Rethinking Technique and the Body "Proper"

Barbara Browning

Well, that was pyrotechnic! I do have a lot of anxiety about this artificial bifurcation between dance history and dance ethnography, but actually the narrative that I'm going to lay out for you today is premised by the fact that much of what I do could be thought of as dance ethnography.

You begin with the two very basic terms—"dance" and "ethnography." So what does that mean? It means that I'm interested in movement and I'm interested in what the cultural context of that is. So thinking about the body, I'm coming at it from two places. One is how the body is configured in different cross-cultural contexts, and then also how movement, or the notion of what constitutes dance, is configured. There are two texts that I want to signal, and I know that many of you are familiar with them, but I just want to give a compressed version.

For me, the late 1960s and early 1970s also constituted an extremely pivotal moment, but if we *do* do that kind of a genealogical narrative, one of the troubling things that sometimes comes up—and I very much appreciate that Randy immediately moved to contextualizing it globally—is that these productive new ways of thinking about things were not necessarily so very new, and some of them actually had roots in other cultural contexts that sometimes get erased. In many accounts of that period, it looks like there were a lot of really creative white hippies, but in fact there were lots of other things that came into the picture. For me, it's also interesting to take a step back and think not only about what was happening globally, politically, at that moment, but also to take a step back and think about how people who *had been* looking at the body cross-culturally and looking at movement cross-culturally had configured things in interesting ways years before the emergence of "postmodern" dance.

The first text I want to signal is Mary Douglas's 1966 book *Purity and Danger*, which is a book about cross-cultural understandings of the body (1966/2002). A lot of it is about hygiene—what's clean and what's dirty—but the very important premise of the book is that the limits of the body—the skin, the orifices, what goes into bodies and what comes out of them, when bodies are sexually penetrated and the ways in which they are—are immensely important. Douglas explores where the body begins and ends as an anthropologist looking at ways that people configure the body in different cultural sites. She demonstrates that the limits of the body serve as a metaphor for what constitutes a given culture. She says that all of our anxiety about, for example, what's proper to go into and out of orifices—one could use as an example Jewish dietary laws—is a way that a society works out its own ideas about what do *we* as a particular people think is proper and clean and how does that define who *we* are? So it's also about political relationships. It's about power, and it has to do with racialization; it has to do with gender. So the lessons that Mary Douglas teaches us about thinking about the body as a metaphor for social relations are very important. You can carry her ideas into the realm of queer theory; you can talk about Judith Butler's work. I often think that there's not enough of an acknowledgment of Mary Douglas's

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observations in the context of what Judith Butler ended up doing. Butler is great, but I think that there is a seed of Butler already in Douglas and her comparative, cross-cultural approach.

The other text that I wanted to signal to you is Marcel Mauss's *Techniques of the Body* (1936/1973). If Douglas was saying you really have to think about what constitutes the limits of the body, Marcel Mauss, who originally wrote this essay decades before postmodern dance found its first articulations, said we have to think about what constitutes *technique*—what you all are configuring as *practice*, which is practice in the sense of movement practice, understanding the technical aspects of what bodies do. Marcel Mauss's argument basically is that everything is a technique. Sitting in a chair, the ways that everyone in this lecture hall is sitting—*that* is a body technique. It's all dance; it's all technique. Marcel Mauss very interestingly begins his argument with a review of various techniques of birth. There's a certain narrative arc to the essay because he goes through these different techniques starting with birth as the inception of life. Birth, he says, that's technical. Everybody thinks it's natural, but no. There are all kinds of birthing techniques. He talks about Buddha's mother, who squatted under a tree, and he's got all of these other examples. The essay continues through all of these different types of movement that are often naturalized: walking, swimming, running. He ends by saying sexual movement, there's nothing more technical. Sex is really technical. [Laughter] We tend to think of it, once again, like birth, as a natural activity. So those are the two ends of the technical spectrum, which is extremely interesting.

That obviously has ramifications for what we might think of as a performance studies approach to dance, which is always trying to do a couple of things. One of them is to say, you really have to push thinking about what is performance. To say all movement is technical is tantamount to saying it's all dance. That's one way of configuring it. To say the way that you all are sitting in your chairs is dance, just as David Gordon says the way he's going to have his dancers sit in chairs is dance, that has implications for all of us, all the time. It's a matter of stretching parameters. Also, though, there's the Mary Douglas reminder, which is that it's never just about the body that's before you. The limits of the body keep expanding exponentially. You always have to understand bodies in relation to their larger social context and the politics that are being articulated through them.

My own work began in Afro-Brazilian dance, and I have a strong interest in religious dance. That is a very interesting place to look, because Afro-Brazilian religious dance involves the tricky term "spirit possession." In that case, what does it mean when you have a body whose dance is animated by a force that ostensibly is external to the body? That raises some really interesting and obviously very specific questions regarding the relationship between the materiality of the body and the notion of what a body can do. "What a body can do": I'm dropping that phrase in, and I want it to resonate with the important work of Gilles Deleuze, who asks the question (via Spinoza) *What can a body do?* (Deleuze 1992). This is a question that then somebody like Judith Butler will take up in very interesting ways. Maybe the most important questions are not *What is a body? What's a woman's body? What's a man's body? What's a proper body?* If we're going back to terms that Mary Douglas would use, maybe it's more

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important to get past that and think about what a body can *do*. Thinking about what a body can do in relation to dance studies, I would invoke Randy's way of talking about mobilization to think about how a body moves through the world. It always has these political ramifications as well and it means something to mobilize a body in excess of what a proper body is supposed to be able to do.

One other category in the list of fields that have emerged in recent years and taken on new force for us in the academy is disability studies. When bodies are doing things that they are ostensibly not supposed to be able to do, obviously there are political ramifications to that as well. If you think about what is supposed to be proper to a body because of its gender, because of its racial categorization, because of its age, because of its relationship between colony and the state, and then you think about the capacity of the body to move in excess of what is proper to it, all of that is of interest to us. In this respect, my own interests tend to move outward from looking at a particular, culturally specific movement technique toward these larger questions of "bodily propriety." I use that term because it means so many things; it's about cleanliness but it's also about ownership. I'm interested in what's proper to bodies and how they sometimes move beyond what is ostensibly proper to them. I'm also interested in the use of the body as a controlling social metaphor and how dance specifically, or movement, becomes this uncontainable category, which is really ultimately about thinking about our performative capacities, our ability not just to configure social relations but also to change them.

A State of Perpetual Becoming: African Bodies as Texts, Methods, and Archives

Awam Amkpa

Thank you so much for asking me to join this illustrious panel. These are people whose work I reference and I talk and think about. I'm going to be tentative in what I say. For me there are no definite theoretical positions, they're exploratory. I'm going to focus more on the poststructuralist dimension because it resonates with my own idea of decolonization, my own idea of postcolonial readings of the body.

I come from a continent where the body is spoken for. We don't have the luxury of stepping in and out of the textuality of the body. From that very moment when the body is born, that body is immediately named and sometimes mired with all kinds of social crisis. So, the body now finds itself having to do two things. One is to learn how to textualize the mythologies, the grand truths and moralities, and the other is to learn how to deconstruct them. For people who become politicized through the process, they begin to utilize their body as a way of thinking contrapuntally. So that for them every image, every text that's produced is produced to be deconstructed rather than to be canonized.

Initially I was thinking I would discuss Judith Butler and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), and I actually decided maybe I should think about it as "The Matter of the Body." As you all know, living in the United States, if you attempt to commit suicide and you fail, it's a crime. So you really do not own your

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