performing a prophetic role in the very actions here attributed to her.

Apart from "prophet," Miriam also has another title here: "sister of Aaron" (Exod 15:20). This relational title reflects a concern in the text to frame her

[24] See Portier-Young, *Prophetic Body*, 30–31, 36–44.

[25] Hamori, *Women's Divination*, 165. Hamori adduces two other factors in support of her judgment here, namely, that interpreters recognize Isaiah's *naming* the child as prophetic symbolic action, and that other texts portray birthing as prophetic symbolic action (Hos 1:3, 6, 8). With regard to the title's importance in this context, she writes, "It is not the fact of bearing a sign-child alone that is an indicator of prophetic function, but the presentation of the actor and the act. In other words, the fact that the woman who participates in the symbolic action in Isaiah 8:3 is introduced as a prophet makes it prophetic activity."

prophetic activity in relation to structures of kinship, affiliating her with a male family member whose authority as mediator was established earlier in the book of Exodus (e.g., Exod 4:30; 6:13; 7:1–2, 8–9). Whether this linking is authorizing or subordinating is unclear, but by locating her within a structure of familial social organization it weaves a connection between her (and the Israelite women's) performance and members of the community (i.e., men) who do not participate directly in the drumming and dancing.[26] These other members of the community have a stake in the performance.[27]

Miriam's affiliation with Aaron raises a question several interpreters have asked: In what ways has androcentrism or gender bias shaped the text and its interpretation? Androcentrism names the overwhelmingly male perspective of biblical writers and editors and the kind of male-centered text this perspective and positionality have produced. It is no longer controversial to notice that in biblical texts male protagonists and voices outnumber and outweigh their female counterparts in a way that skews the picture of life and society in ancient Israel and Judah. When primary sources predominantly portray men holding positions of leadership and power and women in subordinate or supporting roles, then that is the configuration of power readers and interpreters are most likely to imagine.

A reader of Exod 15 easily notices that the song Miriam sings, "Sing to YHWH, for he is gloriously exalted / Horse and rider he cast in the sea," echoes the first line (Exod 15:1) of a much longer song, often called the Song of the Sea (15:1–18). The narrator of Exodus attributes the longer song to Moses and the people (15:1). In Exodus, Miriam's drumming, dancing, and singing of that one shared lyric occurs just after the Song of the Sea, underscoring their close relationship. From a narrative perspective, one might interpret this repetition to mean that Miriam is riffing, maybe summarizing, repeating the chorus, dancing and drumming the theme so no one will forget it.

Nearly seventy years ago, an influential article by Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman approached the lyrical overlap through the lens of composition history.[28] They argued that Exod 15 preserves remnants of a dual tradition, a Moses tradition that affirmed the authority and leadership of Moses and a Miriam tradition that remembered and asserted the authority and leadership of Miriam. While the Moses tradition credited Moses (and the people) with the longer form of the song, the Miriam tradition held a different memory. The very survival of the Miriam tradition in the face of overwhelming bias in favor of Moses's leadership

[26] Rapp argues that the affiliation with Aaron places Miriam within a sociopolitical and theological map (*Mirjam*, 215).

[27] Two masculine plural forms (לָהֶם and שִׁירוּ) in 15:21 are used to identify addressees whom Miriam summons to join her song. For Tervanotko, these details suggest participation of Israelite men in the song (*Denying Her Voice*, 47).

[28] Frank M. Cross Jr. and David Noel Freedman, "The Song of Miriam," *JNES* 14 (1955): 237–50.

(evidenced both here and elsewhere in the Pentateuch) suggested to Cross and Freedman that, before the Song of the Sea was ever associated with Moses, it was first attributed, in its entirety, to Miriam. In their view, "It is easy to understand the ascription of the hymn to the great leader. It would be more difficult to explain the association of Miriam with the song as a secondary development."[29] That is, from a literary standpoint, Moses is the hero of the Pentateuch and its prophet par excellence. The survival of *any* reference to Miriam's leadership and creative agency suggests that her role was too important to erase, even in the face of incredible bias.

