

# The Embodied Thesis

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## Abstract

If doctoral studies seek to develop and accumulate expert knowledge across the myriad facets of human experience, then consideration needs to be given to the varying forms of intelligence through which that knowledge is explored and made manifest. Intra and inter disciplinary approaches to dance suggest that the physical body may be situated at the centre of 'knowing,' thereby challenging the privileged position of the word in western scholarship. The first approach probes embodiment to examine the choreographer/dancer, Marie Chouinard's statement that "[w]hen I dance, my body becomes a laboratory for experience." Such experiential analysis has the potential to complement and make visible the sensate dimensions of medical science, although dance's principal engagement focuses on the imaginative flesh of complex physical thought. The second approach moves outwards from embodiment, triggered by Cezanne's enigmatic observation that "[m]an [is] absent from but entirely within the landscape" which, in my propositional translation, becomes *moving human bodies are absent but entirely within theoretical paradigms*. Both approaches raise critical issues about the management of embodied knowledge within doctoral assessment paradigms. Can performances, like written theses, 'analyse and explain,' is dance 'legible' and how can such knowledge be stored?

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If doctoral studies seek to develop and accumulate expert knowledge across the myriad facets of human experience, then consideration needs to be given to the varying forms of intelligence through which that knowledge is explored and made manifest. Until some forty years ago, movement was assumed to be biological and thus cognitively transparent: human being's learned to walk because of their muscular-skeletal framework. However, once researchers began to seriously examine the implications of Michel Foucault's ideas about the socio-cultural constructedness of knowing, analyses recognised that "[e]ven apparently simple and 'natural' actions such as walking or sitting are in part culturally constructed" (Bull, 2001, 405). Consequently, dance researchers who examined movement's relationship with verbal language, concluded that movement is analogously "ubiquitous, a cultural given which people are constantly creating, participating in, interpreting, and reinterpreting on both conscious and subconscious levels" (Bull, Ibid). In short, movement is a way of knowing, equally diversified and 'acquired' within cultural constraints and limitations as any other means of life engagement. Moreover, western scholarship's privileging of the written word has glossed over the all-too-obvious fact that learning (and thus knowledge) depends on actual human bodies, moving, seeking and discovering. The complicated historical dissociation of mind and body played out in our culture and its validating organisations has, in effect, emasculated the potential of communicating and meaning making systems other than those primarily reliant on the printed word. While early childhood educators stress the significance of movement, sensation and feeling in the human capacity to conceptualise, in formalised education, acts of conceptualisation are assumed to operate exclusively in mediums of reading and writing, treating motor coordination, for example, as primitive steps to the valued objective of creative and penetrating mental---and by implication *dis*-embodied---intelligence, on which our society is thought to revolve. Moreover, even divergent demonstrations of intelligence by celebrated contributors to the sum of western forms of knowledge seem unable to alter the hierarchical institutionalisation of the word. The case in point is Einstein:

The words or the language, as they are spoken or written, do not seem to play any role in my mechanism of thought. The psychical entities which seem to serve as elements in thought are certain signs and more or less clear images which can be voluntarily reproduced or combined ... The above-mentioned elements are, in my case, of visual and some of muscular type (quoted in Bonnycastle, <http://www.usask.ca/education/coursework/802papers/Bonnycastle/Bonnycastle/>).

If Einstein attributed his crucial knowledge-founding intelligence to visual and muscular mechanisms, should we not at least question how this intelligence is formed and how such intelligence/s are accommodated within the various projects of education and intellectual research?

