Protesting the Present/Choreographing the Future

Protestar o Presente/Coreografar o Futuro

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Abstract

This presentation considers two approaches utilized to contest and redress hegemonic forms of domination: constructing resistance and building relations. It assesses the strengths and limitations of each approach. Focusing specifically on examples from diverse dance practices, it argues that only by embracing multiple and diverse forms of political activism can we possibly choreograph our way through the catastrophic challenges that currently face us.

Keywords

Crisis Response, Hegemony and Resistance, Body-Mind Relations, Decolonization and Knowledge, Relationality in Dance

Resumo

Esta apresentação analisa duas abordagens utilizadas para contestar e corrigir formas hegemónicas de dominação: construir resistência e desenvolver relações. Avalia os pontos fortes e limitações de cada abordagem. Ao focar-se especificamente em exemplos de práticas de dança diversas, argumenta que apenas ao abraçarmos múltiplas e diversas formas de ativismo político podemos possivelmente coreografar o nosso caminho através dos desafios catastróficos que enfrentamos atualmente.

Palavras-chave
Resposta à Crise, Hegemonia e Resistência, Relações Corpo-Mente, Descolonização e Conhecimento, Relacionalidade na Dança

Responding to the climate crisis, race-based violence, unprecedented migrations, a monumental augmentation of disparities in wealth and resources, and rising militia and gang violence coupled with the popularity of authoritarian governments and plutocracies, many artists and scholars are engaged in discussions around how to move towards social, racial, and climate justice. This talk[1] considers two approaches to how that might be done - through constructing resistance or the practice of relationing. Resistance might be defined as the undermining of authority of an established system or institution. In contrast, relationing consists in building trusted relation across diversity. My remarks reflect on the advantages and limitations of each approach, as seen from the practice of dance.

As dancers and as people who love and are dedicated to dance, I could guess that one of the things we might want to contest is the general set of Western epistemological assumptions that denigrate dance because it is associated with "the body" as something distinct from "the mind." Located as we are here within a university dedicated to research and the production of new knowledge, we can especially feel the prejudices associated with the mind-body split, and the attendant tropes attached to the body and to dancing as "mindless," "chaotic," "merely sexual," "lacking permanence and history", etc. The logocentrism of the academy is apparent in the entire organization of the institution and the ways that it makes decisions about what is important, valuable, and worthy of support.

Thus, we might well feel the effects of what Ramón Grosfoguel, following Enrique Dussel, has described as a hierarchization of knowledge deriving from colonization. In his 2013 essay on epistemic racism and sexism in the long 16th century, Grosfoguel argues that four large and overlapping projects of colonization were launched by the Spanish that resulted in what he calls epistemicides, defined as the systematic killing off of worldviews. Not only were the Indigenous worldviews from Africa and the Americas destroyed along with the spiritual views of Jews and Arabs, but also the knowledges stored in the bodies of women who were exterminated as witches during the Inquisition. Grosfoguel (2013) connects the destruction of all four of these knowledges to the Cartesian privileging of the mind over the body and its subsequent effects on the production of knowledge.

We might well be interested in contesting this Cartesian epistemology in order to give dance the substance and respect that we know it deserves. We might also want to argue that only by acknowledging and affirming multiple and diverse forms of political activism can we possibly choreograph our way through the catastrophic challenges that currently face us.

Looking first at resistance, this tactical set of responses has been conceptualized as a way to mobilize against the hegemonic forces that hail the body at birth into protocols for proper gendered and classed behavior, correct industriousness, and appropriate comportment. These same hegemonic forces also create divides between body and the self, consciousness, or spirit such that the body becomes more and more the instrument or vehicle for the will. The body comes to lack agency or even the capacity to contribute to decision-making. At the same time, these hegemonic systems fashion the self into a device for self-surveillance, one capable of evaluating and judging the body according to standards of correctness and success. Through techniques that manufacture desire for a more fashionable or healthy life-style, a longed-for

1 National Autonomous University, Mexico City, October 2019.

appearance or attractiveness, as well as techniques for ensuring a sense of insufficiency and inadequacy, these dominant forces constitute the self as capable of observing and policing bodily action, while reducing the body to meat.

In dialectical opposition to these forces, the concept of resistance has been formulated as a practice that continually opposes such disciplinization through two related channels of activity: the creation of tactics that either protest and thereby expose injustice, or the construction of tactics that propose alternative organizations of the social by fashioning counter-hegemonic pursuits, passtimes, and lifestyles. The degree to which these are effective is an open question. Protest is often seen as capable of voicing concerns and producing some changes, but these are sometimes swept aside or erased through assimilation following a return to and re-instantiation of the status quo. Consider, for example, the protests collectively known as the Arab Spring or Occupy Wall Street. The creative production of alternative ways of being is likewise often seen as effective in the short run, but also, in hindsight, as a form of ingenuity that is quickly appropriated by the hegemonic, so that its voice becomes instrumental in propagating mainstream ideologies. For another example, various forms of break dancing and hip hop have developed worldwide, many of which have been appropriated into a global capitalist, neoliberal agenda used in advertising and entertainment spectacles.