Susan Ackerman pursued a similar line of inquiry as she sought to understand "how *any* women could have come to be considered prophets given the overwhelmingly male character of the Bible's prophetic tradition."[30] She made a case for the exceptional character of Miriam's prophetic leadership, arguing that

> Miriam is assigned the prophetic role in Exod 15:20 that is otherwise accorded only to men in the exodus account because the narrative locates her prophetic identity as belonging to a liminal period of anti-structure. In narrative depictions of liminality, the gender conventions that more usually restrict women from holding positions of religious leadership can be suspended. Therefore Miriam can be described as occupying a position as a prophetic functionary that, outside of liminal time and space, women are generally denied.[31]

In their analyses of Exod 15, Cross, Freedman, and Ackerman each argue that androcentric biases in Exodus and other parts of the Hebrew Bible have elevated male mediation and leadership while obscuring or limiting roles afforded to women. It is worth considering whether such a bias has shaped not only the *who* but also the *what*. That is, beyond the question of who functions as poet, prophet, or leader, have androcentric textual or interpretive biases also contributed to a devaluing of cultural forms associated with women and/or limited the scope of activity that is judged to be prophetic?

Meyers argues that in biblical texts androcentrism has diminished the prominence of women's cultural creativity and artistic leadership, even as gender bias has led scholars to ignore or devalue women's cultural creativity and expression, including in the areas of music and dance.[32] Ancient Israelite music was, according to Meyers, "more rhythmic than tonal or melodic," yet only one percussion instrument is named in the Hebrew Bible, the hand-drum, and when the gender of the

[29] Cross and Freedman, "Song of Miriam," 237.

[30] Susan Ackerman, "Why Is Miriam Also among the Prophets? (And Is Zipporah among the Priests?)," *JBL* 121 (2002): 47–80, here 51, https://doi.org/10.2307/3268330.

[31] Ackerman, "Why Is Miriam?," 71.

[32] Carol Meyers, "Mother to Muse: An Archaeomusicological Study of Women's Performance in Ancient Israel," in *Recycling Biblical Figures: Papers Read at a NOSTER Colloquium in Amsterdam, 12–13 May 1997*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Jan Willem van Henten, STAR 1 (Leiden: Deo, 1999), 50–77, here 52, 73–74.

drummer is specified, it is female.[33] Archaeology paints a similar picture. Iron Age terracotta figurines from Israel and Judah similarly portray only women as drummers.[34] From this combined textual and material evidence emerges a portrait of women's drumming, dance, and song as a culturally significant mode of creative expression linked to occasions of mourning as well as victory.[35] Each aspect of their performance—ranging from lyric and melody to instrumentation and movement—relied on skill honed through training and practice.[36] Comparison to performances in other cultures suggests a combination of stock elements drawn from a repertoire, composition and choreography tailored to the occasion, and improvisation within a set of conventional and situational constraints.[37] Meyers writes, "Patriarchal interpretive traditions have been reluctant to credit women with composing and performing YHWH-hymns with such significant theological content. Yet archaeomusicological analysis makes it difficult to deny the role of women in recognizing and celebrating the powerful salvific acts of their God."[38] Meyers does not here develop the implications of her analysis of women's musical performance for Miriam's *prophetic* role.[39] Yet it is possible that judgments that the performance of drumming, dance, and song in Exod 15:20–21 is, by virtue of form or genre, not a mode of prophecy may participate in and result from the same devaluing of women's creative performance that Meyers aims to counteract.[40]

[33] Carol Meyers, *Exodus*, NCBiC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 117; Meyers, "Mother to Muse," 56. See also Sarit Paz, *Drums, Women, and Goddesses: Drumming and Gender in Iron Age II Israel*, OBO 232 (Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 104.

[34] Meyers, "Mother to Muse," 67–70.

[35] Meyers, "Mother to Muse," 64, 70–73.

[36] Meyers, "Mother to Muse," 75.

[37] Meyers, "Mother to Muse," 72. On improvisation, see Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Vida L. Midgelow, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[38] Meyers, "Mother to Muse," 72.

[39] Meyers contends, rather, that "in the Bible, music and other civilized arts or skills are attributed entirely to human creativity; they are not direct gifts from God" ("Mother to Muse," 51). Yet poetry is also "civilized art or skill," as is other rhetorical and literary craft, and numerous prophetic compositions were viewed as inspired speech. In Exodus, moreover, the skill of the artisans who build and furnish the tabernacle is attributed to the spirit of God (Exod 31:3–6). Such skill is also identified as a gift from God in Exod 28:3; 35:31, 35; 36:1–2.