### **Accepting performance research?**

Admittedly, by its special focus on performance research in doctoral studies, this conference indicates that such shifts are beginning to occur. At the same time, institutionalised assumptions are fiendishly difficult to alter, often not through ill will on the part of its members but because there are a 1001 proverbial ramifications to consider if those shifts are to be embraced. Some of these ramifications are relatively simple, such as those incurring economic considerations. To accept, as I propose, dance as a serious practice of research, immediately raises the question of competition for scant grant and research infrastructure resources. Embracing another contender in the field signals reduction of resources for established disciplines and, consequently, change encounters firm resistance. In many ways, more complex ramifications come into play before an economic stalemate is reached, the most predominant being a general reluctance to accept dance or the performing arts as serious and, especially, 'rigorous' forms of scholarship. To most academics, policy makers and politicians, Einstein's muscular intelligence, if remembered, would seem to have no point of contact with dancers moving about on stage. Einstein is a figure whose research rigour is undisputable, while dancers are uniformly suspect, commonly assumed to be female and not renowned for verbal articulation. However, one attribute shared by Einstein and dancers is that curly descriptor, 'creative,' which has crept into the rhetoric of education, business and politics over the last couple of decades, threatening in some instances to displace the conceptual supremacy of 'rigour.'

### **Creativity as a value**

While the current overuse of this term in consumer contexts may possibly exhaust its usefulness as a meaningful entity, 'creative' is quintessentially associated with art-makers. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari conceive art as the transition into form, a bringing or ushering of the unknown into some kind of focus, however fleeting, in which notions of eternity are glimpsed. "Art is not chaos but a composition of chaos that yields the vision or sensation, so that it constitutes, as Joyce says, a chaosmos, a composed chaos---neither foreseen nor preconceived" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, 204). In this perspective, two essential ideas pertinent to creative arts' research lie in tension. While retrieval from the unknown leads to something 'knowable,' its tangibility may essentially remain beyond material grasp. From my point of view, this seeming incongruity applies equally to the volumes of Joyce catalogued in libraries as much as it does to the performance of a choreography by Jiri Kylian or Trisha Brown or Lin Hwai-min, except that the material evidence or trace is much easier to contain in the former than in the ephemeral passage of the latter's dance. Joyce produced a document, the choreographers did not. By the same token, if Joyce was to engage in a PhD candidature today, submitting for example *Ulysses*, who and how could he be as Jo hree( co4( doe( cou)-1(t)-2.2(at)or)1.9(s)-6.4(,)-onequalp. F-3.6(h)-2.2(at)-boee( coki-min,edbrin10.9(t)-3.6(h)-2in a 3)

However, as may be deduced from my inadequate attempts to propose an alternative conceptual system in the English language, the medium itself 'limits' the thought process. Such entrapment in the particularities of verbal/written languages has been thoroughly examined in post-colonial/world literature studies (feminist linguists have mounted similar arguments focusing on the patriarchal yoke of language), wherein African writers like Ama Ato Aidoo struggle against the 'shackling' of the colonialist's language. The issue is not simply a matter of untranslatable terms but of the mesh of invisible fibres (assumptions?) by which a culture's worldview is encapsulated in its language or plural means of expression, for many cultures have invested their knowledge and identity in forms other than words or numbers. While Aidoo's recognition of entrapment also indicates the possibility of an inverse perspective wherein there abides a dizzying diversity of conceptual engagements, implicit in the mono-logic language trap is the actuality of power relations. In much the same way as African cultures remain tied to their former colonial masters even in states of independence (and daughters to the word of the fathers), movement and dance, though given access to academic independence, remain relatively impotent in the face of reified values graven into the system's establishments. That said, change is not impossible but happens imperceptibly from moment to moment. We move and, as this very word implies, we change. If we take the point of view that recognition of entrapment produces a minute but significant shift of weight, then a momentum has been initiated that may, along the lines of the butterfly effect in the Chaos theory, result in some unpredictable turbulence in the future.

