Dialogues:
The State of the Body



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Transcribed and edited by Claire Canavan

Gwendolyn Alker is associate teacher of theatre studies in the Department of Drama at the Tisch School of Arts, New York University. Her articles and reviews have appeared in *Theatre Journal, TDR,* and *Dance Research Journal;* she is former managing editor of *Women and Performance.* She has taught at the Gallatin School of Individualized Study and at Naropa University. She was recently elected the vice president of conference for Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) for the twenty-fifth anniversary conference to be held in Chicago in 2011.

Randy Martin is professor and chair of art and public policy at the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, and president of the Cultural Studies Association (U.S.). His books include *Performance as Political Act: The Embodied Self; Socialist Ensembles: Theater and State in Cuba and Nicaragua; Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics; On Your Marx: Relinking Socialism and the Left; Financialization of Daily Life;* and *An Empire of Indifference: American War and the Financial Logic of Risk Management; Artistic Citizenship: A Public Voice for the Arts* (with Mary Schmidt Campbell); and *The Returns of Alwin Nikolais: Bodies, Boundaries and the Dance Canon* (with Claudia Gitelman), as well as edited volumes on academic labor, sport, and U.S. communism.

Barbara Browning is associate professor and former chair of performance studies at New York University. She received her B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in comparative literature from Yale University. She researches primarily the expressive culture of Brazil and the African diaspora. She published her first book (*Samba: Resistance in Motion,* winner of the de la Torre Bueno Prize for an outstanding work of dance scholarship) in 1995. She went on to publish *Infectious Rhythm: Metaphors of Contagion and the Spread of African Culture* in 1998, and her articles have appeared in anthologies as well as such publications as *Dance Research Journal, TDR, Dance Chronicle,* and *Women and Performance.* She has served on the boards of directors of both the Congress of Research on Dance and the Society of Dance History Scholars. She is also a member of the editorial board of *Women and Performance,* and the advisory board of *Dance Research Journal.*

Awam Amkpa is a dramatist, documentary filmmaker, and an associate professor of drama at Tisch School of the Arts, New York University; associate professor and program director of Africana Studies at NYU's College of Arts and Sciences; and a scholar of theater and film. He is the co-founder and co-curator of the annual Real Life Pan-African Documentary Film Festival in Accra, Ghana—a festival dedicated to African and African Diasporic filmmaking—and a curator of the photographic exhibition Africa: See You, See Me. His documentary films include *Winds Against Ours Souls, It's All about Downtown, The Other Day We Went to the Movies, A VeryVery Short Story of Nollywood,* and the feature film *Wazobia!* He is also the author of *Theatre and Postcolonial Desires* and several articles on black Atlantic and postcolonial theater and film.

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Introduction

Gwendolyn Alker

This roundtable was created as part of a symposium called "The Performing Body in Theory and Practice" held at the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, on March 28, 2009. As the curator of this event and a faculty member in the Department of Drama, I had witnessed many missed connections between scholars in the Department of Performance Studies and practitioners housed mainly in the Experimental Theatre Wing, where physical-based theater and postmodern dance have been at the center of actor training over the last thirty years. What intrigued me was that in both these locations, and in the larger communities that they create and reflect, isolated discussions on the body had remained central and even crucial to disciplinary development. The "body" was continually referenced as metaphor, as identity; it stood in for technique and became shorthand for a panoply of cross-cultural influences. Thus, the symposium as a whole, and this roundtable in particular, endeavored to reveal connections between these different communities and to build upon diverse ideas of embodiment.

This discussion is an edited version of that original conversation. In it, dance scholars Randy Martin and Barbara Browning are joined by Awam Amkpa, a scholar of postcolonial theory and theater studies as well as a filmmaker. In the original event, Karmenlara Ely Seidman and Nathan Flower, faculty members in the Department of Drama, spoke as well. Leading into the event, I had framed numerous questions for participants, the responses to which can be seen in some of the interwoven threads that appear below. In particular, the body as metaphor was repeatedly affirmed as an idea that both exists and unravels itself, in precipitous balance. This doubling parallels the discussions of "rupture" that ground Martin's opening comments. Any theorization of the body is faced with the lived experience, what Browning eloquently references as the "technique" of lived experience. The body is messy, boundaried and porous, historicized, contextualized, simultaneously individual and culturally embedded. Ultimately, in a manner that reveals the most intriguing connection to performance, the body demands and creates an engagement between that which lies within and that which lies beyond any membrane of thought or experience.

I would like to posit one such engagement: a disciplinary reckoning between dance studies and performance studies. In the creation of performance theory, the word "performance" was chosen due, in part, to its flexibility, omnipresent usage, and wide-ranging possibilities for theoretical and practical impact. It would seem that "the body" is another such term, one that plays at the limits of performative theorizations and the materiality that dance scholars must face. Indeed, it has been scholars of dance who have most consistently brought performance theorists back to the centrality of the body on stage. The "body" is also a potent term because it extends this disciplinary meeting point to other conversations from continental philosophy, psychoanalytic theory, postcolonial theory, trauma studies, feminist theory, and somatic disciplines (the list could go on) in which the body is returned to amid the philosophical dilemmas of agency, ontology,

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and perception. In short, "the body" gathers its own set of interdisciplinary preoccupations that reconstitute lines of training and theorization in necessary ways.

The speakers below have a long history of moving between performance theory and dance studies. Barbara Browning's *Samba: Resistance in Motion* was first published in 1995, while Randy Martin's *Performance as a Political Act: The Embodied Self* came out in 1990. Yet it is perhaps now that we are beginning to see more institutional shifts that have emerged from such work. The focus on somatic training at the newly created M.F.A. in contemporary performance at Naropa is an interesting example. The various practice-based research models in England also theorize and practice through the body as a central text, a key example being the PARIP (Practice as Research in Performance) project at the University of Bristol. Phillip Zarrilli's work, both independently and at the University of Exeter, also provides an important example of embodied methodologies. The recent publication of Zarrilli's *Psychophysical Acting* (2008) provides a fascinating text for any individual theorizing the training of the performer. In the United States we have initiated many of the ways in which an engagement with embodiment necessitates updating performance training, theorizations of performance, and the necessary interactions between the two. Yet I would argue that we are currently falling behind. Hopefully such conversations will be recognized as omnipresent and pressing, and their cross-fertilization will lead to greater institutional recognition and support.

Toward a Decentered Social Kinesthetic

Randy Martin

I want to first do just a little bit of work on that very lush framework that you opened up for us. Obviously there's a long history of the body as an object of study, and an anxiety about it. One could say that one sees a series of breaks or ruptures in which the body is always percolating up. When you think about Nietzsche and you think about modernism, the body seems to stand as a kind of solution to whatever kind of societal problem is posed. But if we were to dwell for a moment on that particular eruption that's named as the 1960s, I think there are two interesting dimensions of the broader conditions that would make us have to bring our attention to what's being referred to here as "the body."

Following a very productive formulation of Fredric Jameson regarding the postmodern (1984), we can conceive of a kind of double movement of decolonization—on the one hand, a kind of decolonization of nature, and we can think about that in geopolitical terms. The Third World clearly is figured as the site of nature, the site of the racialized Other, the site of raw material extraction, the site of something that is virginal that's going to be despoiled. So there are all these kinds of tropes of naturalization, and of course what's happening in the 1960s is that the Third World, which had been treated by colonial powers as silent, is now speaking. As Sartre said (in his preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*), the two-thirds of the world that "merely had use" of the word is now giving voice to their world (Fanon 1968). And that voice, I think, occurs as something that is already

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