[40] I do not assert or infer any intrinsic association between women and drumming, dancing, or chanting, but instead build here on Meyers's argument that this was a cultural form associated with women in the context of ancient Israel. An example of men prophesying through dance can be found in the Fijian *meke*. Sachiko Miller describes an instance of the traditional rite for the creation of a *meke*, or "traditional dance that passes on knowledge and genealogies" ("Treasuring the Meke in a Modern Fiji," in *Moving Oceans: Celebrating Dance in the South Pacific*, ed. Ralph Buck and Nicholas Rowe, Celebrating Dance in Asia and the Pacific [New Delhi: Routledge India,

To the biases foregrounded by Cross, Freedman, Ackerman, and Meyers, I add the one named in the introduction to this article, namely, a logocentric bias that locates prophetic activity in speech or words but not in the body. I follow Wilda Gafney, Joseph Blenkinsopp, and others in affirming that Miriam's performance in Exod 15:20–21 is indeed prophetic, an inference supported by the marked inclusion of her title "prophet" in the description of her performance.[41] Moving beyond these biases allows us to ask not just whether Miriam's drumming, dancing, and singing are prophetic, but what that could mean. What and how do this drumming, singing, and leading dance mediate between God and humans? In the remainder of this article I draw on research in dance studies and Karen Barad's new materialist theory of agential realism to argue that Miriam's and the women's performance of drumming, song, and dance is a creative, participatory, and relational mode of mediation that gives shape and expression to the subjectivity and agency of God and people alike.

## III. Drumming, Dancing, and Singing as Prophetic Action

The action that initiates the performance of Miriam and the women is her taking the drum in her hand. Evidence from the books of Samuel and Kings indicates that instrumental music could be a trigger for ecstatic prophecy (1 Sam 10:5, 2 Kgs 3:11–19).[42] Among the keys to how rhythmic drumming can induce altered states of consciousness are the presence of rhythms within the body, the interdependence of biorhythms and states of consciousness, and the body's capacity to respond to external rhythm in diverse ways, including but not limited to movement.[43] It cannot be stated with certainty that Miriam's drumming is intended here

2014], 119–31, here 124; quotation from 119). After "casting a spell over a bowl of Kava" the *Daunivucu* or dance-master (a man) "would drink one bowl and another young man would drink a bowl too. Then the young man would go into a trance, the *Vu* or ancestral gods would be channelled through this young man and he would start to dance and sing the new meke into being. The Daunivucu would watch carefully and learn what was being given to him by the ancestral spirits. Meke would also tell the future, about the happenings or stories and wisdom given to the people by the gods" (124). I thank Jerusha Neal for drawing my attention to this example.

[41] See n. 19 above.

[42] Jonathan Stökl, "Ready or Not, Here I Come: Triggering Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible," in *Prophecy and Its Cultic Dimensions*, ed. Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, JAJSup 31 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), 115–33; Portier-Young, *Prophetic Body*, 160–62. For comparative evidence, see also Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 176–79.

[43] On the relation between rhythm and cognition, see Vijay Iyer, "Improvisation, Action Understanding, and Music Cognition with and without Bodies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies,* ed. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1:74–91.

to produce an altered state of the sort we might characterize as prophetic ecstasy. Such a state is not a prerequisite for prophetic performance. It is nonetheless the case that states of consciousness occupy a continuum, and, even absent a state of trance or ecstasy, drumming has the capacity to alter internal rhythms such as heart rate and produce feelings of transcendence, focused awareness, and, in group settings, an experience of connection.[44]

