

Bodies in Motion:  
Signification, Intensities, Dance

by

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B.A, University of Alberta, 2007

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## **Supervisory Committee**

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## Abstract

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In this thesis, the author claims that dance (especially improvisational dance) is a political practice. Rather than following the familiar trope, where the dancing body stands in as a figure of liberation, the author draws on theorists such as Michel Foucault, Pierre Klossowski, and Judith Butler to suggest that bodies in motion are *partially* determined through discipline, coded language, and norms of sex and gender. Citing empirical cases of dance performances and the author's own practice, she suggests that the body in motion is also partially undetermined by cultural conventions. She extrapolates from the example of dance improvisation, where the dancer begins with a norm or loose choreography and, from there, moves into unexpected territory, to offer an alternative conception of the body. The author argues that bodies in motion move between extremes of structure and freedom.

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To my mother, for taking me to dance class.

## Introduction

### The Body in Chains

I could not fix bodies as simple objects of thought. Not only did bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appeared to be quite central to what bodies ‘are’– Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*.

This thesis is concerned with bodies in motion. Bodily motion is a useful technology; it helps us get around, it gives us pleasure, it can be used to communicate meanings to others in the place of language, or it can be considered artistic, as in dance. The body in motion has intensely political connotations. In the logic of oppression or repression, bodies are framed as victims of corruption, culture, ideology, discourse, or power. The body’s capacity for movement is seen to be limited, constrained, or restricted. In Plato’s cave, the prisoners are held in a fixed place by chains. Rousseau and Marx, too, use the trope of a chained body to stand in for the idea that power restricts the movement of the body. As a feminist (and someone who generally feels more free when moving vs. sitting still), I agree with certain aspects of this sentiment. I am often frustrated with the way that women on television move; women are expected to glide, have more controlled movements, or as Sandra Lee Bartky notes, women are typically more restricted, they expected to *move less* in political society. Normalized feminine gestures have a more conservative relationship with space; they are hesitant to move beyond, they are encouraged to appear narrow, skinny, and their walk is hindered by high-heels. In what was a very influential essay for me “Throwing Like a Girl”, Iris Marion Young notes:

Even in the most simple body orientations of men and woman as they sit, stand, and walk, one can observe a typical difference in body style and extension. Women generally are not as open with their bodies as are men in their gait and stride. Typically, the masculine stride is longer proportional to a man’s body than is the feminine stride to a woman’s. The man typically swings his arms in a more open and loose fashion than does a woman and typically has more up and down rhythm than a woman (2005, 32).

Some bodies more than others are admonished to regulate their movement. Somehow a body that is more static is seen as easier to manage, easier to understand and regulate. Similarly, in this gendered economy of movement and gesture, we are sanctioned to carefully manage the kinds of movements that our bodies are allowed to perform. If we perform the ‘wrong’ gestures (or if our gestures appear queer) this often puts us at the risk of homophobic hatred and violence. My point

here is that movement and gestures, which are so often done at an unthinking level of daily life are politically charged. This is one of the reasons I began to be interested in dance and especially dance improvisation; it was a way for me to experiment with and resist cultural norms of movement and gesture. I used to think that movement performed spontaneously, without habit or choreography, was able to escape these cultural norms that are imposed on the body. At the most general level, my research question is *how can dance draw attention to hegemonic gestural norms and the way they constrain and regulate movement? And how can dance begin to change them?*

This is not a new idea. In the same way that the chained body is a trope for oppression, dance (especially modern dance) is also a trope for freedom. Emma Goldman once said, “if I can’t dance, I don’t want to be a part of your revolution”. Dance carries the connotation of authenticity. It is cast as a carefree, joyful, and life affirming practice. Being centred on the body, dance is seen to be more primal, speaking on a deeper level than language. Dance is often feminized; it is cast as the emotionally eruptive counterpart to reason and philosophy. Somehow, the ability to dance is cast as something innate, an ability that all humans have without any training. Dance has always been noted for its transgressive potential. In the classic tale of teenage repression and rebellion, the film *Footloose*, tells the story of how through dancing the youth are able to overturn their corrupt city council. Dance is juxtaposed against authority, oppression, reservation, and politics. In this way, dancing is often cast as a joyous return to the state of nature. “The dancer is a common figure, often invoked to represent the image of authenticity and purity in the face of the supposed materialism and alienation of the modern world” (Janet Wolf, 1995, 75).

## **The Literature**

But once the chains are cut, what is the status of this freely moving body? What kind of movements could it perform? What kind of messages could it transmit without the techniques and languages provided by culture? In what follows, I give a brief literature review of some of the theorists I am working with, all of whom complicate this concept of freely moving bodies.

Michel Foucault argues that the period of sovereign restriction of bodily motility is over. In modern, Western, bourgeois societies, power operates through the self-driven momentum of bodies. He suggests that modern society is now characterized by disciplinary and normalizing

power, where bodies are continuously subjected to power by being trained to move properly and efficiently. From a young age, we are supervised and trained to comport our bodies in a particular way. Gestures are coded into us through carefully planned educational techniques. Subjection under the disciplines structures our capacity for pleasure and the feeling of empowerment in movement. Take the example of dance: with years of technical (and often very difficult) training, the dancer is able to do unprecedented things with her body. When movement becomes habitual (or when we become successfully disciplined) we forget the struggles that have historically occurred at the level of the body. Foucault's work shows that the mobile body is not liberated from social power. On the contrary, the moving body is more directly gripped by power than ever before. The moving body derives its forms and techniques (even its capacity for movement and freedom) from these very power relations.

To return to the trope of the chains; it is a material body that is constrained by the chains of culture. So, when the chains are cut, what can we make of this cultureless material substance? What is this *body*? Is it an inert surface, a stage-floor on which power relations and culture dances across? Rather than taking the body as a basic material surface or fact, prior to any political arrangement, the literature I am using for this thesis takes a critical position on the materiality of 'the' body. What are the processes that lead to the ability to label 'the' body as an object or basic fact? What counts as the body (our body) and what doesn't? What leads it to be understood as something that belongs to us, drawing the line between 'my' body and someone else's? Writers like Pierre Klossowski, Foucault, and Judith Butler have tried to show that both the conceptual understanding *and* the very materiality of 'the' body is a social invention, brought into being *through* politics and power. This makes sense on a very basic level; what we refer to as 'the' body (or 'our own' body) is always changing. My skin is constantly shedding itself, folding inwards and outwards. The boundary that contains 'my' person is a porous and dynamic organ. Also, on a regular basis, I incorporate other substances into my field of kinaesthetic awareness. Bodies fold around prosthetics or mechanical devices. The notion that something not made of skin and bone is external to the body is an arbitrary system of exclusion that works to bind, solidify, and fix a conceptual and material understanding of the body. In other words, aspects of material being escape discourse, while discourse struggles to contain conceptual coherence of the body. Thus, we can think of 'the body' (i.e. the notion of a coherent object, which can be worked on and possessed) as a discursive construction or cultural artifice which

produces the concept of ‘the body’ as a coherent hole purely in the imagination. One of the questions this thesis asks is, what are the processes that come to regulate the materialization of the body?

In *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, Klossowski suggests that the unified ‘proper’ body is nothing more than the accidental coalescing of physical impulse and sign. A sign comes together with a specific impulse. For example ‘pain’ is ascribed to a certain kind of energetic impulse that flows through the body. Once the sign is created, it is made to ‘stand in’ for the experience itself in, what he calls, an economy of language, or a coded system of signification. Everyday language becomes a censoring principle. The conscious agent filters out the impulses that cannot be assimilated to the codes of everyday language. Thus, Klossowski suggests that what we normally conceive of as ‘the’ body is simply an abbreviation, a stunted creature with a whole depth of activity that is forgotten and made silent. The coherent concept of ‘the’ body or ‘my’ body conceals a raging sea of impulsive discontinuities that occur at every moment. Klossowski’s point is that there is more to bodies than we can ‘understand’ or speak about. But this excess is fundamentally absurd.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler takes her argument for the performative constitution of gender a step further. She shows how the body’s sexed materiality is not a given. Rather, she takes up the “notion of matter, not as a site or surface, but as *a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the fixed affect of boundary, fixity, and surface*” (1993, 9). For Butler, the material body is constructed on the basis of different, but interrelated processes. Performativity is a reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effect that it names. Gendered norms and normativities are imposed on infants (when the baby comes out of the womb, the doctor says ‘it’s a girl!’). But Butler suggests that this does not end here, this ‘girling’ must be repeated on a regular basis, by continued identification with that norm, reiterated through various authorities and throughout various intervals of time (1993, 8). This continued ‘taking up’ of gendered identities is sanctioned in what Butler calls the heterosexual matrix. Successful identification leads to certain social rewards, such as the ability to be recognized, or the ability to join in the readily available means for developing relationships and obtaining normal forms of pleasure. In Butler’s work, the figure of the chain shows up again, but in a different way. Invoking the Nietzschean concept of the ‘sign chain’, Butler suggests that we are chained to discursive conventions that allow bodies to materialize and gain access to

intelligibility. Thus, for Butler, the ‘chain’ is not repressive but fundamentally enabling. But related to this, and elaborated more thoroughly in *Bodies that Matter*, this coherent gendered identity is given form through the ritual production and exclusion of the abject identity:

The construction of gender operates through *exclusionary* means, such that the human is not only produced over and against the inhuman, but through a series of foreclosures, radical erasures, that are, strictly speaking refused the central possibility of articulation (1993, 8).

Butler suggests that these regulatory norms have a profound effect; they allow bodies to ‘materialize’ as imaginative concepts. They filter out the bodies that do not fit in with the regimes of intelligibility put forth in the heterosexual matrix. The bodies that escape the norm lose their status as bodies that ‘matter’, or bodies that are allowed to materialize within the concept of ‘the’ pure body. Every time the theorist refers to ‘the’ body, they refer to a normalized body, which is based on the exclusion of its constitutive other. Taking Butler’s comments about the exclusionary practices that go into forming the coherent body seriously, this thesis emerges from a carefully critical standpoint. ‘The’ body is the product of specific and constraining normative frames. Particular social and historical interpellations give rise to specific kinds of subjectivities; in the same way they also give rise to specific kinds of bodies. Techniques, practices, repeated performance acts give form to specific kinds of bodies. Marcel Mauss notes something very similar, the fact that people in our culture wear particular kinds of shoes has altered the very bone and muscular structure of our feet, “the fact that we wear shoes to walk transforms the positions of our feet: we feel it sure enough when we walk without them” (1935, 81). This is all to show that the material body, in its formalized and conceptualized being, is situated in culture and norms of intelligibility. There is no ‘natural’ body, per se. Even the dancing body is not the pure and idealic landscape where political transgression happens without any effort simply once the chains are removed. In all three thinkers, ‘The body’, its movements and gestures, are dependent on language and intelligibility for their expression or actualization—a body mediated by discourse, whose signifying gestures make and unmake sense (Massumi, 2002, 2). While what has been called the ‘linguistic turn’ in theory is very useful for understanding the body in motion, we will find that it runs into an impasse with improvisation. The discursive body is one that cannot improvise; it cannot dance without referencing discursive conventions. Thus, in order to allow theoretical space for improvisation, I will argue that we must move beyond this notion of a purely discursive body.

Given the insights of these three theorists, the prospects for political transgression is significantly more complex than the plot of *Footloose*. This is because the body's very materiality and its capacity for movement are *produced* through the cultural process of discipline, signification, and gendered performativity. As a result, many people have criticized this theoretical treatment of subjectivity and the body as removing the potential for any kind of political action in the face of oppression. If there is no 'body' outside of the constraints of culture, then what is the point? What exactly are we liberating?

The theorists that I have mentioned have some theory of political resistance to the powers that they critique. They each found a way to work within the limitations that they suggested were all-pervasive, whether it is discourse, power, or gender. Their practices of resistance do not claim to liberate the body from the chains of culture. Rather, they find ways to expose the limitations of that culture, to find new forms of embodiment that work to subvert the power of norms to naturalize themselves, and to explore ways of expanding bodies' (in their multiplicity) potential for intelligibility, intensified experience, and of course *movement*. First, in Foucault's later work, he explored the potential for *using* the disciplinary power relations that tend to expand the body's capacity for pleasure, rather than increasing its docility, as a means of resisting sexual normalization (McWhorter, 1999, 177). Recently, feminist scholars have explored this strategy for resistance in the context of body practices. In *Self Transformations*, Cressida Heyes suggests that "our challenge is to find ways of disrupting the circulation of disciplinary power in particular contexts to reveal its contingency, and perhaps more radically, to undercut the stories that discipline likes to tell us about its own benefits" (2007, 8). One of the examples of counter-attack she offers up is yoga. She suggests that in practicing yoga, she has been able to train her body to experiment with different forms and pleasures that allow her to distance herself from the pleasures that keep her in the grip of debilitating normalizing power.

