

The Body as Archive: In Search of Authenticity

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Abstract: This panel explores processes through which somatic information provides verifiable evidence. Novelty and unfamiliarity of sensory perceptions draw attention, stimulate learning, heighten memory, and ignite the choreographic impulse. Entering the sensory realm alone in search of authenticity, we face these challenges with no other ground than our selves and the transient evidence that moves through the body as archive. Presenters examine: the articulation of knowledge drawn from sensory experiences with dance cultural artifacts; the ‘memory palace’ as a construct to liberate sensate data from ethnographic writing; and somatically engaged fieldwork as a pathway to personal authenticity.

memories from the field: the choreography of field-based inquiries

A memory from the field:

We are sitting outside in the country by a small, empty house. The women are cooking over an open fire stove. After lunch, we lie down on woven mats inside for a nap – Amma, Auntie, Sister, two nieces and me. Later that evening, after our naps, as the sun was setting, we ate food similar to savory pancakes cooked over the outdoor stove. I was not feeling well and had not been eating very much. Amma fed me pieces of the pancake with her own hands. Auntie told me this was custom. Her mother-in-law had fed her like this also. I sat there like a little bird and accepted the morsels of pancake from Amma’s hands into my open mouth.

Authenticity

I was searching for authenticity in my yoga practice in an effort to move beyond appropriation in my yoga instruction. I have studied a range of codified yoga techniques since 1997 and have taught yoga since 2002. Always intimidated by the breadth, history, and complexities of this ancient system, I decided that if I was to continue to teach the form, then it was imperative for me to learn and understand the culture that created yoga. This search for authenticity led me to Tamil Nadu, India first in the winter of 2014 and again in the summer of 2015.

A result of my desire to expand and deepen my experiential understanding of India was a friendship with a Brahmin priest. This relationship led to a trip with his immediate family to the countryside near Thiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu, India. Staying with his extended family of at

least fifty, I slept on straw mats surrounded by women from an ancient Brahmin lineage. My quest for personal authenticity as a yoga teacher delivered me to this community, these people, and Arunchala -- the indomitable mountain of the Hindu god, Shiva.

In Andre Lepecki's paper *The Body as Archive: Will to Re-Enact and the Afterlives of Dances*, he writes of the role of the body as archive (2010). The corporeal --- the bones, blood, muscles, cells, neurons -- store the knowledge. The body acts as a repository, holding and carrying information through time and place. The feel of a lover's hand on your low back can be carried across continents, oceans, and time. The sense of shakiness and ungroundedness found in exploring foreign lands is remembered and transmitted through movement in shapes and images months, or years, later. The memory of being nurtured and nourished stays alive in the cells, to be articulated at a later time, in a different language, in a different country.

Liminality

The British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner's ritual process, derived from the anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep's critical work *Les rites de passage*, is imperative to theorizing my field-based research (1960). Turner's elaboration on Van Gennep's three-part structure of *separation*, *limen/margen*, and *reaggregation* helps me conceptualize what happened with my time in India.

The liminal space is a place in-between, like dawn or dusk -- it is not dark, it is not light. It is a threshold space, not here nor there; existing outside the mundanity of everyday existence. This is a place that will change you.

The liminality inherent in leaving my country of origin produces unsettled feelings as a result of the environmental and cultural unfamiliarity. This unstable, fluid feeling, as if I am balancing on a surfboard, floating out past the break and waiting for the waves, is a place that is

not stable or concrete. This disruption of normality and routine is a zone where my senses enliven and the differences I encounter awaken me. I experience an impression of heightened presence. Worlds are shifting and overlapping in this razor sharp liminal moment.

Exiting the liminal space of my Indian investigations, re-entering, reaggregating, back to the culture of my current home in the southwest of the United States of America, I return altered. Something deep inside me has changed. One of the founders of Performance Studies and close colleague of Turner's, Richard Schechner asserts that the liminal creates change (2014). Part of my process in negotiating this change is the choreography of this liminal tale onto the human form.

When I went to India the first time, I had a certain set of lenses that filtered my reality into a particular vision. I came back a bit altered. I saw differently and to express this, I created the first version of *this is the dream before i die* – an improvised duet between dancer Felix Cruz and myself, and also the durational, improvised piece *lemon lips in the house of tantra*. To explain my chrysalis, I use movement in time and space. Writing, the quality of words, cannot fully express the dimensionality of my experiences. The metaphors and symbols inherent in the language of dance is a more appropriate vehicle to communicate my time in the liminal space.

