

The Dancing Body: Hoping Anyone?

Evadne Kelly

Department of Anthropology

McMaster University

Abstract

How can the body which is constantly changing inspire understanding about life and about knowledge? I am inspired by memories of seeing and participating in dance that felt inclusive. These memories remind me that dance can be a gift, to both the participant and the observer, of a sense of freedom, agency and collective. The left wing modern dance movement in New York, toyi-toyi from the South African anti-apartheid movement, and radical cheerleading at a protest of the Free Trade Area of the Americas are all examples of this. I want to draw from this understanding of dance in order to allow for feelings of abundance, empowerment and agency in my writing about the dancing body and hope. I am filled with a sense of the possibilities for history and memory in subverting hegemony through the dancing body. I can see how history or memory also embodies the on-going creation of the landscapes of the present. It is not just the constructed narratives that those with the power to do so produce about themselves and others' pasts. I want to bring some of life's patchiness into my own attempt to tell a story based on a different writing structure so that I might play with structure in a way that breaks with modern ideas of progress and knowledge production. The story itself has something to do with the body, memory and dance. Part of my goal is to adopt a writing style that mimics this story.

Introduction

“There is a danger of fixing things whose unknowability is troubling, and of finding convenient and reassuring ways of closing awkward cracks in ideologies.” (Burt 2000:129) My approach to writing this essay has emerged due to the influence of writers (Walter Benjamin 1968, Michael Taussig 1991, Kathleen Stewart 2005, Donna Haraway 1991, Mikhail Bakhtin 1984) who all seem interested and curious about ways of looking at the world that are not fixed and knowable but, rather, full of mystery, spirit, imagination and experimentation.

These writers have inspired me to ask: how can the dancing body which is constantly changing inspire hope and understanding about life and about knowledge? This paper begins with a word just as a dance begins with a movement. However, just as a movement is preceded by other movements that may or may not be part of the same performance, these words are not the beginning of my thoughts; they occur in the midst of a life process and are more like the middle of my thoughts.

The body is at once felt and understood while at the same time a complete mystery. Just as Kathleen Stewart (2005) seems to mimic life with her writing I, too, am drawn to ways in which my understanding of life and the dancing body (which I feel is unknowable) can influence both my writing and my thinking. I am inspired by memories of seeing and participating in dance that felt inclusive. These memories remind me that dance can be a gift, to both the participant and the observer, of a sense of freedom, agency and collective. The left wing modern dance movement in New York, memories of watching *toyi-toyi* in a film about the South African anti-apartheid movement, and my own experience of being a radical cheerleader in a protest against the Free Trade Area of the Americas are all examples of this. There are also many examples of dance or aspects of dance that are exclusionary, individualistic, competitive and factionary which take something away from a sense of wholeness and connectedness. I want to draw from this understanding of dance in order to allow for feelings of abundance, richness,

empowerment and agency in my writing about the dancing body and hope.

How does the standard logical progression of an essay that leads the reader logically and seamlessly from point to point to final idea position the reader and the author? It guides the reader's mind in a specific direction and teaches the reader with final conclusions while simultaneously endowing the writer with a charge of power, control, authority and, possibly, heroism. As a budding academic I feel a degree of pressure to follow this logical progressive pattern to perform my potential intellectual might in the hopes of becoming an intellectual hero for a time. However, I am not interested in taking readers or myself on this journey, wearing both down to my final inevitable conclusion. I wish to attempt to veer off this path and carve a path that acknowledges a dialogic interchange between the reader and the writer, a path that inspires and fills both reader and writer. I also realize the difficulty of this task: I am still stringing together words that create meaning, especially when the final word on the string is read. Back to square one? Haraway (1991) has opened my mind to the possibility that people can move forward from these kinds of constructions.

Hopping along...

Why does writing have to develop and progress in a unilinear direction towards finite knowledge? My mind doesn't work this way: things become illuminated to me in interconnective moments throughout my life experience. Inspiration doesn't wait for the end, nor does my body. There is also no logic to these moments: they just happen. Inspiration, ..spontaneous eruption.