Resistance is thus a process that keeps hegemonic discipline in check but often without fundamentally altering its operations. It becomes a practice that can and must continually re-assess how power is working, and this is its great strength. Michel De Certeau (1984) insightfully characterizes this practice of resistance as the "tactical," a set of operations that, in opposition to the "strategic," never occupies space, but instead, is always moving on to the next situation where it can provoke, call attention to, and potentially make fun of how power is working to control and dominate. The tactical is immensely valuable for its ability to identify and dramatize issues of pressing social concern; it alerts people to the need for change.

Within the arena of concert dance choreography, for example, hegemonic discipline has been identified with the proscenium and its structuring of the gaze along with the division of labor between active producers of spectacle and passive consumers of it. Tactics critical of this architecture and the choreography produced to succeed within it have resulted in dances that expanded beyond the proscenium's boundaries, or they have called attention to its enforcement of specific roles for viewers, and they have pushed at the limits of acceptability in both format and content. Over the last half of the twentieth century, tactics such as talking while dancing, extreme uses of the body, nonconforming gender roles, and creative expansions into spaces outside and beyond theatrical edifices, such as lofts, found environments, abandoned spaces, etc. have been implemented. Yet these kinds of choreographic experimentations are now regularly featured in contemporary performance where they function as edgy but nonetheless acceptable conventions for artmaking.

Similarly, while a plethora of choreographic initiatives has been developed to actively resist the ascension of globalized spectacle, we can also see the steady absorption of those tactics into spectacle. In training, we have developed pedagogies, based in anatomy and sports science, that build a multi-talented body capable of virtuoso accomplishment in a variety of styles and genres, suggesting fluency in the world's dances and thus creating a global citizen. In choreography, alternative genres such as flash dances and the uses of genre and gender bending vocabularies have been immediately incorporated into capitalist marketing as certifying signifiers of progressive values. Thus T-Mobile uses a flash dance to advertise its product, and Cirque de Soleil and European versions of So You Think You Can Dance present a range of styles and characters that include homosexuality, androgyny,

trans and queer subjects as well as signifiers of ethnic difference, such as Latin, hip hop, tap, and other world forms, all the while promoting spectacle and eye-popping extremes of physical accomplishment.

As a result, the model of discipline and resistance becomes one in which contestatory engagement is often absorbed by global, neoliberal, capitalist values and procedures that continue to dominate and control. Resistors apply unpredictable pressure, but then hegemony overtakes them. Resistors mount a critique; hegemony trivializes or simply absorbs it. Resistors stand defiantly in protest but are eventually forced to accommodate and be assimilated. Within the realm of tactical operations, the body can serve as a source of inspiration in formulating a particular tactic, and it can also become the site of celebration when power is momentarily disrupted and thrown off balance. The body's intelligence is frequently tapped as a source of insight into how things "really are or feel." Its sensory capacities can reveal the extent of domination and thus serve to instigate a tactical response. Rarely, however, is this intelligence cultivated as a reservoir of knowledge that might generate a more systematic and coordinated set of responses to power. Thus the question that I would ask is, what can be done in addition to resistance, to contribute to the creation of alternative worlds that subvert the hegemonic order in a more lasting way?

Turning now to the second approach, that of building relationality, I would like to emphasize that it is a practice of forging strong relations among beings in which the central and defining principles would be 1) trusted connection AND 2) diversity. And it is immediately obvious, at least to me, that dance is an activity that could build relationality exceedingly well. We dance with people, and we dance for people, and both those actions contain the potential to build connection and diversity. Choreography can be seen as a plan for moving into relationality with others and with one's surroundings. The score for a dance can also be seen as functioning to convene an occasion for moving into relationality. Learning to dance from someone or with someone likewise instills multiple forms of awareness about who one is as a body in relation to others' bodies.

Of course, many choreographies and pedagogies do precisely the opposite: they orchestrate forms of domination and control by one group over another or by the mind over the body. They exercise judgment in ways that make people feel inferior or insufficient. They make demands that physically and spiritually exhaust people. They docilize bodies, normalize behavior, and enforce standardized comportment and protocols, often through intimidation and humiliation. It is probably also the case that the same choreography could have contradictory effects in different historical or cultural moments, and it could function as liberatory or oppressive even within the same context.