When I traveled to India the second time, I was reshaped again. The liminality of my two field-based research trips to India created a significant internal shift. By encountering the liminal in India -- not just once, but twice -- a transformation occurred within myself. I expressed this development by choreographing the second version of *this is the dream before i die* – a duet created with two Arizona State University dance majors. I culled movement from the previous duet of Cruz and myself in addition to the performance piece *mirrored* – a durational solo for myself improvised inside a built architectural environment, also a product of my time in India. I

built the material of these pieces from the field memories of my bodily archive.

Another memory from the field:

On the way back to Chennai from Thiruvannamalai, we stopped to visit relatives living somewhere between these two places. After sitting on the floor and eating traditional Indian fare served on banana leaves, the grandmother of the house laid down on the floor beside me and began to nap. As it was late, and I wasn't feeling well, I decided to emulate the old woman, so I too laid down on the mats and napped while the rest of the family sat, moved, and talked around the two of us sleeping.

While I am in India, I absorb the sights, sounds, smells, dress, and customs --- sitting on the floor, eating with my hands, wearing a shawl, figuring out how to use an Indian toilet, bathing with a bucket. When I return to my home country, I carry these experiences with me --- wearing the shawls, eating with my hands, riding on the back of a motorcycle in Chennai traffic, accepting morsels of food into my mouth from Amma's hand, sleeping together on straw mats. The culture of Tamil Nadu, India has seeped under my skin, and I am carrying it home with me.

The corporeal, the body, acts as a repository, storing the information, in which the knowledge is synthesized and later designed into a piece of art meant for performance. My body is the vessel; organizing, selecting, forgetting, remembering, and accessing information. The unknown allows me to I carry what I learn, experience, eat, smell, love, hate, fear, desire -- the experiences and memories of my time in the field -- within my corporeal self.

Body as Archive

The memories stay alive and change inside the body. In this carnal storehouse, a synthesization occurs. Does the information look the same on the other end of the journey? While living inside the archive, unlike a museum with the registrar documenting what comes in, how long the contents have resided at said museum, and when the items leave, all kept in a detailed and up-to-date database, the body transforms and transmutes the information into knowledge that is unique to the repository.

Herein lies the beauty in the impermanence of dance. Just like reality, it is ever changing. Nothing stays the same. Even in the museum, no matter how careful one is with tracking the humidity, mold may make its way inside the archive, challenging the static environment. With the body, the memories are continuous and fluid.

My body is the repository, carrying the knowledge, the archive shifting due to time inside the space of liminality. Performance is a way of communicating memories of my field-based research into the inconstant language of art.

Conclusion

Encouraged by Diana Taylor's book *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* to reexamine the juxtaposition of writing and embodiment (2003, 16), I began to consider choreography a legitimate route to transmitting the knowledge of my Indian field-based experiences and hopefully extending the perimeters of what is considered relevant academic reporting, I used the language of dance to report my experiences in the field. Dance is a language of metaphors, symbols that can express something that cannot be expressed in words, a perfect vehicle for telling my liminal tales.

Lepecki writes "dance can only find its proper archival site onto/into a body---the body understood as an affective system of formation, transformation, incorporation, and dispersion" (2010, 43). My field-based research conducted in India resulted in dance pieces. I can best describe the depth of the multi-dimensional experiences, occurring in the complexities of the physical body and fluidity of mind, via the symbolism inherent in the art of dance. My question is: why is it that writing is considered a more acceptable mode of reporting my investigations juxtaposed with choreography and performance? I consider this preference for the written word an antiquated patriarchal epistemology of the academy. Drawing from Sarah Rubridge's theory

of Artistic Practice as Research in relationship to theory and practice in the academy (2004), I encourage a conversation around these questions: 1) how are we transferring knowledge, and 2) what is the importance we place on the vehicle of that transference -- be that channel a written document or a performance? I encourage the academy to continue to rethink its approach to art, artistic practice as research, and pieces of art as valid and acceptable systems of reporting research.

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Biography

Jamey Garner is a dance artist, educator, student, and adventurer. Her works have been seen in a variety of venues, including the Williamsburg Fashion Weekend in Brooklyn and the Walker Art Center's Choreographers' Evening in Minneapolis. Jamey is pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in Dance at Arizona State University.

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