Klossowski's transgressive strategy seems to be in the process of writing, generating singular intensities by pushing language to its limit, exposing it to the impulse and moments of singularity that lie beyond the codes of everyday language. Leslie Hill suggests that Klossowski is important because in his writings, he identifies this fundamental limitation of language by capturing the idiosyncratic singularity of bodily experience. He uses the literary medium to relate differently to language's own borders (2001, 20), exposing the limits of everyday language.

Because it does not have to conform to the imperatives of clarity and logical coherence, literature has a transgressive power that philosophy does not. Characters can switch positions, they can be two people in one, or one person in two, etc. In this way, Hill suggests that literature is able to dance around and on the borders of language, rather than rigorously defending them, possibly rupturing these boundaries once and a while.

Finally, Butler suggests that within the constraints of compulsory heterosexual gender identification, there are moments in between reiterations where transgression is possible. Because gender, sexuality, and the material body are entities that are always in state of becoming, and their consistency is dependent on the constant repetition of norms, the possibility of subversion is in choosing not to repeat them, or choosing to repeat them in a different way. The necessity of repetition opens the possibility of repeating these codes with a difference: “since the law must be repeated to remain an authoritative law, the law perpetually reinstitutes the possibility of its own failure” (1993, 108). Butler’s famous example of this kind of political transgression is drag. In reversing the typical sex-gender combination, drag calls attention to the arbitrary nature of heterosexual law. It disputes the ‘naturalness’ of sex-gender, pointing out the cracks, fissures, and potential for slippage in the laws of gender identification. Drag cannot get outside of the law, but it can parody it, all with the hope of subverting it.

But all these strategies for resistance are, for me a bit limiting, especially when the concern of this thesis is to find ways in which dance can begin to change norms surrounding the body. They are wedded to hegemonic norms, even if they subvert them or playfully critique them. While this deconstructive or critical project is very interesting for dance, I would also like to keep open the possibility of bodily creativity, original movement, and singularity. To do this, I will introduce the concept of *intensity*. In *Parables for the Virtual*, Brian Massumi gives this evocative description of intensities:

Intensity is... a non-conscious, never-to-be-conscious autonomic remainder. It is outside expectation and adaptation, as disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration, as it is from vital function. It is narratively delocalized, spreading over the generalized body surface like a lateral backwash from the function-meaning interloops that travel the vertical path between head and heart (2002, 25).

Intensity is a quality that is experienced by both dancers and audiences. For example, with a sudden change of dynamic and formation, attentive audience members might get chills or goosebumps. In spite of the fact that the movement carries no symbolic weight whatsoever, its

value lies in its power to transmit *affect*. And this affect occurs at an immediate, almost autonomic rate. This is where dance becomes less concerned with expression or communication and more about dynamic, tone, speed and stillness—form and not content.

To summarize, Foucault, Klossowski and Butler commonly share the perspective that the material body is not a pre-given entity. Rather, it is formed and given contours through a process of social conformity and under the limitation of being intelligible to others. Each theorist articulates the inescapability of the laws of culture. To claim a liberatory political project, given the world picture they paint, would write them into silence and inaction. Thus, each comes up with a contingent political activity; working from within a particular system to subvert that very system. This summary of the literature is important because it informs the way I think about dance. It informs my research question, and my argument about what dance can *do politically*.

If the body is something that is *formed* in culture, then is it possible to see how that very body can be *reformed* or *transformed*, shaken up by certain practices? (How) can dance transform the body, its capacity for motion, and expand the possibilities for *what counts* as an intelligible bodily form? (How) can dance rearticulate the limits for what counts as a body (expanding the limits of bodily being)?

### **Dance as Resistance**

To invent bodies of resistance is to choreograph anew the body's potential for energetic social action, for engaging in discursive counter-attacks under the form and force of movement—Andre Lepecki, in *Of the Presence of the Body*

In this thesis, I will make a case for contemporary dance as a politically transformative practice that can subvert hegemonic systems of bodily intelligibility. Dance can work within codified gestures and everyday body-languages—imitating recognizable gestures, parodying them, mocking them, and decontextualizing them. In his essay “Dance and the Political”, Franco articulates this capacity:

Resistance is a trope within which movement and representation are ambiguously articulated. This is because dance can absorb and retain the effects of political power as well as resist the very effects it appears to incorporate with the same gesture. This is what makes dance a potent political form of expression: it can encode norms as well as deviation from the norms in the structures of parody, irony, and pastiche that appear and disappear quickly, often leaving no trace (Franco, 14).

This strategy seems to work with the theorists who are more sceptical of an ‘outside’ position to power relations, Foucault, for example. Because the body is forever encapsulated in a choreography of discursive power relations, the strategy is to treat the body’s movement as text. Dance picks up on, or stumbles into the pedestrian forms of movement that we use to communicate basic meanings to others. Dance has the unique power to create traces of resistance, using the tools and strategies that we, as cultured bodies, already have and are already familiar with, such as pedestrian gestures. I understand gesture as a kind of posturing the body in recognizable positions, for example, extending a hand, for the sake of being read by someone—even if it is ourselves. I think of gesture as a kind of language of the body, or some form of physical expression. Most of the time, a gesture can stand in (or be exchanged) for a word or phrase; it communicates cultural meanings.

I make a kind of loose comparison between verbal/textual languages and body-language or gesture. Each of these languages has internal rules of coherence. As I alluded to above, gestures conform to a kind of grammar; certain postures are associated with certain circumstances or situations. Gesture, like language, is a situated knowledge or system of norms, or a kind of discipline. And like any other kind of discipline, there is a margin for error. It is easy to think of examples of a failure to use gesture properly; too strong of a handshake, nodding up and down when one means to express ‘no’. My point, here, is to suggest that there is a code or grammar that applies to gesture. In Klossowski’s fiction, his character Octave quotes Quintilian: “Some think there is solecism in gesture too, whenever by a nod of the head or a movement of the hand one utters the opposite of what one is saying” (1969, 97).

In the abbreviated, sometimes spontaneous quality of gesture, there is more room for error or grammatical slippage. It is easier to misinterpret a gesture than it is with language. Often there is a perplexing duality between the more direct expression of the body and the more mediated expression of verbal or written language. We might say one thing and gesture another—poker players know this. This is where dance has an important poetic licence for the

body. I am interested in the way that dance incorporates these gestures, to construct (or deconstruct) meaning. It uses gestures to encode and decode meaning, playing with and trying to find loopholes in the grammatical rules of body language. I am interested in how choreographers pick up on certain gestures, bringing our attention to the contrived quality of much of the movements that we perform unthinkingly. Dance has the capacity to take something as simple as a hand wave, which in all likelihood took more than a couple repetitions to learn, and treat it as an artistic movement. In other words, it calls attention to the (un)naturalness of bodily gesture, ‘absorbing the effects of political power’. Dance, as textual inversion, tries to pick up on the slipperiness between situated gestures and specific meanings. I am also interested in the way that the disciplined body of the dancer maintains openness to forms of gesture. In the same way that a writer or poet has greater access to language to express and deconstruct meanings, the dancer’s body can act almost as a conduit for various gestural expressions, conjuring up recognizable and unrecognizable gestures in different contexts.

I will look at some choreographic examples of dance that treats the body as text, emphasizing the body’s surfaces and externalities, rather than its interior depth or subjectivity. The best example that illustrates this style of choreography is De Keersmaeker’s *Rosas Danst Rosas*, which I describe in more depth in Chapter One. This piece repeats a seriated code of normalized feminine gestures, in a way that points to their lack of authenticity or originality and highlights the bleak externality of familiar modes of embodiment.

That being said, I do not think this is the only way in which dance can be transgressive or politically potent. While I am cautious of making a case for dance as a romanticized, pre-discursive (non-textual) return to some pre-cultural state of nature, I also think it is too limiting to call dance a purely textual (or deconstructive) practice. Rather than treating gestural acts literally, dance can also stretch movement and the body’s capacity for communication to its limit, reaching thresholds of intensity where all meaning and notions of coherent unity break down. Using the physical presence of the body, but also careful lighting, music, and set creates charged presences, not only of bodies, but of absences and ephemerality. In this intensified state of dancing, the stable of materiality of the body is put into flux. Dance engenders, what in contemporary French philosophy has been called the ‘energetic’ body or the ‘intensified’ body (James, 2001, 61). This kind of dance is resistant to attempts (within medical discourse, for

example) to capture, objectify, name, and fix bodies. What is interesting about this kind of intensified dancing is that these are the moments that often do not make any sense to audiences, they do not have a clear narrative; members of the audience often leave scratching their heads, wondering what the point was. Nevertheless, such performances may be profoundly affective on another level than strictly ‘having a point’. This is because these moments of intensity expose the limits of everyday language and everyday bodies. It is the singularity that is so absurd that it cannot be assimilated into code. As a result, it is very difficult to gain any sense of *understanding* about these intensified events. To ‘understand’ them or conceptualize them (as a narrative or some psychological message) would transform them into another piece of everyday code. This paradox poses a challenge for writing about this experience in watching and performing dance. But just because these intensified moments cannot be grasped, does not take away from their presence, however fleeting it is.

### **The Oscillating Body**

In watching many different styles of contemporary dance, different styles of choreography, it is my sense that that body is neither purely discursive, nor purely singular or authentic. Rather, our bodies and the styles in which they dance oscillate between these two extremes. Some bodies are more censoring (or captivated by discourse) and other bodies are more impulsive (pushing convention to its limit). These characteristics alternate between different bodies and different historical periods. To say that the moving body falls into either one category or the other is too reductive.

Thus, throughout this thesis, I am careful to emphasize that there is no generic or essential concept of ‘dance’; neither is there a generic dancing body. Different dance techniques produce specific kinds of bodies, and different historical periods produce specific choreographic trends. For a critical theoretical account of dance, I need to establish that dance is not pre-disciplined and it is not inherently authentic. The dances that I analyze, even my own experience with dancing, come along with many years of training, disciplining, and coding. I will be analyzing dance in language and discourses that have their own codes and cultural contingencies. This process of theorizing and writing on dance has no doubt influenced my own practice of dancing. In this thesis, I am not suggesting that there is an innate or pure ‘dancer in everyone’ who can be liberated through some emancipatory project. Rather, through these contingencies of

language and dance, I try to gain some footing in the rich practice of reinventing bodies in critical theory and dance.

To make this argument, I draw on theoretical texts and dance performances. As I mentioned above, I think that they have a unique capacity to inform and fuel each other. Throughout my writing, I draw reciprocal inspiration; theory helps me to understand dance, and dance helps me to understand theory. As a result, I blend the two forms of analysis together throughout. However, in Chapters Three and Five, I write more from the perspective of dance. An unexpected result of this, for me, has been to gain a more critical view on theory and academic discipline.

### **Choreography vs. Improvisation**

It is also important to note the different styles of dance I will be considering for this thesis. One of the dualities that shows up every now and again is choreography vs. improvisation. Generally choreography refers to a planned or composed quality in dancing. It can also refer to a relationship of power between the actor(s) planning the dance and the actor(s) performing the dance, even though the roles are not mutually exclusive. Choreography, for me, means a directed and guided flow of movement. Thus, choreography implies a power relation between the choreographer and the dancer. If we construe this more broadly, we can also say that social norms and conventions are a kind of choreography that captivates the movement of individual bodies. There are degrees of choreography; in some dances, every single breath or eye glance is planned. In other dances, there might only be a trace of choreography; the dancers fill in the rest on the spot. Choreography aims to give form and structure to movement, sometimes drawing inspiration from narrative or geometrical patterns. On the other hand, improvisation usually refers to movement that is spontaneous or unplanned. Sometimes, improvised movement is said to come directly from the individual dancer's immediate will. I argue that this way of seeing improvisation is problematic—it either ends up in cliché or immobilization (chapter Five). As a result, improvisation has been called a 'more democratic' form of dance, removing the power relationship between the choreographer and dancer. Improvisational dance also claims to have a 'more authentic' relationship with the body's movement. Rather than performing someone else's choreography, improvisational dancers are allegedly more in tune with what

‘their own’ body needs.

After some consideration, I have come to the conclusion that pure improvisation is rare, and often too romanticized to be taken seriously in a critical analysis of dance. Most of our movement (even if it is spontaneous or ‘in the moment’) draws on some form of habitual encoding of our bodies. Thus, even the most spontaneous movements have some element of social choreography involved. Rather than claiming that improvisation is a more authentic mode of embodiment, I suggest that we can think of improvisational movement more as an experimental process, to gain a better sense of the habitual sedimentation and contingencies in our bodies. I argue that improvisation should be thought of as a relational encounter between performers and their environment. This play between choreography and improvisation will no doubt make its way into the methodology of my thesis. Some chapters will be more choreographed, while others are more spontaneous and free-flowing.