Anna Tsing has given me insight into this dance of interconnective hopping. In Tsing's book *Friction: an Ethnography of Global Connection*, she discusses her methods for studying global connections in which she has realized that people can communicate with the same words and work together even though they may misunderstand each other. Tsing writes about

how she seeks out “...odd connections rather than seamless generalizations...” and how her work feels patchy and random (Tsing 2005:x-xi). She draws together her patchwork experiences and funnels them through herself to create ethnographies that manage to incorporate both local and global issues. I feel that Tsing is touching upon a patchiness about life that perhaps has been often ignored or smoothed out. I want to bring some of this patchiness into my own attempt to tell a story based on a different writing structure so that I might play with structure in a way that breaks with modern ideas of progress and knowledge production. The story itself has something to do with the body, memory and dance. Part of my goal is to adopt a writing style that mimics this story.

A parallel has been hopping around in my mind between the concept of knowledge production and the self. How have these ideas developed within modern enlightenment discourse? What is their status in the 21st century? Enlightenment thinking, in search of objective truth, has positioned knowledge as fixed and knowable. The ‘self’ and the body are also homogenous and fixed in this way of thinking. In academia, it seems as though these ideas are still dominant and are part of an attempt to perpetuate a facade of their importance and value. However, it has become clear that there is a movement away from wanting to perpetuate the performance of this type of knowledge production. Anthropologists are deconstructing their own use of terminology and their own role in knowledge creation. *I, too, want to de-colonize my mind from its inculcation by hegemonic notions of intelligence and what it means to be a rational person. I need to let go of intellectual performance to reveal what I think I am: flesh, blood and spirit, charged by a whole series of imprints from my life experience.*

Ramsay Burt has suggested that dance research has, so far, tended to utilize positivist methodologies informed by liberal and modernist aesthetics (Burt 2000). This has led to the establishment of “a history of canonical artists” (Burt 2000:125). This history tells a victor’s story. It is curious that modern dance,

which tends to be largely subversive in nature, is written about in such a non-subversive manner.

Left Wing Modern Dance in New York

In order to locate and embrace the subversive aspects of dance that embody potential and hope, I will now turn to the left wing modern dance movement in New York. Between the two world wars new dance movements emerged which embraced Marxist perspectives to try to make sense of changes in society (Prickett 1990). One interesting aspect of this modern dance movement was its strong association with the Soviet Union. In many ways, one can see a desire on the part of the workers' dance movement in New York to emulate or mimic artistic experimentation in the Soviet Union. In 1924, Edith Segal performed a solo in memory of Lenin. She danced to the *Workers' Funeral March* (Prickett 1990). Next she danced a dance of hope and optimism for socialism. She wore a red tunic and danced to the *Internationale* (Prickett 1990). Segal began a children's dance group whose intention was to use dance to "...teach workers' children that they belong to the working class" (Prickett 1990:55). Segal expanded her solo in memory of Lenin to involve 50 dancers; it was performed in Madison Square Garden in 1927 at the Lenin Memorial Meeting (Prickett 1990). These performances of alliance with the workers' struggle drew dance into union halls and political rallies.

Isadora Duncan, who was born in the U.S., is often cited as one of the first pioneers of modern dance around the world. She was both a supporter and an inspiration to the left wing modern dance movement in the 1920's (Prickett 1990). However, most sources of modern dance history don't mention this relationship. This is of particular interest when considering Walter Benjamin's thoughts on history (which will arise later). It is perhaps not surprising that mainstream dance history books such as *The Rise and Fall and Rise of Modern Dance* (McDonagh 1970) have omitted the pioneer of modern dance's connection to the New York workers' dance movement and to dance in Soviet Russia.

The Workers' Dance League was founded in 1932 to create dance for and by the working class to express class struggle. The founding members of the Workers' Dance League were the Needle Trades Industrial Workers Union Dance Group, Furriers Dance Group and the Harlem Dance Group (Prickett 1990). In an issue of *Workers' Theatre*, March 1933, there is a call for dancers to help fuel optimism in the middle of the Depression: "In this period of tremendous historical importance, we call upon all dancers to watch the march of events and make the dance a means of social protest, a revolutionary expression of the workers." (Prickett 1990:53)

Experimentation during this period attempted to move away from bourgeois aesthetics (Prickett 1990). The goal for some was to adopt an agit-prop aesthetic: conveying messages as directly as possible with physical attack. The factory assembly-line belt was used as a symbol in one piece where,

through the belt came parts of the machine being built...represented by the dancers in stiff, straight postures. When the "parts" were assembled and the machine completed, through the belt came a bolt of red material which was carried by the workers who surrounded the machine indicating that they had taken possession of the machine being built. (Prickett 1990:52)

Abstract dance was seen as elitist; ballet was viewed as a form of dance whose aim was merely to amuse its audience and distract people from thinking about themselves (Prickett 1990). The Workers' Dance League sought after the "mechanics" of dance and found their aesthetic underpinnings by working with union representatives and receiving their ideological guidance to transform mundane factory movements into dance (Pickett 1990).