Indeed, a distinctive feature of this prophetic performance is that it is not solitary. As soon as Miriam took the drum in her hand, the women "went out, all the women, after her" (15:20). In this laconic narrative, every word counts, and verb choice is thus surely intentional. The women's going out (ותצאן) is expressed by the same verb used elsewhere for God's causing the people to "go out" of Egypt (e.g., Exod 6:7; 7:4, 5; 12:17, 41, 51; 13:3, 4, 9, 14, 16), the very act of exodus itself. The women imitate in the responsive and choreographed movement of their bodies the people's exodus. Their bodily performance thus dramatizes the same story of salvation and victory expressed in the lyrics of the song.[45] The cohort's inclusion of all women in Israel, moreover, extends prophetic action beyond the bounds of Miriam's body to incorporate the responsive actions and interactions of those who follow her. They, too, play hand-drums, synchronizing their rhythms to those of the prophet and amplifying the percussive vibrations of her drum and feet. A recent study led by social neuroscientist Ilanit Gordon of Bar Ilan University found that group drumming produced physiological and behavioral synchrony. This synchrony in turn amplified subjective experience of group cohesion and efficacy.[46] That is, the very act of drumming together has social entailments that extend beyond the performance itself.

Complementing synchronicity in the women's performance is *multiplicity*. "They went out, all the women, after her, with hand-drums and with dances [חלת]" (15:20b). The use of the plural "dances" suggests a form of social dance that combines synchronized performance drawn from a shared repertoire and/or produced by following one or more leaders in the dance with individual and/or smaller group performances that may be practiced, improvised, or a combination of both.[47] Such

[44] On altered states, see Albert P. Garcia-Romeu and Charles T. Tart, "Altered States of Consciousness and Transpersonal Psychology," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology*, ed. Harris L. Friedman and Glenn Hartelius (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 121–40. On effects of drumming, see Dieter Vaitl et al., "Psychobiology of Altered States of Consciousness," *Psychological Bulletin* 131 (2005): 98–127, here 107, https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.131.1.98.

[45] This is also the conclusion of Burns, who argues that the dance was a ritual reenactment that would be repeated by future generations (*Has the Lord Indeed Spoken?*, 38–48).

[46] Ilanit Gordon et al., "Physiological and Behavioral Synchrony Predict Group Cohesion and Performance," *Scientific Reports* 10 (2020): art. 8484, pp. 1–12, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-65670-1.

[47] Theodore Burgh argues that (musical) improvisation and interactive group performance may have been a feature of Israelite prophecy. See Burgh, "Potential Musical Instructions in

a combination of synchronized dance and individual and small-group inventions highlights the relationality of the performance and the agency it constructs. The combination of repertoire—something shared, learned, repeated, familiar to the group as a whole—with new, improvised choreography relies on and shapes the dynamic, dialectic relationship between the agency of individuals and groups. A comparison may be found in the Senegalese *sabar*, a cultural form that, like the performance in Exod 15:20–21, combines social event, drumming, and dance and in which, apart from the drummers, all participants are women. A key feature of the *sabar* is its combination of repertoire and improvisation. Francesca Castaldi writes:

> The *sabar* complex engages individuals and groups in the choreographic process through the interplay of improvisation and the canonizing of successful inventions into the group repertory. Individual and group choreographic agency are thus not mutually exclusive processes that belong to different dance genres (for example, theatrical art and ritual dance) but rather operate dialectically, embedded in complex social negotiations. In other words, choreographic authorship is relational.[48]

In the dialectic interplay between individual and collective agency and creativity, the women's dances in Exod 15:20–21 similarly rely on, refigure, and shape relationship. But they do not only shape relationships among the women who are dancing. The shaping and even transformative effects of their dancing are more far-reaching, doing important mediatory work for the community of freed slaves as they negotiate and establish the community's shared identity and relationship to their past, their future, one another, and God.

Thomas F. DeFrantz sees a similar dynamic at work in African American social dance, which, he argues, provides a way for the community to discover and deepen shared identity, commitments, and connections. He writes, "Social dance functions as a barometer of connectivity, or a way for people to recognize a social self. The dance produces relationship; and in it, we struggle to achieve."[49] What DeFrantz names is not the achievement or effort of an individual alone but that of the collective whose shared venture is an act of hope and risk that can "alter our

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Ancient Israel," in *The Study of Musical Performance in Antiquity: Archaeology and Written Sources*, ed. Agnès Garcia-Ventura, Claudia Tavolieri, and Lorenzo Verderame (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2018), 121–35, here 131–32.