### **Thematic Overview**

Beginning from the trope of ‘chains’, dance as political resistance (critique) or action (change) typically falls into two patterns. First, hegemonic gestures are seen to constrain the body while dance is viewed as liberating the body from these restrictions. In this pattern, dance breaks the chains of convention. The problem with this kind of argument is that it ends in an essentialist view of the body—one that risks reifying another idea concerning how the body ‘should’ be or move. What happens when the dance that was supposed to be freeing becomes a constraint of its own?

To work through this problematic in relation to improvisation, I explore Foucault’s genealogical work in *Discipline and Punish, Power/Knowledge*, and *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*. I examine his comments on the ways that gestures and modes of bodily comportment are inscribed on to the body. After considering the body as something ‘totally inscribed by power’, with no ‘natural’ state, I suggest that some of the discourses employed in contemporary improvisational dance should be rejected on the grounds that they point to a romanticized and potentially dangerous ‘authentic’ movement. In this chapter, I consider two choreographic examples of how dance works within this all-encompassing totality of power, Pina Bausch’s *Café Müller* and Teresa De Keersmeaker’s *Rosas Danst Rosas*. I argue that

through seemingly endless repetition of pedestrian gestures, these dances point towards the strangeness of these gestures and work to decontextualize them. I also look towards how improvisational experiments, like those done at Judson Memorial Church in New York also have this textually subversive potential. Chapter One is mainly about trying to free this discussion of dance (especially improvisational dance) from essentializing discourses. It argues that all movement has at least *some* relationship to discipline and code.

This leads to the second pattern of thinking dance as political resistance. The power that keeps bodies circulating in fields of discourse is fundamentally enabling. Thus, the metaphorical chains should not be broken through dance; without chains, there would be no dance. In order to posit dance as critical or resistive, then, it must stay within the constraints of culture and intelligibility, perhaps playfully subverting them (chapters One and Four).

However, I maintain that this is not the only way in which dance can be thought of as politically potent. As an improviser, I tend to dance with the belief that uncoded, unexpected movement is a possibility (even if it does not always happen). Thus, I privilege theories that allow for impulsive bodies outside of everyday conventions or coded language. In this case, I consider the work of Pierre Klossowski and Laura Hengehold's critical appropriation of Kant in *The Body Problematic* (chapter Two). These texts show how the bodily forms that get taken up, repeated, and defended are those which can be communicated within the recognizable codes of everyday language. Thus, the intelligible body tends to conform to the abbreviated categories that language offers. Meanwhile, much of our bodily being is censored and relegated to silence. Klossowski's work is critical of this codification of bodies, and as I mentioned above, his literature aims to remove bodies from the 'sensible' realm of language, and intensify them using poetic language. I find Klossowski's work to be important and useful for theorizing the body because, while it points to the discursive aspect of bodily life, it also gestures towards an impulsive, intense, and unintelligible depth—one that is foreclosed on a regular basis in order to 'make sense' of the coherent body in everyday culture. In this chapter, I relate this to Chunky Move's *I Want to Dance Better at Parties*. This performance takes text from sociological interviews and physicalizes, intensifies, and pushes the body's capacity to communicate meaning in a gestural manner.

In addition to the impulsive character of bodies, this thesis focuses on dances that move on the edges of cultural intelligibility, for example Xavier Le Roy's *Self Unfinished*. According

to Butler, bodies which do not reference hegemonic norms of sex and gender are suspended in a groundless, weightless realm of abjection, without ‘sure footing’ (1993, 139).

The body which fails to submit to the law or occupies the law in a mode contrary to its dictate, thus loses its sure footing—its cultural gravity—in the symbolic and reappears in its imaginary tenuousness, its fictional direction. Such bodies contest the norms that govern the intelligibility of sex (1993, 139).

‘Bodies that matter’ only matter because they are linked into the ‘sign chains’ that help us make sense of the world. Without the weight provided by cultural intelligibility (here Butler uses the language of movement and materiality as metaphor), bodies stumble and are unable to initiate movement. Thus, it is difficult to imagine Butler’s figure of the abject as a dancer. Chapter Four positions *Self Unfinished* and *Bodies that Matter* against one another, showing how Le Roy’s performance both supports and subverts Butler’s argument. For example, Le Roy is able to radically dematerialize and rematerialized in an unintelligible form (subverting Butler). But he is only able to do this while sandwiched between recognizable bodily forms—i.e. his radically unintelligible body is developed gradually through the playful subversion of gendered bodies. He then becomes mired in the ‘weightless realm of abjection’, he quickly returns to a normalized bodily state.

Chapter Three represents an interruption—a moment where theoretical effort is (for the most part) suspended and dance is allowed to speak for itself. Grappling with the paradoxical space between effort and grace, it contains no predetermined message or outcome. ‘Interlude’ consists of recollections of dance performances that I have participated in as an audience member (*Dark Matters*), or that have caused a stir (*Involuntary Dances*), or dances that I have practiced personally (Contact Improvisation, Noguchi Taisou). My intention is that ‘Interlude’ will rupture the theoretical trajectory of the thesis and begin to articulate a new language of the body—one based on the felt experience of dancing, moving back and forth from rigid choreographic codes and moments of intense creativity. A body (of thought) in motion.

Chapter Five continues along similar lines, this time focusing on the practice of improvisation. First, I use arguments for intelligible bodies to critique romanticized discourses of improvisation. However, I oscillate from my previous position, this time allying myself with improvisation. From the perspective of an improviser, I argue that bodies are more than just discourse and are capable of creating original movements, outside of the weight of cultural sign chains. I draw on Brian Massumi and Erin Manning to show how bodies have an incipient

quality—or potential for movement—that is different from actualized movement, or movement that has already taken form. I argue that improvisation can be thought as a relation of these incipient bodies, full of unexpected potential and impulse.

This thesis complicates the trope of freedom through movement, such as in the allegory of the chains, drawing on theorists like Foucault, Klossowski, and Butler. They all argue that ‘the body’ cannot unproblematically be the site of liberation, because ‘the body’ is thoroughly subjugated by power, discourse, and normativity. This argument most definitely applies to dance. In most cases, the dancer’s movements are activated and made possible by discipline, training, technique. In most cases, dance is considered profound (or recognizable) because of cultural regimes of intelligibility. Thus, far from being a site of liberation, dance is intertwined with subjugating power. We might even say that dance would be impossible without power, discipline, and discursive community. It is impossible to move outside of the grips of power. Power is what enables movement in the first place.

In Foucault, movement outside of power is an impossibility. In Klossowski, there is an ‘underbelly of impulsive’ life, outside of everyday coded language. But this ‘outside’ is fundamentally absurd (i.e. the second it is harnessed into a formula or code, it loses its singular intensity). Similarly, in Butler, hegemonic normativity produces an ‘outside’ (bodies that don’t matter). But this ‘outside’ is paralyzed from movement or political action because it is by definition unintelligible. For Butler, the kind of resistive movement I am interested in with dance is only possible from within regimes of intelligibility or discourse.

In this thesis, I discuss improvisation in dance as a peculiar case which simultaneously reinforces and subverts this line of argumentation. On the one hand, the predicament of the improviser displays perfectly the body’s intertwining with power and discourse; ‘spontaneous’ movement often draws from or cites cultural techniques, artefacts, or gestures. As Butler attests to, this process of citation is profoundly empowering or enabling. But on the other hand, the process of improvisation often builds intensity and departs from recognizable techniques or intelligible norms.

## Chapter One Political Movements

### The Score

°Everyone sit back; ask yourself ‘what does the space need’?

°Dancer(s) immediately respond; follow your original impulse until it reaches a natural ending; then leave the space

°Now other dancer(s) enter and give their interpretation of the first dancer’s movement/stillness; try and match the trajectory of the original impulse

I distinctly remember doing this score at a workshop when I first started improvising. The workshop was full of semi-professional and professional dancers, many of whom I had seen perform. I was extremely nervous. When it was my turn to initiate, I entered the space and stopped at a point, centre-down stage, closest to the audience. I moved in a way that was familiar for me; making circles with my right leg and letting the rest of my body flow along with the movement, responding to the stimulus of leg. My quality of movement was spiralling, and flowing. But my nerves were still strong—on some level I felt like I was just ‘going through the motions’, but I didn’t think the audience noticed.

When my movement grew stale, I left the space. Afterwards, another dancer gave her interpretation of my movement; she went out into the furthest possible point on the upstage (farthest away from the audience) and pulled her shirt over her head, covering up her face and eyes—mimicking my ‘lack of presence’. She performed my movement in an exaggeratedly small and unimpressive way. I sat there and watched this dancer openly critique my movement. She had repeated, yet radicalized, my habitual gestures. It was destabilizing to know that my internal experience of nervousness was translated into a stereotypical posture, easily recognizable by my audience. My improvisation was a rehashing of habit and convention, expressed through my body without my sovereign control. It was also destabilizing to know that the way my dance was being interpreted was completely out of my control. Through my experimentation with workshops like this, my

entire understanding of dance changed.

I think it is important to critically theorize this political purchase of improvisational dance. This is, after all, a project of looking at dance politically. The work of Michel Foucault is important groundwork for any thought on the politics of the body to consider carefully. This chapter focuses on Foucault's critical account of normalization, specifically applied to dancing, improvising bodies. Just as improvisation is posed against choreography, Foucault's account is opposed to the juridical model. This is where an ontologically prior individual relies on sovereign power—on an understanding of the self as monarch, residing within the palace of the body (Heyes, 2007, 6), totally in charge of its own motions. But in Foucault's formulation of disciplinary power, power circulates—it cannot be possessed and wielded by sovereign actors. This 'wielding' of power never stays put with one actor or sovereign subject—it unpredictably shifts. Power operates on individual bodies to manipulate their movements and gestures. The very materiality (musculature, bone structure) of the body is formed under disciplinary power—inculcated with techniques and habits that are never really our own. But then those very bodies, totally subjugated by power, turn around to become the very vehicles of power; these disciplinary techniques are fundamentally enabling.

Bodies are formed in relation to the norm; modes of comportment are trained into us, they are not our original expressions. Not only are our expressions, postures, bodily forms etched onto us by a society of norms, but also our desires, our excesses, our passions are reactive, they are also produced by these circulating forces. Disciplinary power is constitutive of the subject, rather than external to it; it creates—rather than being imposed on—types of individual (Heyes, 2007, 6). I argue that this is a useful way of thinking about dance. In dance, I am not the sovereign over my movement; rather, social relations speak through my body in ways that are not always known to me; the gaze of the audience makes me nervous, but after a while, I become more confident and I am able to wield those gestures and that gaze in a way that seems to my advantage.

Many theorists have critiqued Foucault's articulation of the body, arguing that it leaves little room for resistance to oppression and political action; "if we capitulate to Foucault's analysis, we will find ourselves caught up in a sado-masochist spiral of power and resistance which, circling endlessly in heterogeneous movement, creates a space in

which it will be quite impossible convincingly to argue that women under patriarchy constitute an oppressed group, let alone develop a theory for their liberation” (Toril Moi, quoted in McWhorter, 1999, xiv). Under Foucault’s model, any form of resistance that claims to get outside of the field of power relations and normalization is impossible. He critiques such resistive strategies for having a nostalgic and problematic attachment to the ‘natural’ and ‘the authentic’. Foucault shows how the ‘natural’ and ‘authentic’ are framed as liberatory gestures, but are still instrumental in the process of subjection.

When I first came to the practice of dance improvisation, I was told that I was supposed to meditate and get to a place where all my technique, habits, and gestures were drained; “clearing the environment and listening for an *inner* impulse” (my emphasis, Forti, 2003, 55). I was supposed to achieve a state of raw physicality, uninformed by anything else; I was to find my ‘natural’ body, my pre-technical, my childhood body, my body prior to cultural inscription. This discursive framing of improvisation falls back into the paradoxical repressive hypothesis that Foucault aims to get away from. Foucault might respond to this by saying that even improvised movements are still choreographed by the forces of power that pull on the body and subjectivity. This model of improvisation also involves a problematic assumption of sovereignty; the subject who takes control over their natural body is still wrapped up in totalizing relation of power between mind and passive body. Understanding disciplinary power challenges the distinction between choreography and improvisation. This dissonance between normalizing power and discourses of dance improvisation is what I intend to work through in this chapter. I suggest that if we are to think of dance as critical political action, we need to get away from this essentializing discourse.

That being said, I still think dance and Foucault’s writings work together. After all, isn’t Foucault’s analysis of power relations a kind of improvised dance? Rather than a dialectical tango, Foucault’s dance moves through a multiplicity of dancers. Foucault articulates the world as a field of vibrant forces. In *Power/Knowledge*, he describes power as circulation; a flowing force that cannot be pinned down or localized in the hands of one actor (98). For Foucault, power dances; it pulsates across the stage-floors and surfaces of individual bodies and populations. Power has no teleology or choreographed end; yet it choreographs and guides bodies as it spirals along. Foucault’s texts are a literal

embodiment of powerful forces. Resistance has a literal sense of physicality; it creates tension, harnesses energy and creates the capacity for movement. We know that pulling opposite ends of a rubber band produces the kinetic energy for the rubber band to shoot through the air. In the same way, resistive qualities in the body make for powerful, vibrant, and intensified dances. This is all an understanding ('a grid of intelligibility') that works in the practice of dancing. Foucault speaks in terms of movement, he "physicalizes words" (Foster, 2002, 233). Because Foucault dances theory, he is indispensable for theorizing dance.