To train their bodies and create a new revolutionary dance form, the Workers' Dance League also utilized dance training techniques of other early pioneers of modern dance such as Martha

Graham (Prickett 1990). Martha Graham's work was based on a full range of emotion and breath that created the contraction and release of tension in her movement (McDonagh 1970). Graham, also in support of the left wing dance movement created works that were aimed at exploring mass movements (*Heretic* and *Sketches for the People*). She was concerned with how form could be used to convey a clear social message. *Heretic*, which was very successful, "...was constructed on a central group from which dancers broke away and returned only to break away again in a different timing and phrasing." (McDonagh 1970) Graham chose to emphasize percussive movement and to use movement sparingly leaving the viewer to draw their own connections. She responded to her political context but chose to create work that was not explicitly related to that socio-political context (McDonagh 1970).

By the mid thirties, American dance experimentation had broadened to be inclusive of a range of left wing messages and was no longer so focused on mimicking Soviet Communist developments (Prickett 1990). *Hopping right, no left along*.

From Identity Politics to the Mystical in Movement.

Since this left wing modern dance movement, some modern dance choreographers have continued to explore politically oriented content in their works by attempting to fix and 'pin-down' identity. Rather than trying to 'pin-down' and quantify the meaning of dance, Ramsay Burt suggests we avoid reductive language that results in conforming to and naturalizing conservative ideologies about identity and try to open up possibilities for meaning (Burt 2000). Burt discusses post-identitarianism in dance and scholarship as a "...move beyond separatism toward new forms of hegemony and consensus." (Burt 2000:126). With post-identitarianism in mind, how can Donna Haraway influence the way I am writing and thinking about dance? It strikes me that Haraway intends to carve out a new direction in thinking which moves beyond our western social underpinnings. Haraway imagines a world that moves beyond

identity politics; a world where one can feel "...pleasure in the confusion of boundaries..." (Haraway 1991:2) She utilizes a philosophy based on performance to create consensus and coalition amongst diverse groups and subcultures (Haraway 1991). "The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation." (Haraway 1991:2)

Haraway's cyborg comes to mind as a model for how to think of coalition building through dance without restricting ourselves to strict identity boundaries. As opposed to abolishing ballet, which has tended to mirror the same naturalizing conservative ideologies that Burt discusses, how can ballet be viewed in a new way? "A call to think differently about choreography and performance is a call to excite the intellect and imagination to go against the grain of dominant discourses of aesthetic appreciation and find ways of resisting or subverting the demands of the ideological policemen." (Burt 2000:128) The cyborg tells us something about how to blur boundaries of power and structure in dance.

Judith Butler shows how the example of voguing in the film *Paris is Burning*, is an example of dance performance that confuses dominant notions of gender boundaries and, according to Butler, "might be understood as repetitions of hegemonic forms of power which fail to repeat loyally and, in that failure, open possibilities for resignifying the terms of violation against their violating aims." (Burt 2000:128). Post-identitarian discourse blurs the basis upon which discriminatory discourse depends (Burt 2000).

Collapse...

Lying in bed a few nights before this paper was due; I realized that I had not addressed some of the initial motivating memories that inspired me to write this paper. The reason I had not yet addressed these memories was because I had not yet been able to find an academic source to 'back-up' my memories. Then, it struck me that I was unlikely to find such an academic

source since I was essentially looking for my memory. When unable to locate academically sanctioned versions of my memories, I had dismissed my memories as points of exploration. I suddenly realized that my memories didn't need academic 'back-up'. They have merit on their own and are also not something that can be measured and quantified. Nor are they likely to have been written about in an academic way due to their mysterious and unknowable nature. Dance is passed on through memory. It is not verifiable because it is not fixed and writable. Dance just provides us with scraps of memory.

The Dancing Body - a Memorial Landscape

Walter Benjamin and Pierre Nora argue that those with power and authority, the victors, make their victory felt through the writing of history. These writers of history position themselves as heroes and central to the past, the present and the future. This process, which is inherited by future generations of victors, contributes to maintaining and perpetuating hegemony. In his call for a historical materialism, Benjamin is critical of this process of transformation (Benjamin 1968). He discusses the importance of understanding how to tear into and potentially destroy hegemony through historical materialism. Historical materialism would seek to hold onto past images and memories that arise in moments of danger. The highlighting of these memories attempts to subvert conforming histories (Benjamin 1968). This revolutionary and momentary present can then be lengthened into the future. What would constitute a moment of danger? Revolutionary memories would appear to be such moments of danger. They include memories of the dancing body full of hope, power and resistance. These memories are dangerous to the *status quo*.