[48] Francesca Castaldi, *Choreographies of African Identities: Négritude, Dance, and the National Ballet of Senegal* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 141. A similar relational argument undergirds Ingrid Monson's ethnomusicological analysis of jazz rhythm sections' improvisational interactions. See Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*, Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[49] Thomas F. DeFrantz, "Improvising Social Exchange: African American Social Dance" in Lewis and Piekut, *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, 1:330–38, here 333.

future capacities outside of the dance."[50] That is, the relationality forged and explored in dance extends beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of the dance itself.

Social dance is, in DeFrantz's words, "at once archival and futuristic," as the dancer "reaches back in order to cast forward."[51] Dance carries and shapes cultural memory and identity, telling stories of struggles, preserving values and history, linking generations across time and space, and creating opportunity for community, cohesion, and solidarity.[52] Dance's capacity to reach back enacts an "embodied reclaiming, or remembering."[53] This reaching back and casting forward relies in part on the intercorporeal and intertextual referential power of body-talk, wherein movements can echo the interpretation or style of another dancer, evoke an era or genre, refer to a dance others remember but no longer perform, and use metaphor and mimesis to dramatize stories, emotion, and relationship. For DeFrantz, these echoes and references bring the old forward into the new in a bold assertion of possibility for the future. "These insertions of embodied referents arrive in nonlinear, evocative assembly; they confirm the expansive possibility of statement enabled by the dance."[54] In the concomitant act of casting forward, dance has the power to uphold, transmit, repair, interrupt, or reshape social values and structures. It also shapes commitment and action. Black social dance, for example, enacts "movements toward social justice and against disavowals" of Black worth.[55] Social *dance* affirms the possibility of and helps bring about social *change*: "We dance the knowledge that there will be revolutions led by people in motion; that the police state of America will not deprive us of our greatest resources of collective action through aesthetic gesture."[56] The example of African American social dance illuminates how the connections, awareness, emotion, energy, memory, future, and commitments forged in social dance can mobilize collective action.[57] In the context

[50] DeFrantz, "Improvising Social Exchange," 334.

[51] DeFrantz, "Improvising Social Exchange," 334.

[52] Yda J. Smith, "Traditional Dance as a Vehicle for Identity Construction and Social Engagement after Forced Migration," *Societies* 8.3 (2018): art. 67, pp. 1–10, https://doi.org/10.3390/soc8030067; Cia Sautter, *The Miriam Tradition: Teaching Embodied Torah* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Evadne Kelly, *Dancing Spirit, Love, and War: Performing the Translocal Realities of Contemporary Fiji*, Studies in Dance History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019).

[53] DeFrantz, "Improvising Social Exchange," 334.

[54] DeFrantz, "Improvising Social Exchange," 334.

[55] Thomas F. DeFrantz, "This Is America," *ASAP Journal*, Black One Shot 7.3 (27 August 2018), https://asapjournal.com/b-o-s-7-3-this-is-america-thomas-f-defrantz/.

[56] DeFrantz, "This is America."

[57] Paz makes a similar argument about Israelite women's performances of music and dancing in the genre of victory song. More than momentary celebration of past action, the performance has the capacity to enact social change, drawing "rhetorical power" from the "logogenic" force of its words and "pathogenic" force of drums and dance (*Drums, Women, and Goddesses*, 90–91, 94).

of liberation from slavery and exodus from the place of bondage, rhythm and the movement of women's bodies take on heightened meaning. The bodies of Israel's women hold memory of enslavement, aborted futures, and a resistant commitment to life (Exod 1:15–22). The song's celebration of divine triumph against the armies of Pharaoh does not erase the memory of past trauma but continues to claim embodied agency in response to domination and in the face of loss and displacement.