Foucault treats embodied practices as political resistance. He suggests that even in spite of bodies existing wholly within the field of power relations, the primary mode of resistance (revolt or counter-attack) is 'at the level of the body'. In *Discipline and Punish*, he mentions that "in recent years, prison revolts have occurred throughout the world.... In fact, they were revolts, at the level of the body, against the very body of the prison" (1977, 30). Similarly, he ends his first volume of *The History of Sexuality* with the possibility that "the rallying point against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures" (1978, 157). In this chapter, I explore what this prison-revolt or this counter-attack could look like for dance. I will go through some of Foucault's insights on the culturally inscribed body, in relation to gesture. I argue that, for improvised dance to be thought of as a critical political practice, we should reject its humanizing and essentializing tendencies. Rather, I make a case for thinking of dance as genealogy, that is, with the potential to highlight the strangeness of familiar gesture. In stylistically repeating and decontextualizing familiar gestures, dance can possibly disrupt the circulation of disciplinary power, revealing its contingencies, and radically undercutting often unquestioned norms of bodily being.

## Economies of Gesture

It is already one of the prime affects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires come to be identified and constituted as individuals (Foucault, 1980, 98).

It is my intention in this next section to elaborate on Foucault's account of disciplinary power and normalization throughout his genealogical writings and work through this account to show how there are only a limited number of gestures that the dancer (even when improvising) can choose from. As I mentioned above, Foucault formulates his understanding of power against the judicial understanding, where there is a sovereign ruler or decision maker who is responsible for everything under his or her jurisdiction. On the level of the body, the juridical model is associated with a version of mind-body dualisms, where the sovereign mind is in charge of an inert body. Political agency in this formulation is to have complete jurisdiction over one's body. By this same logic, oppression is when this personal responsibility is prevented and subjects lose the ability to control or determine what happens with 'their own' bodies. Under this model (which our society is arguably caught up in) human subjects are expected to be good managers of our bodies. When we are unable to do this (and unfortunately, some bodies are more difficult to normalize than others), there is a danger that someone will take control for us (for example, the patient loses the ability to control herself once she is interned in an asylum) and we lose our status as rational agents (McWhorter, 1999, 146). Alternatively, Foucault wants his readers to pay attention to the other forms of power that occur at the edge of the juridical concept and formal law. He shows how the body is inscribed with recognizable forms through a function of power that we often do not recognize to be restrictive, but rather constitutive, or even productive. In other words, liberatory discourse often relies heavily on concepts that are inherently imbued with cultural power. This is the form of power that juridical logic completely ignores. Where the better we become at 'managing' the movement of our body, the more thoroughly subjugated we are.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault leaves behind the mind-body dualism and focuses on the emergence and development of disciplinary power. Rather than taking minds and bodies as *a priori*, Foucault shows how modern power has a particular view of the human

body; “within disciplinary technologies, the body is an intricate yet pliable instrument, capable of being trained, tuned to better, more efficient performance, a fine machinery of parts to be regulated, segmented, put to work, reordered, and replaced where necessary” (Grosz, 1994, 151). In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault shows how power targets individual bodies and works on them in order to a. increase their docility so that they are easier to manage or train and b. to develop their capacities, so that they can effectively perform certain tasks. This work is done by what he calls the disciplines; “the historical moment of the disciplines was the moment an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, not at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely” (Foucault, 1977, 137-138). With the emergence of disciplinary power, “what was being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviours” (138). Through the careful organization of bodies in space and regulation of activities, bodies could (and would) be encouraged to perform certain tasks and comport themselves in certain ways—the ‘certainty’ or ‘correctness’ of tasks and postures is determined by the knowledge/power combinations of the body-disciplines.

What is important for this chapter is how the spatiotemporal regulation of acts establishes a relationship with appropriate gestures and appropriate contexts. Let’s take one of Foucault’s textual examples:

A well disciplined body forms the operational context of the slightest gesture. Good handwriting, for example, presupposes a gymnastics—a whole routine whose rigorous code invests the body in its entirety, from the points of the feet to the tip of the index finger. The pupils must ‘hold their bodies erect, somewhat turned and free on the left side, slightly inclined, so that, with the elbow placed on the table, the chin can be rested upon the hand, unless this were to interfere with the view; the left leg must be somewhat more forward under the table than the right. A distance of two or more fingers must be left between the body and the table; for not only does one write with more alertness, but there is nothing more harmful to the health than to acquire the habit of pressing one’s stomach against the table.... (152).

When students first learn how to write, they are given detailed choreography by an instructor; “discipline or ‘normation’ intensifies movement and space by breaking them into smaller units, each of which can be brought more closely into line with a standard”

(Hengehold, 2007, 150). The students are seated in desks organized in rows down a classroom so that the teacher can walk through monitor their progress and give corrections (Foucault, 1977, 145). They are given time-tables; everyday before lunch they spend an hour repeating their lettering (150). They are taught to hold their pens and sit in their desks correctly so that they do not get ink on their hands and press their stomachs against the table (152). Eventually, through the continual repetition of this process, most of the students will learn this gymnastic code of micro-movements without the observation and correction of the teacher—the relationship between trainer and trained is internalized. In other words, most of the students will become coded<sup>1</sup>. I am using some of these techniques right now, unconsciously letting my fingers glide across the keyboard while sitting upright in my office chair. The repeated gesture of writing has even left marks on my bones (I have a groove in my ring finger for where my pen sits). Disciplined gestures have become ingrained in my muscle-memory, as Susan Leigh-Foster puts it, power has been ‘in-sinew-ated’ into my very musculature (2002, 217).

Over time, we forget that these supposedly natural bodily movements began as a kind of draconian choreography drilled into us by an often humiliating education process. The body ‘comes to life’ or is brought into actualization by taking on a disciplined form of gestural comportment. It is difficult to think of an enjoyable or even liveable life without any discipline or skill. With the successful memorization and internalization of the disciplines, over a period of time, we go about our daily life performing coded gestures (disciplinary choreography) without even noticing it; tying our shoes, adjusting our postures, even dancing at a club. Not only are we encoded with countless combinations of technical gestures, but we are also encoded with a sense of when and when not to employ them. All this happens ‘at the level’ of the body, most of the time, without the sovereign control of the mind. One of the things I find most interesting here is the fact that through this spatiotemporal regulation of physical action, disciplinary power establishes a relationship between appropriate gesture and appropriate context. When learning how to write, the students also learn to exclude their learned gestures from their activity at hand;

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<sup>1</sup> Some students will not learn how to write under these mechanisms. Likely those children will be diagnosed with a learning disability, moved to a different classroom, and be put under a different regime of disciplinary training.

they learn not to confuse activities and context. We learn to enact specific gestures during specific times and within specific contexts, often in an unconscious way; we have a general understanding of ‘inside-voices’ and ‘classroom behaviour’.

In *The Body Problematic* Laura Hengehold gives a compelling analysis of Foucault’s economy of bodies and gestures. Drawing from his earlier anthropological work, Hengehold argues that bodies are more like statements (*énoncés*) than referents, more like events than objects (2007, 167). For linguistic communication to be possible, certain utterances and meanings are deemed unintelligible in order to create a kind of syntax. This exclusion creates logical sphere (or limited context) where there is a scarcity of words and meanings, making it possible to communicate our various experiences to one another; “the exclusionary function of these institutions...demonstrates the necessary limitations that must be placed on the multiplicity of incompatible contexts for experience to take on a unified shape, to refer to itself, and to be interpreted on its own terms” (179). If we take the body as something that is formed by disciplinary power, then those forms, as well, must be limited in order to be recognizable within a common social realm (181). Certain bodies, visceral experiences, and modes of expression are excluded to structure a system where certain gestures stand in for certain meanings. This limitation is what Foucault refers to in the *History of Sexuality* as an economy of bodies and pleasures (1978, 159). In other words, gestural possibilities are limited in order to establish cultural coherence; they must be scarce in order to make sense (I will discuss this notion of ‘economy’ more in chapter Two). Power is that which constrains us to appear or perceive in a certain way:

We think of the materiality of statements and bodies as an effect of the finitude or discursivity of the human understanding, the fact that it must both realize and restrict its application of concepts at a determinate level of detail or analogy (197).

My point, here, has been to show how gestures are imprinted onto the body, such that they are expressed without the sovereign control of the subject. These gestures are necessarily limited and held in common in order for bodies to make sense in a community. Disciplined gestures are not always like writing or holding a gun. Dancers also learn gestures through a similar process; choreography or dance technique. After much practice and rehearsal, the dancer can perform a triple pirouette with the same ease that she writes

her shopping list.

**(Un)natural Bodies, Recalcitrance, Failure**

For Foucault, there is no ‘natural’, primordial, or pre-cultural body before this disciplinary formation. Bodies are always products of the discursive arrangements of power. Prior to power, bodies are in a state of deformation, they have no abilities, they have no attributes. These abilities are always produced by the training of disciplinary power. However, Foucault shows how the concept of ‘natural body’ emerges as a critique of the ‘mechanical body’ and is created and used by disciplinary regimes. He draws primarily from the 1772 text written by a military disciplinarian, J.A Guibert. Guibert paid attention to how mechanical and ‘excessively artificial’ discipline was not effective for every body. While disciplinary techniques were successful most of the time, and with most people, there were always some subjects who did not catch on or that took longer to train. Even with the meticulous break down, seriation, and repetition of proper gestures, some bodies refuse; they are recalcitrant.

On entering most of our training schools, one sees all those unfortunate soldiers in constricting and forced attitudes, one sees all their muscles contracted, the circulation of their blood interrupted... If we studied the intention of nature and the construction of the human body, we would find the position and the bearing that nature clearly prescribes for the soldier (Guibert, quoted in Foucault, 1977, 155)

In *Bodies and Pleasures*, Ladelle McWhorter discusses the significance of this appeal to the natural bodies. First, it establishes a layered stratification of the body; there is the visible, external surface of the body, and an internal force that resists. Now more than just the mechanical body, “there is something in the body itself, some force that is internal to it” (McWhorter, 1999, 152). Rather than exhaustively trying to subdue the natural forces that inevitably cause the body to ‘fight back’ against discipline, Guibert was the first to utilize this natural force to compliment and augment the processes of discipline. Knowledge of the developmental trajectory of the natural body could work with the disciplines to maximize their potential. But this knowledge of the body’s nature was simply a essentializing generalization; “bodies came to be understood not just as functioning organisms but as thoroughly temporal beings that always operate according to a desirable set of functions...the natural is just the normal” (1999, 153). Now, when a body

fails to be disciplined, there is something abnormal with the individual's internal nature. For instance, in the example of handwriting; the student who fails to internalize the discipline of handwriting under the specified guidelines is put into a special classroom. Thus, the emergence of organism-body marks the transition from disciplinary power to normalization; a power which takes a hold of and derives energy from this discursively constructed and internal nature.

### **The Repressive Hypothesis**

Foucault continues along this line in the *History of Sexuality: Introduction* to show how this internal 'natural' force within the body (in this case, referred to as sexuality) comes to stand in for individual identity. Through normalizing discourses, collections of behaviour solidify into specific kinds of persons and new developments in knowledge (human sciences) come to generate subjectivities (Heyes, 2007, 32). Sexuality is not a pure and spontaneous force that is tamed by power; rather sexuality is deployed by power to enable it to gain a grip on life itself. According to Foucault, emancipatory humanism has it backwards; we think this internal force is what we need to set free and protect from homogenization. Under this logic, it is tempting to struggle against disciplinary power by trying to establish the conditions under which we can have full expression and recognition of our authentic selves. But this force is precisely what continues to keep us in cycles of subjection. Foucault tries to show how this desire to liberate the 'self' from power is misguided. The 'self' is what power produces and what it wants us to have in the first place.

In some emancipatory discourses of liberalism political society corrupts humanity and alienates us from our blissful State of Nature. In the same way, contemporary culture has a plethora of discourses that have the goal of freeing the body from the corruption of discipline and returning the body back to a healthy natural state. Improvisational dancing frequently falls into this pattern. It suggests that 'there is an authentic dancer within everyone' and in order to liberate that dancer, bodies need to 'relax' or be free from controlling discipline and choreography. This discourse of improvisation is clearly exemplified by West Coast choreographer and improviser Anna Halprin. During the 1960s,

she ran improvisation schools for children to influence her own work. Speaking on the benefits of this, she states, “I thought that the children were fresh and that working with them would eventually enable me to work spontaneously...I thought they were closer to natural sources of movement and creativity” (Halprin quoted in Ross, 2003, 42). Her goal was to tap the instinctive and internal in children. From her perspective, feeling and instinct were valuable repositories of emotional reserves that improvisation could mine (43). As Janice Ross suggests in her short biography, this was an implicitly political project; ‘naturalness’ and ‘authenticity’ in this regard implied innate, unmediated responses and behaviours, an indifference to conventions” (45).

