

Dance in the Field: a genealogical approach

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In September this year I travelled from my home in Melbourne to Darwin to undertake an ethnographic field study of the Northern Territory dance company Tracks, as part of my PhD research. My research titled “Patterns in Performance making: ways of choreographing”, is an attempt to identify and analyse some characteristics of choreographic processes. As a choreographer myself, I am interested in identifying and defining key aspects of what happens when a dance is made. Are there shared experiences common to choreographers when constructing a new dance, particularly in relation to the journey of the dancer in the work? What “tools” might the choreographer choose when faced with a particular problem? How is it possible to articulate the choreographic process? How is movement read and translated between choreographer and dancer? In order to look at some of these questions I decided to approach the research from a genealogical perspective, that is, through a discursive paradigm that allowed me to focus on the intertextuality surrounding the dancers and choreographers involved with the company. By using a range of source material, from semi-structured interviews to observation and archival searches, I am in the process of reshaping my research question to focus on the impact location and spatiality have on the identity and work practices of Tracks. The following paper contains some observations regarding my positionality in the research, as well a brief explanation on why I think it may be useful to approach dance research through a genealogical approach.

Tracks’ Background

Tracks is run by two full-time Artistic Directors: David McMicken and Tim Newth, both who have been with the company for over fifteen years. Other creative staff include two part-time dance animators, Julia Quinn and Erwin Fenis, and a Melbourne-based development officer, Suzanne Fermanis, a key member of the team who comes to Darwin for a short period of time each year for strategic planning. They have a full-time company manager and a part-time bookkeeper. Tracks employ other dancers or choreographers when necessary on a project-by-project basis. The Australia Council currently funds the company triennially.

Artistic Directors, David McMicken and Tim Newth create dance in a context that questions and explores complex cross-cultural networks, producing process based performance work that is driven by the culturally diverse communities they engage with. The company develops public performances aiming not only to connect meaningfully with the audience, but also to develop

rich and mutually satisfying relationships with the performers. As described in the company's *Delivery Plan 2006 – 2008*, Tracks "has developed strong relationships and ways of working with traditional Aboriginal, South East Asian and Pacific communities. With different value systems relating to such things as the extended family, reciprocal learning, the inter-relationship between people, place and spirit and notions of Country and Law, these complex and fruitful relationships give Tracks an innovative perspective."

The company began under the banner of Browns Mart Community Dance Program in 1988 where several projects were instigated and early connections with groups established by dancer and teacher Sarah Calver, an important figure in the company's history. She, along with Tim Newth and David McMicken conducted classes and workshops that forged early relationships with various discrete groups that now make up some of the core community groups the company currently work with. Some of these focus groups are as follows (NB. In bold print are the names Tracks use for each group):

the **Cross-cultural**, which includes Sri Lanjkan, Filipino, and South East Islander groups;

the **Grey Panthers**, a group of approximately 30 predominantly white women aged 50 years and over;

the **Lajamanu**, an indigenous community situated approximately 1000 kilometres from Darwin in the Tanami desert;

the **Youth** dancers ranging in age from 15 - 26, a recent work "Mr Big" includes a cast of 30 with approximately a third of the cast male dancers.

Central to this research is the location of the company, Tracks see themselves as a regional company, and it is necessary for them to operate differently from other dance companies in Australia by embracing what may be perceived as negative elements; they report that "*isolation, small population, vast distances between population centres, small Western-trained base, limited performance opportunities – are what we seize on as opportunities.*"

Tracks Dance attempts to dismantle preconceived notions of cross-cultural dance in ways that are both explicit and implicit; they use a mixture of mature artists as well as youth dancers, they employ different temporal dimensions in regards to rehearsal periods and development of work, and they emphasis throughout their process the importance of past histories and connections with the performers, resulting in relationships meaningful to both dancer(s) and choreographer(s).

Lajamanu

I became interested in using Tracks as a focus for my research after reading about their work with the remote indigenous community of Lajamanu. While the company had worked with other Northern Territory indigenous groups before, it had formed a special relationship with a group of 10 – 15 female dancers in Lajamanu, a relationship that began 18 years ago. I became intrigued at the way in which the Artistic Directors approached their exchange with this community, addressing and modifying preconceived western theatrical and dance traditions by embracing differences in the Lajamanu community in regards to preparation and performances of dances.