Currently in academic contexts, dance is on the periphery of power but this situation has fluctuated in time. To reiterate a well documented instance, dance was used as a weapon of state by Louis XIV of France (1638-1715). Faced by the unstable relations between the various kingdoms of central Europe on which he relied for his claim to 'religiously ordained' supremacy, Louis organised the 'rhetoric' or symbolic court hierarchies by means of his courtiers' proficiencies in dance. This particular 'language' of power lay within complex intersections of economy, marriage alliances, religious and idealised ancient Greek symbolism but dance acted as the glue to meld the factors together. As the contradictions of history demonstrate, the logical acknowledgment of dance's significance marked, in western civilisation, the beginnings of its demise. Once Louis had recognised the need for skill development and established *L'école de la danse et de la musique*, as an 'academie' or academic pursuit in its own right, he unwittingly loosened the implacable ties of dance with the court. The discipline developed not to shore up the inviolable right of kings but as an autonomous 'language.' In a sense, given the opportunity, dancers, choreographers and ballet masters, though subject to the unforeseen effects of other historical factors, were given licence to research their field of experience and, in the process, lost their foothold in the realms of power. It may be that Louis' example acts as a demonstration of how dangerous it is to divorce one discipline from the complex interactions of life's affairs, especially those concerned with political power of one kind or another but such reflections cannot change the course of history. On the other hand, there is an argument that these reflections can inform our current approaches to issues of scholarship or, more explicitly, knowledge. For instance, it may be that researchers involved in dance may perpetuate dislocation/alienation from established scholarship by championing the autonomous nature of the form or that too much focus on the unique possibilities of movement may be counterproductive to a 'language' that should be integral to rather than distinct from the bread and butter of life? Or to frame the idea in Diedre Sklar's words: "The concrete and sensory, in other words *bodily*, aspects of social life provide the glue that holds world views and cosmologies, values and political convictions, together" (Sklar, 2001, 31).

Such debates, though often frustrating for advocates of dance scholarship in its plethora of forms, need to be constantly reinvigorated, for they contribute to that momentum straining for change. Likewise, the glimpse into one moment of dance's history is meant to highlight the strange twists as well as the malleability of cultural formations. Ironically, some four centuries later, we are in a similar situation, encountering the entrance of dance practices into the parameters of academic pursuits. Louis might not recognise much less approve of the more radical emanations of today's 'dancing,' but he would probably not deny its claim for knowledge and that is what concerns us here. Aside from deviations from conservatism, the defining factor of the current discipline is that instead of one dance and one 'body' of knowledge, we now deal with many dances and many forms of knowledge. Appreciation of an 'absolute' has been fractured into complexity. Kinaesthetic, proprioceptive, emotional, visual, aura and imaginative knowledges have now been assigned, each through the shaping lenses of culture, to the physical/mental

cognition of dance, though how each contributes to the complex whole is yet to be fully understood. In a sense, the given matter of life, the human body, is proving to be even more extraordinary than suggested by probes into its biological and genetic systems. It is this extraordinary ordinariness that is under scrutiny in the emerging 'performance research,' extraordinary also because all research, to return to the issue of verbal or written representations of knowledge, is irrevocably physical, since all human acts derive from the body and not from disembodied minds. Nonetheless, it is extremely difficult to change perceptions that the body may be the centre of 'knowing,' rather than mere baggage to the brilliant 'dance' of the mind.

**Is subjectivity an issue?**

made in the studio. For my purposes, Chouinard engages in research *in the practices of dance* and ‘publishes’ her findings in the next choreography that she makes. If she was enrolled in an Australian PhD, however, she would need to submit an exegesis to satisfy the requirements of the degree.

Kent De Spain’s observation about movement improvisation, a specialised form where the practitioner is trained to respond instantaneously, akin to a stream-of-consciousness writing process, gives some insight into Chouinard’s process as well, when he notes that improvisation “is a form of research, a way of peering into the complex natural system that is a human being. It is, in a sense, another way of ‘thinking,’ but one that produces ideas impossible to conceive in stillness” (De Spain, 1994, 58). Both Chouinard and de Spain are concerned with internal perspectives of the body in motion, the extent of its muscular memory, its changing relationships with velocity and gravity, spatial organisation, energy lines and so forth. In relationship to the previous discussion on different foci between autonomous and interdisciplinary positioning of dance research, these two choreographers clearly concentrate on internal modes of knowledge.