Aside from the disturbing image of children going to dance class and being ‘mined’ in search of the ‘natural source’ of authentic movement, this discourse is problematic in two senses from the Foucauldian perspective. First, it plays back into a system of normalization; it draws from the developmental discourses of human sciences (the playfulness and innocence of childhood) and, therefore, contributes to that system of normalization. Halprin’s work draws from the experiences of ‘most’ children (read: ‘normal children’). Even though it claims to give an unbiased representation of ‘the natural sources of movement’, we should be sceptical of the normalizing and reifying effects of positing the ‘natural’. It also reverts back to the model of sovereignty-repression, the repressive hypothesis. It claims that there is an *a priori* internal force that is a. repressed by societal or choreographic conventions and b. should be liberated from these restraints by an attempted return to more ‘natural’ states. Foucault states this problem most clearly at the end of his “Two Lectures” in *Power/Knowledge*:

It is at this point [in the struggle against disciplinary power] that we come up against the notion of repression, whose use in this context I believe to be doubly unfortunate. On the one hand, it contains an obscure reference to a theory of sovereignty, the sovereignty of the sovereign rights of the individual, and on the other hand, its usage introduces a psychological reference points borrowed from the human sciences, that is to say, from discourses and practices that come from the disciplinary realm (1980, 108).

Foucault suggests that this liberating gesture, in drawing from the logic of sovereignty and from human psychology, effectively increases the grip of power. This links up to another strong theme in Foucault’s work; that of the cyclical nature of power and resistance; “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet rather consequently, this resistance is

never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (1977, 95). The notion that through political resistance, we can escape disciplinary power’s oppression is, according to Foucault, is a misunderstanding of power relationships: “their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance” (ibid). This points to the idea that resistance to power only increases the tension, and power depends on this energy provided by multiple points of resistance. This is Foucault’s bleak paradox; resistance is always within the field of power relations.

To explore this a little further, I’ll return back to the discussion of dance. Proponents of resisting discipline through improvisation have, in my opinion, placed too much purchase in the idea of an innate dancer. Ladelle McWhorter also articulates this frustration in regards to her experience of learning how to country line dance:

People who say ‘just let go and feel the music’ are complete idiots. Dance, of whatever kind, is a disciplined activity. It requires knowledge and practice and musculature of a sort that nobody’s born possessing (1999, 171-172).

This points to an interesting critique: even in improvisation, bodies are never fully outside technique or outside choreography. In an essay on Flamenco dance, Michelle Heffner Hayes criticizes the ‘aura of authenticity’ behind much of improvisational dance; “the written or spoken narratives that attempt to capture the evanescence of the improvisational moment often romanticize the process as ‘natural’” (2003, 108)<sup>2</sup>. In place of this romanticizing discourse, she argues that dancers and dance scholars alike should begin to take into account how “the decision making process [of improvisational dance] may be spontaneous, contextually defined by the situation and members of the group, but a successful improvisation makes sense through the invocation and subtle disruption of choreographic codes” (111). Hayes has a Foucauldian sensibility here to suggest that dancers are never truly outside of choreography. Even dancers who improvise without visibly using their dance technique, still use other techniques and social choreographies that imprinted on their bodies through years of discipline. In improvising, there are a set of norms and conventions that guide dancer’s actions and responses. For Foucault, there is no such thing as a natural body outside of discipline. Dance, regardless if it is improvised or

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<sup>2</sup> Hayes further critiques the discourse of authenticity within flamenco dance for having an implicit racism; only true Gypsy performers are said to have the ‘innate grace’ to dance flamenco authentically (2003, 108).

choreographed, “moulds the body and its way of moving, it cannot help but propose models of subjectivity in either an affirmative or negative sense” (Franco, 2007, 16). If dance is to take up a ‘counter-attack’ on disciplinary power, it must reject the project of returning to more natural, more authentic motion.

### **Dance as Genealogy**

Once rejecting the notion of dance as expressing and liberating an authentic self from the shackles of disciplinary power, what are we left with? How can we begin to think of dance and an art with the ability to critique the powers of society? In this next section, I point the way to thinking about dance genealogically; an ability to stumble into gestures, repeat them, decontextualize them, in a way that parodies their naturalness or their originality.

As a method, genealogy searches through material sketchings on parchments, institutions, and bodies. It focuses on the corporeality of experience and the ways in which the embodiment of subjectivity is vulnerable to impositions of power. Its search reveals the preposterousness of the ‘original’; “if [the genealogist] listens to history, he finds that there is ‘something all together different’ behind things: not a timeless essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms” (Foucault, 1984, 78). In Foucault’s own genealogical works, he tries to show how there is no metaphysical presence of the subject within the body.

The genealogical method is similar to the moving arts; “it disrupts what was previously considered immobile” (82), destabilizing what is typically understood to be stable. Genealogy can attach itself to the dancing body that is made up of sedimented layers of technique; “genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and of history’s destruction of the body” (83). Dance has a special capacity for genealogical critique—it works through a body that is encoded with gestures and can artistically reroute them; whether it be through exaggerated representation or through decontextualizing them, removing from their designated space and time, pointing towards the situatedness of knowledge.

As an art-form primarily situated in the body, dance finds itself absorbed in the kind of

political power that Foucault describes. But as Franco suggests, dance can also resist this subjection and deviate from norms in structures of parody, irony, and pastiche; exploring the specific codes and forms of subjection that have taken affect on our bodies. To demonstrate this political potential (at least by way of dance analysis), I turn to an essay by “Genealogy and Dance History” by Ramsay Burt. In this essay, Burt shows how choreographic dance can be considered social critique; “the radical, experimental performance practices whose histories [he] discusses in this essay can only disrupt or resist impositions of normative ideologies by revealing the otherwise hidden strategies through which the fiction or illusion of an a priori presence is performatively produced” (2004, 34). I will explore a couple of the choreographed dances that Burt analyses, but I also want to turn to my own example of critical, genealogical and *improvised* dance.

### Pina Bausch’s *Café Müller*

This dance begins with a couple, Mercy and Airaudo, in a tight embrace. Another dancer, a character called Minarik walks up to them, wearing a suit and barefoot. Starting slowly at first, he adjusts the couple’s posture, one limb at a time, so that they are in Minarik’s preferred position. He makes Mercy kiss Airaudo on the lips while holding her awkwardly in midair in front of him. As Minarik leaves, Airaudo collapses out of the unstable position, hits the floor, and immediately rebounds to the couple’s original embrace. Minarik turns around when he hears the fall and comes back to readjust the couple into the same position. They collapse again; Minarik comes back to correct them again. This sequence is repeated over and over, gradually picking up speed, until finally, Mercy and Airaudo slip back into the same posture that Minarik had directed, only this time without Minarik’s intervention; “it is as if they had internalized Minarik’s role and no longer needed him there” (Burt, 2004, 39). This dance shows us two bodies visibly being interpolated, inscribed, and normalized into the ‘proper’ physical arrangements. As Mercy and Airaudo repeat these gestures over and over again, the audience gets a sense of helplessness, on the one hand, their lack of agency (40). But on the other hand, the audience is exposed to the resilience of Mercy and Airaudo’s bodies; we see that it takes a great deal of repetition until they internalize the proper gesture; continually returning to

their *original* instinct. And even when they do internalize it, their bodies still fail to be ‘successfully’ interpolated; “what is supplementary to its enactment is the dancer’s exhaustion, the messiness of bodies out of control, the visceral, intimate mixing of bodily fluids, and the apparent blurring of interpersonal boundaries of these dazed and confused performers” (40). The thing that strikes me about this performance, is that we (the audience) see the struggle of disciplinary power to imprint normal gestures of love into the body, but we are also left with a sense of the body’s enduring recalcitrance in spite of this power.

Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker’s *Rosas Danst Rosas*

This piece is composed by a set of stereotypical and quotidian feminine gestures; glancing seductively, brushing hand through hair, shoving clasped hands between legs, tossing hair out of the face, jerking back T-shirt to reveal bare shoulder, crossed legs with chin rested on hand, and more. These gestures are repeated for the most part in unison by four dancers sitting on chairs, in a serial manner for a seemingly endless period of time. Nothing in this piece is improvised; everything in this piece is meticulously choreographed; every glance, every expression of exhaustion is coded into the series of gestures that De Keersmaeker wants to call attention to. The code is repeated over and over, with slight variations and developments, projecting not only a sense of urgency, but a sense that the dance will never end; the dancer’s are hopelessly caught up in the repetition of feminine gestures.

Burt suggests that *Rosas Danst Rosas* mirrors Foucault’s circuit of power that captivates and inscribes all bodies; “the minimalist monotony of the repetition of mundane gestures suggest the compulsion to conform to prescribed behaviour” (41). On some level, it appears that the dancers are held captive by the gesture in that they keep going on and on, but on another, they seem at home in them—they flow through the postures with relative ease. While the gestures appear familiar and seem to be very personal, private, idiosyncratic, their overt repetition and unison suggest their artificiality. This piece “is a play of surfaces rather than an exploration of depth” (ibid). In a different context, or when we see a person perform a singular gesture, for instance the slumping forward in a chair,

we might presume that the person is genuinely having an internal state of exhaustion. However, in *Rosas Danst Rosas*, we know that this gesture is predetermined, it disrupts our sense of the dancer's interior psychological self. In contrast to Pina Bausch's *Café Müller*, where the dancer's bodies revolt back against their discipline, *Rosas Danst Rosas* gives a bleaker and less confident sense of the possibility of resistance normative power (ibid).

### Movement Research at Judson Church

In Foucault's universe of disciplinary and normalizing power, what is the outlook for improvisation in dance? I would like to turn to an example of improvised dance performance that contains elements of genealogical critique of disciplinary power. This piece is untitled, but it is a part of a series of experiments with improvisational movement from the Judson Dance Theatre, which often performed at the Judson Memorial Church. While this dance is for the most part improvised, its score (or structural limitations) consist of costume; skirts, blouses, and high heels, and set; a table, chairs, a pot, and a baking whisk. It begins with one dancer, swinging her arms violently on the ground. Eventually, she makes her way up to the table, where she falls into a slow rhythm of quotidian gestures; she faces the table, she faces away from the table, she tries to eat, and eventually her movement reaches a terminus, seated in the chair, and slumped over on the table. Two other dancers enter, walking around the space in a feminine way, experimenting with the gait encouraged by their high heels. Towards the end; one of the dancers begins to use the bowl and the whisk as a prop, while the other two remain stationary, postured in typical ways around the table. Taking her cue from the bouncing and spiralling motion of the whisk, the dancer turns around and begins performing a different style of dance, bouncing her hips, popping out her chest, shaking, and gyrating; drawing attention to her breasts, waist, and hips. She almost looks like she is dancing at a club, except more frenzied, frantic shaking motions. All this happens while the other dancers remain stoic, unaffected, still caught up in their more conservative characters. There is a comic moment, when the still dancer looks over sceptically at the gyrating dancer and then continues with the stillness and boredom of stereotypical kitchen-brand femininity.

This piece does some theoretically interesting things. It first presents us with a particular mode of femininity that seems to match with the constructed setting of a kitchen.

At first, the women come across as serious, conservative, more subdued. They present us normalized gestures that coincide with their specific context. This is juxtaposed with a radically different technique of dance and a radically different mode of feminine comportment. One mode makes contextual sense and the other mode seems out of place. But this juxtaposition calls attention to the strangeness and specificity of both. This piece points to bodies, not in their natural and pre-disciplined form, but in their inscribed, culturally specified existence—it shows that bodies are always in some sense choreographed by habitual gestures. But it also shows that other gestures and modes of bodily being can be ‘stumbled into’ (genealogy seeks events “in the most unpromising places” [Foucault, 1984, 76]); the motion of an object—like the whisk—can trigger an alternate muscle memory, one that does not make *sense* in the given context. This lack of coherence across the women in this piece points to a fissure in disciplinary power and the possibility of critique and resistance through playful recombination and juxtaposition. Ironic juxtapositions are stumbled into with a kind of excitement and surprise. I imagine Foucault experiencing this same kind of serendipitous and ironic joy when stumbling onto an unexpected document in some basement archives.