A final example from dance studies further illumines the capacity of dance to move through trauma, enabling participants to reclaim agency and move individually and collectively toward healing. I argue that the dances of Miriam and the women do just this. Chuyun Oh analyzes the global flash mob One Billion Rising (OBR).[58] A flash mob is "a large group of people organized by means of [electronic media] who assemble in public to perform a prearranged action together and then quickly disperse" and may aim to disrupt, entertain, and/or "to have a political or social impact."[59] Flash mobs often, but not always, include music and dance. OBR was born of a social movement "to end sexual violence against women," aiming to be simultaneously an act of protest, community building, and, for survivors of sexual violence, an occasion for healing.[60] OBR organizers describe dance as "defiance … joyous and raging. It is contagious and free and beyond corporate or state control."[61]

Dance's embodied character adds a further dimension to the performance of freedom. Keira Cristobal documents ways that dance can help create a "sense of safety," acceptance of the past, and empowerment for people who have experienced trauma.[62] Survivors of trauma may cope through various (unconscious or conscious) techniques of dissociation, which builds a wall between the conscious mind and awareness of traumatic experience and memory. Because the body stores traumatic memory, the body is an important site of integration, recovery, and healing.[63] While Cristobal focuses on dance's role in therapeutic encounters, Oh applies this framework to OBR. Participants in OBR described its effect of transforming trauma

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Meyers similarly writes that "the expressive act … has the ability to transform social relations" ("Mother to Muse," 76).

[58] Chuyun Oh, "The One Billion Rising Flash Mob: From Unspeakable Trauma to Danceable Pleasure," *Dance Chronicle* 42 (2019): 296–321.

[59] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "flash mob (noun$^2$)," July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4273792683.

[60] Oh, "One Billion Rising," 298–99. The OBR movement is not without critics, however, including those who say the pop-infused and (for some) visually appealing dance form makes light of the seriousness of violence against women and distracts from the day-to-day efforts of other organizations (301).

[61] Cited in Oh, "One Billion Rising," 305–6.

[62] Keira A. Cristobal, "Power of Touch: Working with Survivors of Sexual Abuse within Dance/Movement Therapy," *American Journal of Dance Therapy* 40 (2018): 68–86.

[63] Cristobal, "Power of Touch," 70–71.

into beauty and "ignit[ing] … hope" through individual and collective movement.[64] A further key to how dance could accomplish this for survivors of sexual violence lies in the contrast between the experience of another person's control over one's body and the experience of freely chosen, expressive movement. Oh writes:

> At OBR, performers possessed their bodies as their own while dancing; expressing their selfhood through basic movements renewed and restored them. Their bodies were no longer subject to another's judgment, physical enforcement, or gaze: they found life, hope, joy, and celebration in coming together.[65]

According to the narrative in Exodus, the women who celebrate YHWH's victory at the Reed Sea are survivors of individual and collective trauma. Their bodies carry the memory of enslavement, state violence and terror, and maternal bereavement. Though they had collaborated to deliver children safely into life, they and their children were not safe and their bodies had not been free (Exod 1:15–21). Their dancing enacted freedom in community, awakened bodily memory and knowing, and created opportunity for integration, connection, and healing.

Dance's capacity to create relationship owes in part to the connectivity and relationality of the body itself.[66] Cultural theorist Elizabeth Grosz describes the body as "a mode of linkage … a set of operational linkages and connections with other things, other bodies."[67] The body's connectivity is one key to the mediatory power of Miriam's dance.

## IV. Drumming, Dancing, and Singing as Intra-Action: A New Materialist Interpretation

Equally critical is the interplay of the material elements of drumming, dancing, and singing with the discursive character of the song. What the body does and what the words do cannot be separated out: they are entangled and constitutive of one another. Barad's new materialist theory of agential realism provides a framework for analyzing this interplay and clarifying how the drumming, dance(s), and song of Miriam and the women of Israel can be a mode of mediation.[68] The new materialist turn in cultural theory insists on the interrelationship and mutual

[64] Oh, "One Billion Rising," 307–8.

[65] Oh, "One Billion Rising," 309.

[66] Marianne Clark, "Reimagining the Dancing Body in and through Barad," in *Sport, Physical Culture, and the Moving Body: Materialisms, Technologies, Ecologies*, ed. Joshua I. Newman, Holly Thorpe, and David L. Andrews, Critical Issues in Sport and Society (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 209–28.

[67] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Theories of Representation and Difference (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 120.