### **Inter-disciplinary dance research**

Other research choreographers choose more external types of explorations such as how movement communicates between dancers and spectators. This process involves extensive trial and error constructions of rhythmic states, reiterated phrases and manipulations, spatial configurations and varying degrees of speed and inflections together with critical observations of the results. Questions are posed. For example, Australian choreographer, Leigh Warren is currently exploring how to guide and maintain the audience’s focus on a microcosm of small wrist or hip actions at the centre of a group of dancers. Normally, viewing gravitates to the larger mass and the most pronounced actions, so what movement devices might override that habit? Such objectives are not easily attained but if Warren is able to solve the problem, he might well discover not simply a choreographic device but some significant feature of how visual perception operates. Here is just one instance where the practices of dance are irrevocably implicated in other disciplinary concerns. This approach moves outwards from embodiment, correlating consciously or otherwise, Cezanne’s enigmatic observation that “[m]an [is] absent from but entirely within the landscape” (quoted in Deleuze & Guattari 169) which, in my propositional translation, becomes *moving human bodies are absent but entirely within theoretical paradigms*. In effect, Cezanne’s words can resonate similarly through intra-disciplinary investigations, provided some bridging study is generated. For instance, increased knowledge of internal bodily states potentially complements and makes visible the sensate dimensions of medical science, even if the initiating dance research’s principal engagement focuses on the imaginative flesh of complex physical thought.

### **Assessment management**

Having given a brief outline of the intentional parameters and protocols encompassed in performance research as well as some indication of how embodiment may extend manifold and unusual contributions to human knowledge, I would now like to draw attention to some points which, I hope, may allay hesitations about assessment procedures for performance research at a doctoral level. First and foremost, people outside the creative arts disciplines need to be assured that notions of artists as egotistical, self-indulgent personalities and the body, divorced from the mind, as messy, uncontrollable and feminine, are myths perpetuated in society for reasons too complex to enter into here. Artists and the bodies they inhabit work extremely hard to develop skills and a variety of intelligences. Often the passion that drives dancers to pursue their art form is taken for some sort of negligence of civic responsibility. Loving what one does seems to outsiders to situate dancers in *non-work* activities, though the same logic is not applied to teachers, nurses or scientists who happen to be utterly dedicated to their practice. This complicated set of myths tends to place the artist as doctoral student on a lower rung than his or her counterpart in another discipline, merely because dance academics feel the need to forcefully reinstate the credentials of the discipline. Personally, I am inclined to compare artists with mathematicians who are expected to convey their knowledge in the language of numbers as well as in an explanatory, lucid English. These two skills may be diametrically opposed, requiring the person with a brilliant grasp of the movement of figures to articulate the same coherence in the mathematically impoverished language of English. Dancers and musicians face the same problem, needing to be well and truly bi-lingual to emphasise their critically reflective and ‘verbal’ articulation even when the words may appear superfluous. The logical conclusion of asserting *different* forms of intelligence suggests that the corresponding knowledges will be conveyed via

*different* channels of communication, be they mathematical or choreographic. Nonetheless, the challenge of bilingualism is taken for granted by artists choosing to enter doctoral candidatures and their applications are correspondingly screened for aptitudes to complete this exacting requirement. In other words, doctoral candidates in the practices of dance commence their studies with at least the same if not increased potential for serious reflection and discovery as do their counterparts in other disciplines.

From the examiners' point of view, the final manifestation of the rigour of investigation together with highly articulate skills in performance and words form the basis of the evaluation. The other crucial factor is the discipline's maintenance of a shared knowledge base across its various genres, contextualised within theoretical developments in related disciplines. Having only established a visible presence since the 1970s, dance is a relative newcomer to contemporary academic frameworks. At the same time, this picture does not account for the many centuries of explorations carried out beyond the confines of academe, conveyed through remarkably coherent and intersecting networks of the profession. What entrance into university contexts has enabled is a rapid and much more systematic public management of the circulating knowledge. Publication of books, articles and videos have moved hand in hand with recognition of diversity and complexity in our construction of disciplinary concepts, reaffirmed and broadened through debate, exchange, challenge and intra-disciplinary support. Validation of performance research has increased this momentum, generating more detailed resources while reinforcing confidence in our rigour and audacity. Examiners' familiarity with the rapid accumulation of resources becomes in-built into the evaluation process, imposing high expectations on candidates with respect to breadth and detail within analyses as well as evidence of creative agility in word and performance.