Although my writing about these moments of danger will create some lasting memory or imprint on someone, dance itself happens in the moment unless extended into the future through film or writing. However, does filming and writing about subversive dance moments deform or illuminate their truth in “our

memorial landscape?" (Nora 1989:20) I suppose this becomes the space between history and memory or *les lieux de memoire* (Nora 1989). Further to this, since we live in a world based on victory, can we ever really step outside of that world to understand 'the dead' or the dangerous moments of subversive memory? After all, "whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate." (Benjamin 1968:258) *Back to hopping?*

Comaroff and Nora point out how the body is also a site for the construction of memory (Comaroff 1992, Nora 1989). Bodies can be viewed here as passive, active or both in this construction. According to Foucault, bodies are regulated in a way that maintains current hegemony. In his book, *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault articulates how "technologies of power" developed in the eighteenth century assert disciplinary control over bodies (Freund 1988). Bodies are regulated by the scheduling of time and the self control of physical expression. People's movements, gestures and attitudes are all subject to "micro-penalties" of time, activity, behavior, speech, the body and sexuality (Freund 1988). Foucault is concerned with how power is deployed directly onto the body. This kind of bodily regulation reminds me of Bahktin's analysis of the shift from the comedic grotesque medieval body to the streamlined cynical and individualistic body of the Enlightenment. In fact, Elias links these changes in bodily control to the sixteenth century emergence of the nation-state and the "civilizing" process

...with the ascendance of the modern nation state (which was largely related to bourgeois hegemony), new techniques of control were necessitated, because populations had to be pacified and domesticated to an unprecedented degree. The state assumed an increasing monopoly over violence. This control was accomplished by imposing self-initiated inhibitions on the "spontaneous" display of various kinds of bodily expression. (Freund 1988:844)

On the other hand, today, bodies are increasingly viewed as more agentic. In the case of dance, it seems as though the body is both intensely regulated and controlled as well as having agency in expression and an impact upon its surroundings. People often dance because of a memory of physical, spiritual and emotional oppression. But, in so doing, they also move their bodies from a place of hope, empowerment and resistance. Freund's analysis about the body shows how this hypothesis is in line with the views of Freund, Scheper-Hughes and Lock who see the body as "simultaneously a physical and symbolic artifact, as both naturally and culturally produced, and as securely anchored in a particular historical moment." (Freund 1988:842)

How is movement related to memory? Michael Taussig's, *Tactility and Distraction*, has inspired me to think about everyday movement as a performative dance that erases difference and creates a sense of common ground and solidarity (Taussig 1991:147). He talks about everydayness as a kind of embodied knowledge "...that functions like peripheral vision..." (Taussig 1991:147) Everyday sensations of the body, even painful ones, turn into a background hum. Sensation seems to come to the foreground when it is unusually painful or ecstatic. What has shaped these everyday background humming sensations? It seems tactile memory, of the usual or unusual type, becomes internalized at the physical level and becomes part of that background physical sensation. This memorial tactility is, to some degree, what motivates bodies to choose how to be expressive through dance.

Hopping bigger!

The film *Amandla!* about the South African liberation struggle from apartheid introduced me to *toyi-toyi*. This powerful dance, which emerged in the 1980's, became a cultural and physical way for people to collectively challenge the state during protests (Hirsch 2002). It was deeply moving to see people *toyi-toyi* on mass in this film. The elements I found particularly moving came from the understanding that the *toyi-toyi* was created

collectively by bodies that were undergoing massive repression (Hirsch 2002). *Toyi-Toyi* shows how the struggle for freedom and the right to occupy public space was embodied. The dancing body in this case became a weapon that had its greatest power *enmasse* as a collective not as an individual. The dance itself (originally from Zimbabwe) trained their bodies to be strong and unbeatable and seems to have been the result of both the collective memory of repression under the apartheid system and the collective dream and fight for freedom. Hope seems to have been inspired by a combination of factors that include music, dance and socialist ideological underpinnings. All of these elements seem to be what made *toyi-toyi* so powerful and revolutionary.

Hopping in a circle.