As I look at the relationship between the Artistic Director's of Tracks and the Lajamanu community, I am struck by what I see as profound influences the Lajamanu community have on the way the Artistic Director's run their dance company. Both Newth and McMicken have skin names given to them when they were in Lajamanu. Tim is Jampajimpa, David is Japaljari; these names relate them as cousins, a relationship they see as 'one makes the work and the other manages it'. The relationship with the community extends past the studio walls and often includes members of the Lajamanu community staying with McMicken or Newth when in Darwin.

McMicken and Newth visit the Lajamanu community on average once a year and have in the past stayed for months at a time. Their skin names place them in highly complex relationships with members of the community. Anthropologist Graham Harvey, in his work as researcher in Maori communities uses the term "guesthood" when describing his relationship within the communities he studied. Harvey identifies this position as one in which the visitor in the community is treated differently from both a native and an observer. It is a position characterized by active participation from the outsider in ceremonies and important cultural activities on invitation from the community. He goes on to say "guesthood is not available from a distance or to those that *demand* entry, but to those who acknowledge and respect the prestige of their hosts" (Harvey, 2004). The relationship between the Artistic Directors of Tracks and Lajamanu share similar characteristics with this notion of guesthood. McMicken and Newth see their positions in the community as evolving as they learn more about specific cultural activities such as dance, stories or the land.

Crossing Over

What the Artistic Directors and the communities they work with is more than dance steps – it is a fluid exchange between western theatrical and dance traditions and a wholly other(ed) way of looking. The relationships are longstanding and generally held together by key people from each group. The outcome of the work is often clear from the beginning of the project, there will be a performance conceived and directed by the two Artistic directors of Tracks, that will include a place for the groups to perform their particular dances which are generally left intact. However, during the course of a typical Tracks performance, these groups may also explore kinesthetically another

foreign dance form – crossing over into another style. For example a dancer of Philippino background may learn and perform Greek dance steps. These crossovers fulfil the vision of the Artistic Directors, yet are not without their problems. Negotiations occur between the dancers and the Artistic Directors regarding the meaning and/or context of the dance being made. In this way the movement language reflects and describes a marriage of sorts, a relationship that contains compromise, trust, and respect from both dancer and choreographer.

For the purpose of research, I defined the period of focus as the rehearsal period – from the first rehearsal to the first performance. What emerged from the fieldwork was a need to shift the temporal boundaries of my study to reflect the profound importance of the long relationships between Tracks and the dancers they engage with. I needed to acknowledge the importance of these relationships, in order to fully describe what I saw as an adoption of certain cultural markers the Artistic Director's use when making work.

Fieldwork

“Fieldwork offers the...researcher the prospect of reconnection with a former life or the prospect of escape; it sustains the possibility of alternate senses of belonging and self, deftly buried in conceptions of work and intellectual enterprise” (Knowles, 2000).

Over the course of my month long field study in Darwin, I observed most rehearsals the company held and conducted a series of interviews from the key creative personal connected with their new work. I also attended creative development meetings and had a number of insightful conversations with the staff of Tracks as well as past audience members and dancers. The company was developing a youth dance work “Mr Big”, to be performed as part of the 2006 Darwin Festival. While I wrestle with the idea of whether this research is a genealogical or ethnographical study, what is indisputable is that my time in Darwin was most definitely “fieldwork”, a word that until recently I have slightly uncomfortable associations with using as it brings to mind assumptions of the researcher occupying a position of authority and power. Recently though I believe the notion of fieldwork is being re-examined in a much more positive light with the emergence of field studies where the position and partiality of the researcher is brought into question. A postmodern approach to ethnographic research would be to realise that previously held ideas of the ability of ethnography to document and then analyse a particular “truth” no longer holds much sway. Recent scholarship on the position of the researcher in fieldwork understands that the “nuanced shifting multiple subjectivity experienced by many anthropologists” (Wulff, 2000) is a compelling contrast with the previously awkward relationship of native and researcher.