Alike any other discipline in the humanities, the performance-plus-exegesis needs to demonstrate a 'substantial and original contribution to the knowledge/s of the discipline/s,' articulated lucidly through embodiment and verbal argument while adhering to all the conventions of the two mediums of communication. Oversights in the technical execution of the performance, such as mal-functioning sound systems, or inadequate physical accomplishments commensurate with the objectives of the study incur the same penalties as would grammatical sloppiness or inappropriate methodology. A study claiming to investigate the re-education of a classical ballet trained dancer for an alternative style such as contemporary dance or butoh would have to demonstrate the degree of enculturation in the first style as a methodological component in arguing for the processes of change. Similarly, propositions that might aim to refute Judith Butler's theories on gender inequalities in cinema through some variable that alters the situation in live performance would have to embody this variable and its effect in the performance. In other words, all the protocols of examination in a thesis-only situation apply to performance research. The only difference, as discussed above, is the medium in which the conceptual investigation takes place. Ultimately, examiners with a sense of responsibility to their profession, with a consciousness of their own credibility and, I would hope, with an integrity to respect divergent views when cogently argued and presented, act on the shared knowledge to guarantee a constructive and fair assessment.

Naturally, every once in a while, an anomaly appears in a system, that should screen out problematic candidates before they submit for examination. I have encountered such an occasion in a full thesis submission where the author demonstrated neither a familiarity with professional knowledge nor the capacity to integrate theoretical discussions into a focussed argument. In this instance, the problem seemed to arise from or be exacerbated precisely from a lack of a specialised knowledge on the part of the supervisor. I suggest that we need to be vigilant about highlighting the importance of supervisory competence, especially though not exclusively where performance research is concerned. The capacity to provide the candidate with disciplinary specific support is a fundamental requirement of acceptance into a doctoral degree, a protocol that should be adhered to scrupulously if we wish to demonstrate our credibility in the two worlds, in my case dance and academic contexts, that we serve.

### **The 'real' problems**

In terms of examination, the current problem is less a matter of impaired knowledge emerging from doctoral studies than the relatively few qualified examiners available to act in this role. The problem, though not insurmountable, is exacerbated by requirements of the performance because these 'publications' cannot be easily packaged and sent to interstate and international examiners. As yet, we have no technological means of replicating live performances to capture the kinaesthetic and arguably

social contexts that convey or precipitate knowledge in performance. This situation means that universities need to take into account the expense and logistics of bringing examiners together in the same time and place. Increasing the pool of examiners will eventually alleviate the local problem but international benchmarking will remain an issue. Strategically, we need to situate performance research expositions in international conferences or find correspondences with visiting companies or experts whereby performances can be mediated against international expectations. It may be that there are considerable advantages in pressing for two qualified examiners in the university sense plus a third who is artistically credible in an international arena. That combination would test the bilingual propensity of the candidate for they would need to measure up to the demanding standards of the profession and those of the university. If this balance could be achieved, we may circumvent the potential danger that acceptance into 'mainstream' research may alienate this 'critical observer/creator' from the professional creator's domain.

The other related point of contention, which additionally distinguishes dance and the creative arts from other disciplines, concerns the financial inequity between the university and the profession. No amount of impressive qualifications will change the situation that performing arts organisations, invariably reliant on labour intensive infrastructures, struggle to survive in an economic climate focused on attenuating human resources in order to gain profit. An ideal interdependence between the university and the profession should envisage sharing limited resources, like supporting research development in academic parameters enabling extended choreographic development periods that could subsequently be channelled into more potent or refined performance products for the general public. However, such propositions raise concerns about limiting company dancers' employment, exploiting students and generally prejudicing future increases in arts funding. Additionally, since artistic reputation is acquired by demonstrations of skills and originality within the profession, little value is placed in artists pursuing university qualifications unless the candidate in question wishes to pursue a teaching career. At the same time, there is little or no dispute about the value of increased visibility and enhanced value to be gained from the current promotion of dance and the performing arts research at a doctoral level.

In an optimistic perspective, these vexed questions may find resolution in a balance whereby recognition of the physical body as pivotal to the human propensity 'to know' challenges the privileged position of the word in western scholarship and, concurrently, enables human communities to participate across many levels of involvement in the dance of being-in-the-world. In the process, embodied articulation of conceptual understanding may imbue words with renewed vigour and possibility. The one need not cancel out the other.

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