Still, I would propose that "relationing" is immensely important for us as dancers for several reasons, the first of which concerns the effects that colonial epistemicide has had on our body/mind relationship. Many of us have been involved in dance pedagogies that approach the body as the instrument of the mind, demanding of it greater levels of skill and competence while also instilling dissatisfaction with the body's capacities as well as its shape, size, or other aspects of its appearance. We have probably also enjoyed other pedagogies that articulate a different and more relational set of connections between mind and body. Pursuing those is one way to begin building a more equitable dance practice. Even asking the question of how a pedagogy approaches the relationship between body and mind begins this process.

In terms of exploring relationality, I have also taken inspiration from contemporary Indigenous Studies, a field that examines the cultural traditions and political experiences of Indigenous peoples worldwide, scrutinizing in depth the effects of settler colonial conquest to which Grossfoguel (2013) refers, and also the profound connections that Indigenous peoples maintain to the land on which they live. Indigenous Studies repeatedly claims as a central tenant of indigenous iden-

tity a profound connection between human beings and the surrounding natural world. Built through patient observation and quiet attentiveness, this connection is reaffirmed in choices made throughout one's daily life as well as in ceremonial contexts[2].

In addition to observation and patience, according to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, an Indigenous approach to building connection requires creativity in devising a connection to what one is observing so that a connection that is "based in mutual respect, caring, and reciprocity" (Simpson, 2014, p. 12) can be forged. This connection must sustain and promote all life, rather than privileging some life or other life[3]. Sharing this connection with trusted others is a process of building upon that connection in ways that mutually benefit everyone. Ritual, ceremony, and dance can then be used to strengthen new connections and the relations they make possible. As Simpson details, an Indigenous approach to world-making focuses on alignment with rather than domination over, and it promotes a willingness to de-center human superiority[4]. It also encourages a constant re-positioning of oneself as a learner. And it validates bodily experience as a potential reservoir of knowledge.

There are a number of Indigenous efforts to build relationality through dance or "dance" in its broadest definition that might be helpful to consider. Meryl McMaster uses performance in order to make photographs of actions that point simultaneously towards the past and towards the land and its inhabitants. Most often self-portraits, they dramatize the quest for knowledge as inherited from earlier generations, and she also concocts uncanny relationships between herself and the natural world. Rulan Tangen, founder and artistic director of Dancing Earth, makes dances in riverbeds, canyons, art museums, elementary and high schools, and Native wellness centers, among other places. For each performance she takes the time to build her connections to and understanding of the local population, and to create opportunities for dancers and audience members to share before and after the performances. Her dances incorporate pan-tribal elements, and she works with a diverse group of dancers coming from distinct tribal affiliations. Tanja Lukin-Linklater works in between dance, music, and visual media to express different kinds of relations between the land and people and between different genres of dance and dance histories.

All three of these artists are dedicated to creating new work, often in new genres, that nonetheless embodies traditional values and visions. They maintain very close ties with the elders in their communities, both in terms of remaining their students and continuing to learn from them, and in terms of seeking elders' permission and opinions about the new works they are creating. In this way they build trust and a strong sense of continuity across generations.

An additional example of using "dance" in the broadest senses of the term to build relationality is also worth considering: Karyn Recollet, who argues for a process she calls "de-colonial love" builds relations with other beings, animate and inanimate through activating thoughtful connections to the past, present, and future. Living in Toronto, Recollet practices a particular form of connecting during her daily runs through the parks of the city, many of which follow old stream beds where salmon spawned hundreds of years ago. As she runs, she meditates on the land's past history and her activation through running, of a connection to it, literally reminding herself at every step of where she is now in relation to how the land has changed over time, and also thinking about the fish as fellow creatures who have inhabited the earth.

2 Simpson (2014) writes: "1) observation; 2) patience in apprehending what one is observing and all its surrounding context; 3) creativity in devising a connection to what one is observing; 4) sharing this connection with trusted others; 5) building upon that connection is ways that mutually benefit everyone; 5) using ritual, ceremony, and dance to strengthen new connections and the relations they make possible" (p. 12). She argues for a connection that sustains and promotes all life, rather than privileging some life or other life, as well as a connection that is "based in mutual respect, caring, and reciprocity" (Simpson, 2014, p. 12).

3 See also Tinker (2004, p. 119).

4 This process can be seen as the very act of theorizing (See Kathleen E. Absolon's chapter on process in Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know for one compelling discussion).

A different approach to connecting across diversity can be found in Brazilian choreographer Lia Rodrigues's decision to leave a wealthy district of Rio de Janeiro and found her school in Nova Hollanda, a favela where a large number of residents were initially suspicious of or hostile to her presence[5]. Over years of patiently reaching out to her neighbors, Rodrigues was eventually able to host free dance classes for children in the area and to invite the entire community to performances hosted in her warehouse studio. She now premieres new work at the studio before touring internationally. On the road Rodrigues continues to champion the causes of poor and minoritized Brazilians and to draw attention to their plight in creating her new works.