### **Beyond Foucault**

In this paper, I have revisited Foucault’s genealogical work on bodies in modern societies. After considering the body as an entity ‘totally inscribed by power’, with no state of nature to return to, I suggest that some of the discourses that are employed in contemporary improvisational dance should be rejected on the grounds that they point to a romanticized and potentially dangerous ‘natural’ ‘authentic’ movement. Rather, I argue that dance has the unique potential to criticize power from within disciplinary power (according to Foucault, the only place one can act from). I explored choreographic and improvised examples of this, demonstrating that dance can slip into various recognizable gestures and change an audience’s perspective on them, finally making them seem strange, possibly pointing to the possibility of generating new possibilities for gestural expression.

Foucault’s theoretical framework is extremely important for the argument of this thesis. He warns us to beware of the positing of ‘natural’ or extra-discursive bodies because these are notions that are easily co-opted by normalizing power. For example, if

we suggest that the spine was destined to sit in a certain fashion and that regular office chairs are harmful to this natural state, then all the office manager has to do is replace the old chairs with new ergonomic ones, and business goes on as usual. The workers are even more productive, and their superiors rejoice. The example also applies to dance; modern dance suggests that there is an authentic form of movement that traditional ballet technique represses. But this ‘authentic movement’ has turned into its very own discipline, and the criteria for what counts as ‘authentic’ continues to normalize and subjugate dancer’s body. Again, Foucault’s theoretical framework is very useful for understanding and remaining critical of these tendencies in dance.

The notion of productive power is also very useful (and it is something that will continue to develop throughout this thesis). This is the notion that power relations, discipline, discourse induction into regimes of normativity etc are all indispensable to subjective and bodily life. Without these forces of knowledge and power, we would lose the capabilities to do anything. From this idea of productive power, we are left with complete dependence on discourse, discipline, and normativity for dance as critique to be possible. If we must rely on the subjecting forces of discipline, language, normativity to do anything at all, then no act of dance or movement can be considered *singular* or *original*. We would have to say goodbye to the notion of improvising bodies.

This is where I would prefer to leave the Foucaultian tools of analysis behind. Power is not only productive. In focussing solely on what power enables or makes possible, we might fail to notice what power *disables* or makes *impossible*. Power is not only productive, but it is also exclusive and destructive. Certain bodily possibilities are made impossible to structure the rules of what is acceptable or what is intelligible (as I discussed briefly in the section ‘economies of gesture’). In other words, I argue that discipline/technique, though enabling, is purchased at the expense of creativity, singularity, and the potential for novelty. How can we begin to dance that which is excluded, without co-opting it and establishing it as another point of normalizing power? In the following chapter, I move past Foucault, to the work of Pierre Klossowski to try and engage with what lies beyond these limits, even if it is an engagement that results in impossibility.

As well as pointing to new possibilities, improvisation has the capacity to engender a new relation to disciplinary power. When disciplinary power flows through our bodies and

encourages us to continuously self-regulate and self-choreograph on an everyday basis, improvisation (as a technique in itself) can encourage us to let go—giving us room to remain open-ended—and allowing us to be continually surprised by what the body is and what it can do, exposing the limits of disciplined gestures and recognizable bodily forms.

## Chapter Two Dancing Better at Parties

We are possessed, abandoned, possessed again and taken by surprise: sometimes by the system of impulsive designations, at others by the system of everyday signs—Pierre Klossowski, in *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*

I recently went to see a contemporary dance piece called *I Want to Dance Better at Parties* by a company called Chunky Move. This piece started out as a film that was *supposed* to be about Australian men in contemporary society and their relationship to dance. The Choreographer, Gideon Obarzanek, selected five men from various socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds—a recent widower, a retired engineer, a gay line-dancer, a young macho ‘clubber’, and a composer. In the process of making the film, Obarzanek did a series of interviews, asking his subjects to speak about their relationship to dance. In the process of speaking about dance, the subjects revealed more about their personal lives and their histories, than they did specifically about dance. As Obarzanek moved forward with the project, he started to think it would make a compelling dance piece in itself.

As a live contemporary dance performance, this piece consists of six performers standing in for the interview subjects, periodic filmed images of the subjects themselves. Throughout the performance, splices of the recorded interviews are played as the dancers act out or respond to the spoken text. Sometimes the dance is more literal; for example, when the subject speaks about step-dancing, the performer step-dances. Other times, dancers respond to the text more abstractedly, using pieces of modern or contemporary technique. For example, there is a scene where one of the subjects, Phillip, whose wife recently passed away, speaks about the sensation of ‘shortness of breath’ in the process of grieving. The dancers walk on their tip toes, arms held high and stiff, like a pair of lungs that hold their breath. This is accompanied with suspended poses that seem to last forever, followed by exhausted collapses to the floor. Their movements simulate mechanical, short, and belaboured breathing. But it is more than just simulation—throughout this section, the audience can actually hear the dancer’s mechanical breathing. Throughout the dance, we hear the subjects describe their experiences of grief, betrayal, or profound self-hatred, their physiological descriptions are mapped onto the dancer’s bodies and replayed for the audience in an artistic way. In a situation like this, it seems like the dance’s

intention is to magnify a process or event, occurring at the organic-level (the lungs) or at a cellular level—the cells filling up with poisonous CO<sub>2</sub>—and amplify them. Dance expands the cellular process mapping it onto the whole body or a cast of bodies. The simple statement, ‘shortness of breath’, expressed in everyday language contains an uncommunicated physicality that this dance aims to bring to life. It tries to tap into the intensities that cannot come across through simple, everyday, or medicalized language. It is my sense that Gideon Obarzanek stages the performance to pay tribute the singular experience of grief in a way that every day language cannot.

*I Want to Dance Better at Parties* is a good example of how dance strives for alternative forms of communicability or intelligibility between the choreographer, dancer, and the audience. Contemporary dance (at least the kind that I’m into) is famous for being disjointed, often confusing, and even absurd. In this very performance, the girl behind me whispered to her partner ‘I have *no* idea what is going on’. In this way, the dance risks alienating the members of the audience who expect clarity. But it doesn’t mind. This dance slips in and out of sensibility; in and out of textuality and physicality. The dance retells the stories of the interview subjects in a way that is partial, non-linear, incoherent, and often confusing. The dance moves in and out of recognizability; through different dance forms (including contemporary dance) in different contextual arrangements. Throughout the performance, we get a sense of both the interview subject’s relationship to dance, but also the performers and the choreographer’s.

Why the choreographer decided to make his interviews into live performance versus a documentary-type film? What is it about the freedom and limitations of live theatre that is good for expressing the kinds of statements and events that came out through these interviews? I can give a couple of guesses here. Live performance does not have to be coherent. We do not need the complete biography of the subjects for a dance performance. We do not need the link between subjects and their experiences to come through. A live, touring performance requires the choreographer to hire professional dancers who could *stand in* for his subjects. In detaching the experiences in question from the subjects, the dance tries to engage with the singular intensities, in way that suggests that these intensities are not bounded by the singular subject. In fact, the experience is so intensified that it tends towards the very exclusion of the subject. As the dance becomes more energetically charged, bodies multiply, more dancers come out of the wings. As William Butler Yeats wrote, “O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, How can we know

the dancer from the dance?” (quoted in Hill, 2001, 104). The title itself, *I Want to Dance Better at Parties*, refers to an important tension between being free enough to move creatively, while still being recognizable enough to be accepted in social situations, like a party.

In the preceding chapter, I explored Michel Foucault’s notion of purely discursive bodies, or bodies that are only actualized in discursive fields of power. All movements, gestures, and impulses are inscribed onto the body through circuits of disciplinary power. For Foucault, there is no such thing as a natural body, a body prior to power-infused discourse. In *The History of Sexuality*, his main thrust of critique is to show how this notion of a pre-discursive, natural body is precisely what keeps bodies in the grips of normalizing power. The notion of a normal sex drive keeps us totally linked to the deployment of sexuality. In order for Foucault’s own theoretical discourse to make sense, the possibility of pre-discursive impulses must be excluded. Within Foucault’s frame of thought, referring to ‘impulse’, or that which escapes discourse, does not make sense. Discourse (or ‘everyday language’) actualizes these so-called impulses. Following along with Laura Hengehold’s comparison of Immanuel Kant and Foucault, I think it may be safe to say that impulses in-themselves are Foucault’s theoretical noumena; the exclusion that structures his own field of thought.

In this chapter, I want to try and move beyond the notion of purely discursive bodies. Here, I want to explore the possibility of impulsive bodily life outside of discursive power. Even if this life remains unactualized, unspeakable, or unthinkable. Even if this exploration leads only to a dead end, a limit which cannot be breached. Even if the task of this chapter (or the task of dance) is to expose this limit. In order to do this, I turn to Pierre Klossowski because, while he recognizes the power of discourse to give form to bodies, he leaves enough space in order to theorize the impulsive, fortuitous, spontaneous character of bodies. Klossowski theorizes the distinction between two bodies: the body that is caught up in coded language, and the body (sic) that always escapes any kind of ‘textual capture’ (James, 2001, 64). In his work on Nietzsche (*Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*), he develops a critique of ‘everyday’ language. Klossowski points towards its limitation from capturing the singularity of experience (and bodies). What is the difference between the recognizable expression, ‘shortness of breath’, and the actions that take place on the stage? In Klossowski’s formulation, everyday language is, by definition, general, gregarious—meant to be readily understood by everyone. Here, clarity is a virtue.

Paramedics have a system of codifying pain; they ask patients to rate their pain on a scale of one to ten, so that they can make immediate, efficient, and accurate decisions on the severity of the situation. Coded physical experience enables efficient communication—as Klossowski suggests, this kind of language is economical, it works on the principles of exchange and thrives under conditions of scarcity—at least, that is not the part that is communicated. Klossowski’s literary and philosophical work asks the question, what does everyday language miss? What sorts of intensities escape the codification of experience? Once those excesses are captured by codified language, then they lose their specificity and their particular intense qualities. Is there something about certain experiences that cannot be exchanged for everyday language? Klossowski recognizes the existence of a fortuitous body that escapes codification alongside discursive bodies, but because of its incommunicability, the impulsive remainder of the body is silent. For Klossowski, the key discontinuity is not between mind and body, but rather the “discontinuity between *silence* and *declarations* in the agent” (Klossowski, 1997, 37). For Klossowski, this unexchangeable depth plays an important role; it exposes the limit of language and communicability.

The same line applies to bodies and physiology. Klossowski suggests that bodies are comprised of scattered impulses. ‘The’ body is really just a heterotopia of contradictory impulses and intensities, that come together in the form of ‘events’.

*The body is a product of chance*; it is nothing but the *locus* where a group of individuated impulses confront each other so as to produce this interval that constitutes a *human life*, impulses whose sole ambition is to *de-individuate themselves* (Klossowski, 1997, 26).

The need to communicate to others and conform to standards of intelligibility causes the ‘consciousness’ to filter out the impulses that do not conform to these standards, and bring the impulses that do conform into some kind of unified, coherent whole. In this reading, so much of our bodily-being is shuffled off to the side. As Immanuel Kant would say, it is rendered noumenal. The very exclusion of nonconforming impulses makes the whole field of intelligible bodies possible. This chapter tries to draw connections between the Kantian paradigm and Klossowski’s thought on bodies. I draw from Laura Henghehold’s book, *The Body Problematic*, as it applies to the imaginative constitution of bodies.

The important point for this chapter is that this assemblage of impulses and intensities is ontologized and solidified in our imagination as ‘the’ body, ‘our’ body, a proper name for

referring to a stable and static substance that we eventually come to think of as an object of possession. We are lead to believe that there is *a priori* ‘a’ body—one which has internal coherence, an “*irreversible history*’, and a linkage of causes and effects” (Klossowski, 1997, 29). I think this becomes a distinctly political problem when this body resists coherence, as it tends to do. The body constantly sheds parts of itself, skin cells exfoliate, moods change, features shift. Often we have to make great efforts to maintain a sense of physical coherence, especially those bodies that norms of codified language do not circulate around. Other times, the bodies that do not conform are met with discrimination, exclusion, or violence.

This chapter aims to show that ‘the unified body’ is a product of imagination, a political entity, subject to change. It is an imaginary or conceptual reorganization of scattered and heterogeneous impulses. First, I will explain the model (the Kantian paradigm) for conceptual unification, as it applies to human understanding. Next, I draw on the work of Pierre Klossowski; first some of his work on language, how language forms a quotidian code that aims to censor singular intensities in the name of efficiency and communicability. I follow this with the application of this understanding of language to the body; bodies are caught up in the same pattern that Klossowski identifies with language; gestures and modes of comportments either conform to the codes of everyday language, or they engage with some kind of singularity. The need to be understood tempts the body to assimilate to codes of intelligibility that are coherent, straight-forward, and recognizable. The problem of this is when these gestural codes are too inhibiting and/or too limiting. In the same way that Klossowski draws attention to the limits of everyday language through the literary medium, my greater project is to argue that dance can do something similar. Coming from a critical perspective of a culture of physical inhibition, I see dance as an important, and politically charged practice that contemporary dance is well equipped to engage with. All of this is with the hope of being able to re-appropriate the mythic power of ‘the’ body, we can have the ability to rearticulate our bodies in ways that are more freeing, that have more capacity for action. I propose dance as a practice of engaging with the silent intensities of bodies, or that which is unavowable and incommunicable under regimes of everyday language, in a way that does not aim to appropriate impulse into the code, but rather in a way that exposes the limitations on everyday bodies and expand new possibilities for bodily intelligibility, without being forced back into the codes of coherent unit.