Bakhtin's writing about medieval folk humor and the carnivalesque in *Rabelais and His World* has become a primary source of ontological inspiration for me and, as a result, has impacted my philosophical approach to this paper and my perceptions about the dancing body. It seems that the principles behind medieval folk humor are currently evident in many subversive ways. These principles relate laughter with freedom, destroy the official picture of things "...and the narrow seriousness dictated by the ruling classes" and embrace and include all folk (giving carnival a universal quality). Life in the realm of medieval folk humor is unknowable. The body represents life and connects with life due to its protrusions and orifices that both enter and emerge from the universe; the grotesque body is both terrifying and regenerative (Bakhtin 1984). In grotesque imagery boundaries between humans and animals as well as life and death become blurred (Bakhtin 1984). This blurring of boundaries draws me back to Haraway and her interest in how this blurring of boundaries can draw people together in powerful ways. A particularly interesting point for the purposes of this paper is that "[c]arnival [like dance and hopefully this paper] is life shaped according to a certain pattern or form of play." (Bakhtin 1984,7)

Hopping Globally

In recent years, many protests have adopted some of the carnivalesque qualities that Bakhtin writes about. Local protests have connected at a global level over common concerns. As Ferguson has pointed out, this kind of connection between “local” or “grassroots” actors across the globe has dismantled the vertically elevated spatial power “on which the legitimation of nation-states has so long depended.” (Ferguson 2006:111) Carnavalesque protests remind people that established authority and truth are precarious achievements. This global emergence of carnivalesque protests and the principles that go along with them have endowed people with an indestructible sense of community that exists for a period of time outside of imposed socio-economic and political order. Dance has been a part of these carnivalesque protests in many forms as a type of “semiotic ju-jitsu.” (Duncombe 2004)

Three hundred people dancing to a sound system, some with their faces painted, a handful in Marie Antoinette drag, and one fellow bouncing around in bright blue bunny suit? The police were dumfounded. (Duncombe 2004)

My own experience of radical cheerleading at the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) Quebec Summit in 2001, seems like another example of this carnivalesque and semiotic ju-jitsu. Movements for these cheers were created collectively and performed spontaneously, similar to toyi-toyi. Due to the nature of how they were created, they had an embracive quality that blurred participant/spectator boundaries. They also involved humor giving them a liberating and freeing quality.

Using the dancing body as its metaphor, life is revealed as momentary, fleeting. Grafting local experience onto universalist theories about society and history is easily problematized. However, examples of dancing seem to illuminate a human interconnectivity across nation-state borders. I am filled with a

sense of possibility for embodied history and memory to subvert hegemony through the dancing body. Embodied history and memory also involve the on-going creation of the landscapes of the present that are not just the constructed narratives that those in power produce about themselves and others' pasts.

Since absolutely nothing can be predicated with any real certainty as to the "true nature of things", all projects (as Nietzsche says) can only be "founded on nothing." And yet there must be a project - if only because we ourselves resist being categorized as "nothing." Out of nothing we will make something: the Uprising, the revolt against everything which proclaims: "The Nature of Things is such-&-such." We disagree, we are unnatural, we are less than nothing in the eyes of the Law - Divine Law, Natural Law, or Social Law - take your pick. Out of nothing we will imagine our values, and by this act of invention we shall live. (Bey 1994:1)

This is an essay that draws from dance. Part of the conflict in drawing from dance has to do with trying to explore a new way to write and think about dance that is not exclusionary and individualistic. I have also sought to experiment with how I write and how I think in academic terms. Through this exploration of writing and thinking, I have attempted to emulate a dance or a movement that rises, falls, tumbles and goes upside down, that travels somewhere and makes linkages that help it to mean something, to show its humanness, its life. There is something beautifully and naturally collective about dance; it is a way of sharing an everyday human spirit, a spirit that can be shared in times of extreme adversity through dancing together. Why hopping? Hopping is something that almost anyone can do, even if it means hopping with fingers or shoulders; it is something that is

easily shared and inclusive. Hopping can be big or small, it can really travel or stay on the spot, it can be sharp or round. All these variations have a different meaning or aesthetic and relate to their context. Hopping is also a word that is very close to hoping. I like the idea that the two ideas can come together in imagining an act of hopping together or dancing together. What do left wing modern dance, toyi-toyi, medieval carnivalesque movement and radical cheerleading have in common? They are all examples of people collectively creating a sense of hope and freedom through dance resulting in a shared powerful and immense human spirit.

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