[68] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

articulation of the material and discursive.[69] Merging quantum physics with phenomenology and cultural theory, Barad offers what these approaches refer to as an onto-epistemological model of intra-action that simultaneously and iteratively produces being, knowledge, subjectivity, and agency. For Barad, subjects or objects do not precede intra-action but are constituted through it. The same is true of knowledge, agency, and being itself. To put it another way, with regard to discourse, when we talk about something, we are not just representing reality. We are shaping it. With regard to matter, when we interact with our environment, or with other persons, we do not do so as discrete preexisting subjects interacting with discrete preexisting objects. Barad's term intra-action names something internal and in between, because in this model subject and object are entangled with each other. In this way, matter, including the body, is "produced and productive, generated and generative."[70] Subject and object are mutually shaping each other, mutually constituting each other's being and agency and knowing.

Barad opposes their theory to what they describe as representionalist understandings of the production of meaning and knowledge in which "representations serve a mediating function between knower and known."[71] In that representative model, a prophet could find words or gestures to represent a preexisting reality or divine intention. The prophetic mediator and mediating speech or actions would not shape that reality, only represent it, make it accessible. This is fundamental to a view of prophet as messenger or mouthpiece.

In place of the representionalist view, Barad proposes "a *performative* understanding of discursive practices" in which all modes of knowing and representing—whether through talk, text, or action and interaction—are also modes of engagement that simultaneously *produce* both knower and known.[72] Barad writes:

> Phenomena are constitutive of reality. Reality is composed not of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but of things-in-phenomena. The world is a dynamic process of intra-activity and materialization in the enactment of determinate causal structures with determinate boundaries, properties, meanings, and patterns of marks on bodies. This ongoing flow of agency through which part of the world makes itself differentially intelligible to another part of the world and through which causal structures are stabilized and destabilized does not take place in space and time but happens in the making of spacetime

[69] Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 152: "The relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment. Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other. Neither is articulated or articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated."

[70] Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 137.

[71] Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 133.

[72] Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 133.

> itself. It is through specific agential intra-actions that a differential sense of being is enacted in the ongoing ebb and flow of agency. That is, it is through specific intra-actions that phenomena come to matter—in both senses of the word.[73]

This coming-to-matter through intra-action is for Barad a dynamic process of worlding and becoming, making and being made.[74]

Perazzo Domm applies Barad's theory to dance, arguing that the intra-actions of dance differentiate and materialize the juncture of the possible and impossible for performers and audience alike, articulating ethical commitments in a way that both responds to and takes responsibility for the world that is and the world that might be.[75]

Barad's theory produces several insights regarding the mediatory function of Miriam's and the women's drumming, dancing, and singing. At one level, the discursive labeling of Miriam as prophet constructs her activity of drumming, dancing, and singing as prophetic, even as her activity shapes the meaning of the prophetic role. At another level, the verbal discourse of the song and the embodied praxis of drumming and dancing are mutually articulating and entailing, such that each makes meaning in the intra-actions with the others. This mutual articulation draws the deity into the dance. Drumming, dance(s), and song make known the God who triumphed at the sea even as they bring into being the people who celebrate God's victory. God and people emerge from and are constituted in the performance as objects, subjects, and agents. The very dynamism of drumming, dance(s), and song articulate the power of the deity not as a thing apart but as a thing in motion, a responsive, dynamic force at the juncture of unmaking (casting horse and rider into the sea) and making (constituting a people for life in covenant), impossibility (the people cannot compel the Pharaoh, defeat the army, or walk on water) and possibility (divine miracles compel Pharaoh to release the people, defeat the army, and part the waters to enable crossing on dry land). The drumming, dance(s), and song thus mediate knowledge of God in a way that expands and revises traditional epistemological frameworks.

The drumming, dance(s), and song of Miriam and the women she leads similarly have the potential to expand and revise traditional construals of prophecy. The dance is a prophetic act. The knowledge accessed, produced, and mediated through drumming, dance(s), and song is embodied and relational. The coordinated and responsive ordering of bodies in space and time corresponds and responds to the creative actions of God in the work of liberation while simultaneously enacting new patterns of relational becoming. In so doing it entrains the

[73] Barad, Meeting the Universe, 140.

[74] For Barad, "worlding" is a set of material, responsive, relational, and ethical processes in which subjects participate and through which the world (and subjects and objects in it) comes to be (*Meeting the Universe*, 160, 181, 392).