## Conceptual Mediation

Laura Hengehold uses Kant to elaborate a position on imagination's material effect on bodies. Later I will relate this to Klossowski. Kant's work begins from the separation of questions concerning the phenomenal objects of human experiences and the possibility of *things-in-themselves*. Kant's position was that human beings are faced with a fundamental frailty or limitation. We do not and cannot have access to *things-in-themselves*; everything we perceive is representation, appearance, or phenomena. For Kant, our entire sense of reality is based on the foundation of man-made categories, which are both *a priori* and culturally conditioned (Hengehold, 2007, 7). They are *a priori* in the sense that they come before experience; they are precisely the conditions for experience in the first place. They are culturally conditioned in the sense that they are fabricated by the faculty of reason. We can only access the world through the mediation of these concepts and categories—for example the concepts of space and time or the category of causation. We have an intuitive sense of these concepts or categories, but we have no way of gaining empirical evidence of them. This is because they are the necessary conditions for the possibility of empirical evidence in the first place.

I understand Kantian categories as principles of interpretation—Klossowski's thought does something similar; through the concepts available to us in everyday language, we develop a system of exchange (an economy). We take in phenomena and systematically exchange them for meaning/knowledge. While there are many examples or manifestations of this form of organization, Hengehold gives the example of an office filing system:

These faculties or powers of thought are like impersonal 'folders' into which representations can be filed by anyone familiar with an office's activities. But they also limit and anticipate the concepts that can be used communicably by that thought (or those office workers) and the kinds of sensory particulars to which those concepts might be applied. Representations that do not fit the purpose of the files are either piled on individual worker's desks or put outside in the hallway as trash; the order of the filing system depends on their exclusion (49).

We take in representations of *things-in-themselves* and file them according to categories with the hope of establishing a system of understanding. These categories are constructed in the realm of everyday language. We make sense of physiological experience according to these contingent categories of understanding, that can be understood by anyone in the same office. For example, in *I want to Dance Better at Parties*, the Widower interprets his experience in the medicalized terms of hyperventilation, shortness of breath. Occasionally, we can see how the code itself

actually becomes so habitually engrained that it becomes constitutive of experience. We tend to perceive the category of something before the particular phenomena.

But given this limitation of thought and knowledge, specifically that we can't know *things-in-themselves*, how can we have any kind of certainty regarding our understanding of reality? Why should we think any object corresponds to this concept? Kant faces the problem of legitimacy or the trustworthiness of human understanding. If every sense of reality is based on imaginative categories, how do we know if we are right? Hengehold alludes to two of the practical solutions to this problem in her example of the office filing system. The two different, but closely related solutions that are important for me are *a.* the *enabling exclusion* of the 'problematic object', structuring the field of what is legitimately 'knowable', and *b.* universalization through communication.

### **Problematic Objects and Enabling Exclusions**

What about the representations that do not fit 'the purposes of the files' or that do not fit into categories? Under this system, these kinds of representations are what Kant refers to as 'the problematic object'. As Hengehold suggests, these objects are placed in the noumenal realm (or the trash-can). They are labelled unintelligible, impossible, and thus, unimportant for present consideration. But the importance of the 'problematic object' is silent or invisible. It is by virtue of this practical exclusion that entire systems of coherent thought are made possible.

For Kant, the problematic object is anything that creates disjuncture with a unified system. Furthermore, labelling something the 'problematic object' enables the whole system of clarity in the first place. When Kant sets out to write *The Critique of Pure Reason*, he excludes the possibility of opinion or insufficiently grounded knowledge as something involved in his inquiry. In negating this possibility, Kant carves out a river-bed of concepts that narrows and sharpens his flow of thought. Without excluding the problematic object, any thought runs the danger of trailing off everywhere, losing its intensity. As Hengehold suggests, "[Kant's] key strategy is positing the existence of a 'problematic object', which divides the field of human thought into a manageable, knowable part and an indefinite, unknowable part" (28). That which does not fit is that which must be excluded. The human mind is limited from grasping, perceiving, and understanding everything all at once. There needs to be a limitation of the kinds of appearances that are possible, otherwise the reasoning agent would be overwhelmed. As a

result, certain perceptions, certain experiences *must* be excluded in order to structure a field of sensibility, a contextual grounding in which objects make sense. “Excluding the ‘problematic object’ is the first boundary-setting gesture of Kantian reason, enabling it to carry out the ‘natural’ pursuit of unity among the domains into which elements of experience are eventually grouped” (31). The noumenon occupies a crucial spot in Kant’s system insofar as it ‘closes’ the sphere of conceivable metaphysical entities to which concepts apply.

### **Communicability**

But excluding the ‘problematic object’ is not enough. How can individuals, with their own imaginative conceptions of reality come together to inhabit a common world? For Kant, judgments of taste play a significant role in the certainty of human understanding. As Hengehold says, “the fact that we expect and can sometimes train people to agree on the beauty or ugliness of particulars they have never before encountered proves that something like a ‘supersensible substrate’ must exist as condition for the possibility of this agreement” (59). The legitimacy of a human understanding without the dogmatic appeal to god, for Kant, is totally dependent on the interconnection of people through webs of communication, or what he calls common sense. This collective sense—the fact that people have aesthetic agreements—points to a system of legitimacy, reflected off of the common understanding of others.

For Kant, pleasure is in the ability to identify with the likely mental state of others or to dis-identify with the idiosyncratic aspects of one’s own mental state. It has to do with one’s ability to identify with spectators. For Kant, taste is the ability to judge the communicability of a given presentation (64). Part of the aesthetic pleasure is from the communication of an experience: we abstract from our own immediate sensation of something, and imagine what other people might think about it. For example, when learning about wine, sommeliers take an initial taste, taking note of their own physical reaction. Afterwards, they take another taste, keeping in mind the qualities that the general public enjoys in wine. The sommelier may *hate* a particular wine, but she knows that it is a very popular bottle of French wine, so she refuses write it off completely. In doing this, the sommelier is able to make the right pairing decisions; her recommendations are more likely to be enjoyed by others. Thus, something is communicable because it reflects “the harmonious relation among faculties manifest in a judgement of taste” (62). In order to communicate our pleasures, we have to be able to universalize our experiences,

move beyond our ‘inner’ idiosyncratic reaction, adopt the code of everyday language, and appeal to concepts and categories that are familiar to others. For Kant, this is significant because it points towards the unification of spaces of perception, knowledge, and philosophical reflection (ibid). It resolves the tension between the divisive nature of personal experience, grounded in nothing but one’s own mind, and the concern for social reliability, consistency, and coherence.

Along these lines, Kant also notes the importance that the virtues of communicability hold for the social education of subjects. Being educated to enjoy the forms that are typically and gregariously enjoyed is a symbol of a person’s ‘refinement’ (66). Eventually, our sommelier might even begin to enjoy her French wine. Educating the general public in the ‘art of reciprocal communication’ is an efficient way to establish a political community. Communicable aesthetics is a mode of integrating people with one another, preventing them from sinking into solipsism.

These systems of communicability require the exclusion of the ‘problematic object’ that I discussed above. Fields of intelligibility necessarily exclude (and constantly reference) utterances that are unintelligible, creating what Hengehold calls an economy of statements. Within these codes, it is possible to disregard statements and utterances as complete nonsense, unacceptable, or simply mad. In this way, Kant’s aesthetic of communicability also functions as a *regulative ideal*: it habitually trains us out of having experiences that are excessively partial or idiosyncratic. Unless we can find some way to coherently translate those experiences according to concepts and categories involved in the *sensus communis*, our ‘inner’ sense runs the risk of seeming irrational, untrustworthy, or mad. But why does Kant insist that common sense raise us out of our immediate experience? As Hengehold suggests, the possibility of madness threatens the unity of communicable concepts. Through systems of social sanction, we are prevented from imagining things that are not considered communicable within this economy of understanding. The limitation of communication, for Kant, is indispensable for the consideration of community, “the limitations on imagination rendering experience communicable are among the most important factors discriminating the possibility of political community and psychological coherence from the fragmentary and antagonistic spaces of madness” (88). Reason, experience, pleasures, and bodies have to remain communicable, otherwise this system cracks apart.

This reading of Kant is important in the context of this chapter because he does not take unity as a given, but rather as a process—something that reason or conscious or imagination, or whatever, tries to *achieve*. “Most philosophers have assumed that normal experience is unified,

and Kant's philosophy has been used to *make* unity the norm" (32). Kant begins from a space of heterotopic ideas. In the same way that Klossowski works from the point of a heterotopic, impulsive body. Once we see how reasonable unity is strived towards and what threatens its undoing, we can turn towards Klossowski and the physiological equivalent of imaginative construction of reality.

### **Everyday Language**

*[The] body is only the fortuitous encounter of contradictory impulses, temporarily reconciled* (Klossowski, 1997, 28)

Klossowski writes about a similar process where the body *comes to be* united under frames of communicability and intelligibility. But before I move to this discussion of bodies, it is important to explore Klossowski's view on language. As I mentioned above, Klossowski's work deals with a critique of 'everyday' language in opposition to the singular sign. As a form of communication, language has a series of words and phrases that come to stand-in for or represent experiences. If experience is something that is unique or singular to each individual moment or experience, then language tries to find common representations of experiences so that individuals can understand one another. Through continuous repetition and experimentation, everyday language takes moments of singularity and transforms them into a universal concepts, proper names, or a code of conventional signs (Hill, 2001, 171). In Laura Hengehold's description of the office filing system, the files are organized such that they can be understood by anyone who works in the office. Anyone with a background in a given language can use a conventional sign and be understood by another person. Everyday language is gregarious, it brings people together, allowing them to relate their experiences with one another.

Klossowski is critical of everyday language for its tendency to abbreviate experiences, censor the intensity of the singular sign, and fix a once fluid experience in a conventional code. Everyday language is comprised of economical abbreviations of signs; it is "the creation of forms, which *represent* numerous movements, the invention of signs for all types of sign" (Nietzsche, quoted in Klossowski, 1997, 44). In order to stretch across all possible manifestations of a kind of event, language must censor the intensity of the original impulse or the original sign. As a translator, Klossowski was keenly aware of the demand to find accurate systems of exchange for words and meanings across other languages. He was highly critical of

translators who aimed to reproduce the exact meaning of the original to make perfect grammatical sense in the secondary language. He argued that in doing so, translators lost some of the ‘physicality’ or ‘impulsivity’ of the original language, for the sake of efficient exchange of meaning. What is lost is “the rhythm of the original, the linguist materiality of its ‘metabolism’” (James, 2000, 119). For Klossowski, language has the potential to express this impulsive intensity, but the ‘code of everyday language’ misses out on this completely. For example, when I tell a paramedic that my experience of pain is ‘seven’ on a scale of ten, I remove the intensities involved in that experience, all for the sake of efficient communication. My ‘seven’ is the same as someone else’s ‘seven’, at least in the eyes of medical code. As a result, Klossowski describes the code of conventional signs as an economy; a system of comparable signs, designed for the purposes of accurate exchange. Or as Leslie Hill writes:

If the code of conventional signs treats experience as a merchantable commodity, subject to unity, identity purpose, and meaning, the realm of the ‘signe unique’, which is characterized by unpredictable fluctuations in intensity, is inhabited only by the force of the idiosyncratic, priceless, unexchangeable singular point (Hill, 107).

This language-economy is *necessarily* based on the conditions of scarcity—in the same way that Kant suggests that the ‘problematic object’ must be excluded in order to close a field of thought, language, too, has a structured syntax, where only certain phrases and utterances make sense. Finally, Klossowski suggests that this language-economy is premised on the necessity for unity and internal coherence. This is in order to avoid contradictions in the terms of exchange and to maximize the possibilities for intelligibility. Once a generalized sign comes to stand in for a particular *kind* of experience, it must work to maintain regularity in order to maintain the conditions for its existence (Klossowski, 1997, 45). The conscious agent polices-out experiences and declarations that cannot be assimilated within the code of conventional signs. It filters out the experiences that threaten the universality of the code—either by determining them ‘mad’ or reducing them to silence. However, it is important to note that for Klossowski, the singular is always ‘silent’ in that it does not aim to ‘say’ anything, or get any kind of message across. It is called the ‘unintelligible depth’ because it is ‘by nature non-communicable’.