Negotiating the Boundaries

While in Darwin I was aware of keeping a “professional” distance between the research subjects and myself although on various occasions I socialised with them. At the end of the field study I felt I was successful in not crossing the imaginary line where my research would be compromised by becoming too familiar with the company. It wasn’t until I returned to Melbourne and began to research other field studies that I became aware that my experience, where I teetered between keeping a sense of distance between the research subjects, and alternately finding myself in situations where we were extremely familiar, was quite common amongst other researchers involved in fieldwork. A less prescriptive view of ethnography acknowledges a fluid positionality of the investigator, whereby the closeness often encountered in the relationship between subject and investigator often contributes to findings that can only happen through deep understanding. Possibly a less prescriptive approach to the notion of a linear “truth” in fieldwork, may focus on revealing the processes and practices surrounding the subject acknowledging the multiplicities that lie within.

Genealogy

Dance writer Ramsay Burt in his essay “Genealogy and Dance History” discusses the notion of dance historians ignoring the often “troubling and disturbing material dancing bodies” in their analysis of choreography, bypassing the seductive qualities of the dancing body and issues of representation. He goes on to discuss Yvonne Rainer’s seminal work, “Trio A’, (1968, Judson Church, NY) where Rainer forced the viewer to question her representation in the performance by “eliminating the kind of presence that is produced when the audience senses the performers’ pleasure in exhibiting themselves” (Burt, 2004). In doing this she positioned herself firmly outside of the conventions held in dance. Burt likens Rainer’s approach to dance performance as a genealogical one, whereby through reflection on codes of dance practices, she was able to reveal and expose a deeply rooted previously unquestioned convention about viewing/presence and by doing so, opened up other new possibilities of seeing and doing dance. The fact that this work had profound repercussions in the dance world, influencing many dance and performance artists attests to the fact of the potential impact genealogy has in revealing previously submerged practices.

A genealogical study, characterised by its attention to detail, assists in the emergence of new ways of understanding. A genealogical study attempts to map the “descent and emergence of practice” (Tamboukou, 2003). It can be seen as an attempt to document and analyse the surface events of the subject. The small, seemingly insignificant details which when explored, offer new understandings of power relations within the subject, possibly uncovering previously “submerged voices”. A genealogical study follows the Deleuzian notion of the rhizome, a tangled web of multiplicities, resisting one linear reading of truth.

Another key distinguishing features of a genealogical study relevant to dance making is that “genealogy highlights the importance of the body as a site of interaction of material and symbolic forces, a battle field of power relations and antagonistic discourses” (Ball, Tamboukou, 2003). Foucault saw the body as a site that becomes inscribed by social and cultural practices resulting in what is seen as “the process of history’s destruction of the body” (Burt,2004). Burt distinguishes this approach from Judith Butler’s belief that individuals although “subject to impositions of power over time”(Burt, 2003), have a degree of agency within pre-prescribed cultural settings.

Due to its adherence to detail and its concern with descent, genealogy is possibly better suited to archival searches or historical gatherings. Certainly the difficulty in recording dance leaves the researcher with limited archival material to work with. Perhaps then the solution is to have a genealogical approach to an ethnographic study, maintaining a reflective approach to the research while constantly observing the nuances and varied power structures present.

In her essay “Mining the Dancefield”, Anne Cooper Albright discusses the notion of the culture of the individual is driven somatically (that is from the body), and how contemporary dance assists in outlining the “interconnectedness of bodies and identities by foregrounding the cultural significance of somatic experience”.

Albright states “a conviction that contemporary dance could shed light on the current debates about how cultural identities are negotiated and embodied” She distinguishes “between the perception of the body as a passive surface onto which society inscribes its political and social ideologies, with conceptions of the body as an essentially natural phenomenon that precedes cultural conditioning”

When does the process of choreography begin? In the case of Tracks, I would argue that it begins long before the company step into the studio, rather it is the unique philosophy of the company and the way they have deeply embraced and appropriated cultural markers from the groups they engage with, to determine the way they perceive, transmit and ultimately create dance. What has emerged from my research is a need to acknowledge shifting boundaries surrounding the company; my position as observer in the study is much more fluid then simply “researcher and subject”, just as the relationship Tracks have with the diverse cultural groups they work with are more fluid than the simple definition of “artistic directors and dancers”.

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