These examples build relationality between humans and the land and also work to create connections between humans. One question I have is whether it is always necessary to develop connection based on the particularities of the situation in which dancers find themselves. Must the way of connecting always develop organically from the locale in which it is being developed, or might there be models or scores for building relationality that could be transported from place to place?

In attempting to answer that question, I would like to look at an example that emphasizes the necessity of building physical trust in others. Simone Forti's piece Huddle was initially created in 1961 and has been performed since innumerable times and on several continents. The score for the "dance construction," as she calls it, proposes that 7-8 people form a well-connected huddle of bodies, that is to say, a circular web of bodies, standing with their arms interwoven. One at a time, a single person will disengage from this mass and slowly crawl up and over it, reintegrating into the mass on the other side. This process continues for an indeterminate period of time. The full score reads as follows:

> A group of seven to eight people stand together in a very close huddle. One member of the group climbs up the mass of people and then down again becoming once more a part of the mass. Immediately another is climbing. The movement must be constant but not hurried. Sometimes it happens that there are two climbing at once. That's all right. The dance construction should be continued 'long enough,' perhaps ten minutes.
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> (Forti, 1974, p. 59)

The experience of connectivity and mutual responsibility is built into the very fabric of the piece, since each participant can sense the weight distribution across the entire group and also must adjust him/herself to meet the needs of group support as the climber continues his/her journey. Each time a new climber crosses the huddle, the entire group experiences a new sequence of reactions and a new sense of how the group can sustain support, allowing each member of the group to deepen a sense of commitment to the project and intensifying the experience of kinesthetic responsiveness. Each performer must continually sense what is called for in each particular situation, given the size, shape, weight, and movement style of each climber. Performers must also be sensitive to who has crawled across the top and who has not and allow a sharing of roles. Also, importantly, they must be conscious not to violate people's personal space by grabbing sensitive or erotic areas. No one body can or should take on the role of solely supporting the crawling body, so the notion of connectivity among bodies is literally enforced, and everyone gets a chance to experience the activity from multiple perspectives: as crawler, as direct supporter, and as adjacent supporter.

On the face of it, Huddle presents a brilliantly simple, flexible structure, easily transportable to multiple kinds of public venues and requiring virtually no physical resources apart from the dancers who volunteer to participate. It champions physical

5 In 2004 Rodriguez left the Zona Sul, a wealthy region of Rio de Janeiro, where she had worked for fifteen years, and related to the Complexo de Favelas da Mare, a region of sixteen favelas, eventually establishing her headquarters in Nova Holanda. Since 2011 her arts center has housed a school of dance, open to young people from the area called CAM Núcleo 2.

trust and the importance of literally being there for someone, and it also proposes to passersby a model for building connection, both metaphorically and literally.

At the same time, Huddle enforces various forms of self-censorship: no movement can be rugged, jagged, or sudden, and everyone must pretend that no parts of the body are more intimate or specially coded in any way. The piece therefore requires that participants erase or repress histories of intimacy, violence, kinship, frailty, and abnormality. The piece also tacitly presumes a background in certain kinds of dance training, and indeed, its self-selected participants come from backgrounds in dance that would embrace Forti as an important postmodern dance pioneer. That is, they would most likely know about the opportunity to participate in Huddle through having been schooled in classes that promote certain understandings of the body, among which is the assumptions that the body can be a neutral thing, stripped of its cultural and personal histories in order to become a malleable, sensate, yet dispassionate entity.

And, as a number of dance scholars have observed, this corporeal transformation is much easier for white, middle-class dancers. Thus, even though Forti's score seems to make an open appeal to any and all to participate in the huddle, it not only requires specific training at the skills necessary to support the group's efforts, but it also relies on months or years of other elite training that help to make the body over into a neutral vessel. The assumption underlying Huddle is that the body is neutral, asexual and without a history; it shares in common with all other bodies the universality of its anatomy and does not promote a diversity of backgrounds and histories. Instead, it potentially coerces bodies into sameness.

So, in assessing whether or not a given model is viable we need to take into consideration several aspects of dance that contribute to the making of its politics: the directives according to which dancers are guided through action and the actions of the director who is helping to teach and develop the score; the relationships the dancers construct with one another; the markers of identity they put forward; and the history of bodily training evident in their performance.

This is a lot to have to consider, especially given the urgency of what is happening in the world at the moment. It seems we have no time, and on the other hand, we need to take time, both to think through options and begin to build strong relations. This is the disadvantage of relation-building. Undoubtedly because it has been ignored for so long, our capacities to approach situations with mutual respect are not well developed and it is unclear whether there is time to gain the necessary trust. Perhaps acts of resistance can continue to give us time, as we work to become capable of stronger relation-building. Perhaps the crisis that we are now facing is one of such immensity and urgency that we will be inspired to make commitments to both approaches.

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