[75] Domm, "Im/possible Choreographies," 70–71.

bodies of the Israelites for a life in covenant community.[76] The dance is journey and a living map of the destination, what it means to be a people.[77]

## V. Conclusion

I have argued that Miriam's narrated activity of leading women in drumming, dancing, and singing in Exod 15:20–21 is a form of embodied prophecy. Recent studies of embodiment in biblical prophecy have paved the way for greater recognition of prophecy's embodied character, helping to expand prophecy's acknowledged scope beyond text and speech to include a wider range of creative forms. While some scholars have previously acknowledged that the labeling of Miriam as a prophet in Exod 15:20 (and nowhere else in the Bible) functions to characterize her actions in Exod 15:20–21 as prophetic, others have denied this possibility. Just as androcentric bias has shaped representations of women's mediation in biblical texts, it has also contributed to a corresponding devaluing of women's cultural forms in modern scholarship. The playing of hand-drums and performing of victory songs and dances were cultural activities particular to women in ancient Israel. Contravening androcentric and logocentric biases makes space for a fresh assessment of ways these activities could be understood as a mode of prophetic mediation between people and God.

[76] On entrainment through "pulse-based music and dance," see Ann David, "Ways of Moving and Thinking: The Emplaced Body as a Tool for Ethnographic Research," in *Performance and Ethnography: Dance, Drama, Music*, ed. Peter Harrop and Dunja Njaradi (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 45–66, here 52–53; William H. McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Jessica Phillips-Silver et al., "The Ecology of Entrainment: Foundations of Coordinated Rhythmic Movement," *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 28.1 (2010): 3–14. Yosef Garfinkel writes that "dance is an activity through which society instils collective discipline in its members.… The participants in the dance accept the rules of the community, which is achieved not through fear, but through bodily activity" ("Dancing with Masks in the Proto-Historic Near East," in *Ritual, Play, and Belief, in Evolution and Early Human Societies*, ed. Colin Renfrew, Iain Morley, and Michael Boyd [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018], 143–69, here 145). Barad's theory would adjust this understanding, such that the rules do not precede the dance but exercise agency with and within it and simultaneously come to being in and through it.

[77] Ananya Chatterjea writes of dance's ability to "travel across vast geopolitical and cultural, spaces" and of the power of embodied retellings to talk back to received versions, reimagine histories, disrupt relations of power, assert subjectivity, and insert "bodies marked as 'other' to indicate the long, convoluted, and entangled histories of empire" ("Of Corporeal Rewritings, Translations, and the Politics of Difference in Dancing," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics*, ed. Rebekah J. Kowal, Gerald Siegmund, and Randy Martin [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017], 283–302, here 284–87). On the capacity of dance to express and shape political ideology, subjectivity, and agency, see Mark Franko, "Dance and the Political: States of Exception," *Dance Research Journal* 38 (2006): 3–18.

Insights from neuroscience and critical dance studies illuminate the mediatory character of Miriam's actions. In taking up the hand-drum Miriam initiates an activity that establishes synchrony and cohesion among the women of Israel. The plural dances, meanwhile, evince a dialectic interplay between collective and individual agency and creativity. Comparison with African American social dance illuminates the power of the dance Miriam leads to negotiate shared identity in relation to past and future and in relation to one another and God; to shape communal memory, values, commitments, structures, and actions; and to help bring about social change. The community of dancers were survivors of enslavement, state violence, and maternal bereavement. Comparison to the global flash mob One Billion Rising further illuminates the dance's power to mediate healing from trauma and recovery of agency. In the dance Miriam leads, prophetic performance reinforces cultural identity and values for a people on the move, assigns new meaning to traumatic memory, and forges patterns of responsive relationship for and movement toward a life in covenant freedom.

The narrative further links the bodily actions of drumming, dancing, and singing with the discourse of the song. In a representational model of prophetic discourse, words and actions of the prophet might represent and thereby disclose knowledge of preexisting divine realities. By contrast, the new materialist philosophy of Karen Barad offers a model in which the interrelationship of the material and discursive constitutes a form of engagement that produces both knower and known. Drumming, dancing, and singing mediate embodied knowledge of God and constitute God and people in relationship to one another. This intra-active model expands our understanding of the scope and function of biblical prophecy.