Eventually, with enough repetition, everyday language becomes a habitual mode of experience. In Althusser’s words, we become interpolated with everyday language; “for even when we are alone, silent, speaking internally to ourselves, it is still the *outside* that is speaking

to us—thanks to these signs from the exterior that invade and occupy us, and whose murmuring totally covers over all our impulsive life” (Klossowski, 1997, 39). While Klossowski recognizes our dependency on the code of everyday language for the purposes of basic communication, he is critical of its tendency to reduce our capacity to experience the singular intensity events, “worse still, to destroy it by traducing it into the fictive terms of the semiotic code’s discursive or rationalist presuppositions” (Hill, 2001, 107).

### **Impulsive Bodies**

This way of thinking about language has interesting implications for the body. Ian James has suggested that Klossowski’s work refers to two bodies. First, he writes of the *corpse propre*, “the everyday body which can bear a name; be identified, and which can be said to belong to someone” (2001, 61). The body-proper is the body that we are familiar with, the body with limits, and the one interpolated by everyday language. Second, Klossowski refers to the *corpse fortuity* which “does not belong to anyone as such, and exceeds all categories of knowledge and representation...the fortuitous body cannot be described and cannot be said to belong” (ibid). In the same way that Kant begins from a fragmented consideration of the world and theorizes the process of unification, Klossowski begins from a fragmented consideration of the body. This body is nothing more than a repeated imaginary concept used to veil a series of complex, heterogeneous, and often conflicting impulses. This unification occurs under regimes of intelligibility. What I want to consider in this chapter is how the need for bodies to communicate means that they must conform to the codes of everyday language. The body is forced into (subordinated under) the constraints of everyday language in order to maintain systematic coherence of language. As Klossowski points out, there is always something about the singularity of the body that is incommunicable—that which cannot be attributed to several individuals. When the body is made communicable, something is inevitably lost.

We are only a succession of *discontinuous states* in relation to *the code of everyday signs*, and about which *the fixity of language* deceives us. As long as we depend on this code, we can conceive our continuity, even though we live discontinuously (41).

‘The’ body is merely an interpretation of discontinuous impulses (and a fallacious one at that). The body is an enabling fiction that allows us to conceive of a unified agent. In the same way that Kant suggests that we can only grasp the world through categorical interpretations of

phenomena, Klossowski suggests our understanding of embodiment is mitigated through the interpretation of impulses by the ‘conscious’ agent. For example, we have experiences of pain, pleasure, laughing, trembling, or enjoying (29), but these are representations that fit into the categories of *good* or *bad*, danger or good fortune. These kinds of experiences are modifications of inexplicable processes happening in the body. This qualitative character of experience is something that is added on, or represented by parts of everyday code. Any conscious processing of bodily experience is dependent on everyday language, “the body wants to make itself heard according to intermediary of a language of signs that is fallaciously deciphered by the consciousness” (26). This interpretation is ‘fallacious’ because exchangeable language can never capture the unexchangeable depth or singularity of experiences; “the process of ordering and interpreting the random flux of impulsional life is, for Klossowski, falsifying” (James, 2001, 64). For Klossowski, bodily impulses are inherently singular—there is always something missing in our sense of embodiment; it is a fragile entity based on shaky and imaginative foundations.

Forgetting is crucial to the possibility of a coherent self being able to establish itself through the fixity of the ‘code of everyday signs’. Because in reality the self is nothing other than a discontinuous series of non-identical and fortuitous instances, any one instance can only establish itself as a coherent consciousness in the forgetting of all the other moments in the series, or as Klossowski puts it...., ‘my present consciousness will be established in the forgetting of my other possible identities (James, 2000, 130-131).

In the above quote Klossowski suggests that the ‘conscious’ self does the interpretation, but he is careful not to invoke a conscious-unconscious binary. To speak of an unconscious (the lower part of an iceberg) presupposes a whole iceberg or self. To speak in these terms is to refer back to a unified conception of the body, thus, working back into the code of everyday language, trying to defend itself. For Klossowski, consciousness, itself, is a ‘fortuitous encounter’ of impulses, itself a product of fallacious and incomplete translation. These colliding impulses somehow propel the body upward into space, into a standing position. At this point, the organ at ‘highest’ extremity of the assemblage is given responsibility over the impulses. Each time we stand up, this particular organization of the body ‘rejuvenates’ itself. On the one hand, impulses are resources for the body; they are responsible for creating the bodily forms that we recognize as ‘normal’ in the first place. However, Klossowski suggests that over time, the body loses this impulsive resource. At this point, the consciousness (or that particular upright character of the

body) becomes fixed, “its ‘*character*’ hardens (29). In the first instance, the body’s cohesion with the self happens by chance, but given this new assemblage’s tumultuousness, the self must begin to actively protect itself in order to maintain this cohesion. It maintains its own coherence by disavowing those impulses that resist its current form. It takes control over the corporealizing force and it takes responsibility for interpreting and censoring impulses. All this is with the purpose of maintaining its own coherence:

The body, insofar as it is grasped by consciousness, *dissociates itself* from the impulses that flow through it, and which having come together fortuitously, continue to sustain the body in an equally fortuitous manner. The organ that these impulses have developed at the ‘highest’ extremity of the body considers this fortuitous yet obvious sustenance to be necessary for its conservation. Its ‘cerebral’ activity therefore selects only those forces that preserve this activity, or, rather those that can be *assimilated* to it (27).

Not only are some impulses transformed by the consciousness (the ones that can be assimilated into the picture of the unified self are processed into code), but also other impulses are ignored all together. To give a crude example, as I sit here in the library writing this chapter, I am trying not to pay attention to my impulse to run outside and play in the grass. What Klossowski is talking about here is a little more complex than this. For him, the point is not that we need to discipline our impulses in order to perform certain tasks, it is that we are *unaware* of the ‘combat of impulses’ that occurs in order for us to write or think (38). Any impulse that is ‘picked up’ by my conscious self is part of my everyday coded body. It is the impulses that I am totally unaware of (the silent impulses) that are excluded, or placed behind the noumenal veil in order to constitute my sense of coherent self. “The physical agent of myself [*le suppôt physique de moi-même*] seems to reject any thoughts that I have that no longer ensure its own cohesion, thoughts that proceed from a state that is *foreign* or *contrary* to that required by the physical agent, which is nonetheless identical to myself” (28). Just like in the discussion of Kantian understanding, the exclusion of ‘problematic impulses’ enables the functioning of a coherent subject; “it is only the perspective of consciousness, falsely encoded within a system of signs, which *allows* us to attach identities to bodies and think of a separation between subject and object, between my body and your body” (my emphasis, James, 2001, 65).

Again, this system of maintaining bodily coherence falls under the code of everyday language. The impulses that are chosen to be taken-up and transformed are those that can be communicated using parts of intelligible language. As Klossowski states, as “*the system of*

*'signs' abbreviates the gestures* of the impulsive constraint, and lead it back to the coherent *unity* (of the agent), which forms the (grammatical) subject" (49). The ones that are completely ignored, are so, because of their innate incommunicability or their inability to be made sense of, "the intellect is nothing more than a *repulsion* of anything that might destroy the cohesion between the agent and this abbreviating system" (ibid). Under the rule of the consciousness, the combat of impulses is reduced to silence, enabling the constitution and appearance of a unified body. Thus for Klossowski, our body's quotidian movement is governed by these codes of everyday language. Our gestures can be readily exchanged for textual meanings. Our bodies constrained by 'sense'. *I Want to Dance Better at Parties* plays with this theme. One of the interviewed subjects, the computer engineer who does Israeli folk dance, speaks about his project of developing dance codes. He says, "when dances are taught, its difficult to normally write down the steps because it takes much more time than what's available. Because of my background in coding, I could develop a system where I could write down the dances as they are taught in class. So, when a teacher teaches a dance, I'd take out a pen and paper and write down the code, the code that represents the steps". This man develops a coding system for dance, a list of abbreviated representations that come to stand in for given dance steps. The scene in *I Want to Dance Better at Parties* critiques this notion playfully; once the steps are interpreted—once they are tweaked, perfected, and abbreviated—the movement itself takes on these characteristics. The once flowing dancers, now march rigidly across the stage. The dancer playing the computer engineer directs them, she appears to be totally control of their movements.

Klossowski was also interested the 'undoing' of this process, or the deunification or fragmentation of the body in moments of intensity. However strenuously the conscious agent works to maintain its own coherence by censoring out the impulses that do not fit with its image, there always remain the possibility of moments where the agent is 'taken by surprise', and dispossessed of its self control. As Klossowski discusses in *Sade, my Neighbour*, during moments of sexual perversion, the censoring self is shaken up (along with conventions of procreative sex) (James, 2000, 58). The example I want to focus on, here, is from Klossowski's *Roberte Ce Soir*, where Octave and his nephew are discussing a photograph of Roberte:

The scene begins with Antoine sorting through his uncle Octave's photographs, when he stumbles onto an image of a woman "whose skirt is starting to burn and who leaps away from the

fireplace into the arms of this gentleman who has rushed up to her rescue and is snatching off her burning clothes” (1969, 19). With a further glance, Antoine finally notices that the photo is of his aunt Roberte. He doesn’t recognize her at first, because he is used to seeing her as an “attentive and severe sister, unbelieving and austere” (36).

In the moment of catching her skirt on fire, everything about Roberte’s body—her posture, her composition, her recognizable gesture—changes. The only thing that remains the same is her name (and something about the appearance of her face). In the spontaneity of the moment, her fortuitous body, the one that is constantly in a state of flux and becoming, is set free from the conscious agent that continuously tries to fix its identity. In such moments, our person(ality) is allowed to shift. We do things that are totally out of character—our bodies perform tasks that seem impossible or unimaginable. Norms of propriety and personal space are broken, even the individuation of the body becomes blurry. Towards the end of the discussion, Octave mentions that in other prints from the same negative “there is no sign of fire: all that remains, but in a much more striking manner, is this extraordinary tangle of arms and legs” (43). Roberte’s body blends with her rescuer’s.

What allows this to happen? For Klossowski, this moment of panic catches the censoring conscious agent by surprise, allowing some of the fortuitous and typically silent impulses to actualize themselves in Roberte’s body. In such moments, the forgotten impulses are allowed to speak again—but given their spontaneity, they come across as *out of character*, they disrupt the fictitious coherence of Roberte’s identity. According to Octave, the picture shows us the “irruption of the increate into [Roberte’s] hitherto closed existence” (41). In other words, the closed system that defines Roberte is ruptured, letting in parts of the unactualized and incommunicable. As a result of this rupture, Roberte is no longer recognizable. Even though she *becomes someone else*, Octave (and Klossowski) are obsessed with the picture because it expresses a part of Roberte that is rarely apprehended under her other guises (as a wife or as an aunt). The photograph taps into the physical remainder that is cut off in codes of everyday language and bodily comportment. The picture expresses something that everyday language cannot.

This leads nicely into my discussion of *I Want to Dance Better at Parties*. As I mentioned in the introduction, the choreographer decided to translate the ‘data’ from his textual interviews into a dance performance. I guessed that, for him, dance was able to engage with the intensity of

the subject's experiences better than words. I think that this piece takes the same critical view of language that Klossowski does, namely, that language misses something important. But isn't this paradoxical? Klossowski is *writing* about how *writing* is incomplete; he is trying to articulate something which is, by nature, un-articulatable. In *The Persistence of a Name*, Ian James argues that Klossowski is well aware of this paradox and opts for a parodic and often times absurdist tone. While certain styles of writing strive for logical clarity, and simplicity of meaning, a more poetic style reaches towards that 'impulsive intensity' or the physical remainder of words. In doing so, this more poetic style wavers on the edge nonsense. Trying to engage with the intensities that escape language sends language beyond its recoverable limit. This attempt points to the limits of language itself. James describes Klossowski's project of speaking to the unspeakable character of bodies as a kind of translation; "translation in the sense of seeking to think something or transpose into the realm of thought that which lies outside thought, to write something which cannot be written" (2000, 92).

In this vein, I want to suggest that dance offers another mode of translation of the body's intensity. It is tempting to argue that dance is better at engaging with the incommunicable and impulsive character of bodies, given its closer relation and greater dependence on the entire body for its work. I do not think this is always the case. Just like writing or speaking, dance oscillates between poles of coded rigidity and wild spontaneous intensity. Dance is not always about translating experience in its likeness, or getting as close as possible. It is not about reproducing or representing the forgotten impulsive multiplicity of the body. As I have tried to suggest, this would be antithetical to such an aim. The task of the translator is not to capture the likeness of the original copy in a clear, coherent, and useful manner, but to point towards the semiotic excess of the original. This means that the translation slips into nonsense, it does not make grammatical sense, the lack of structure of the translation points towards the limitations of the second language from capturing anything but fragments of the original. It translates the multiplicity of the body, not by reproducing the meaning of it (for it is precisely without meaning) but by reproducing its mode of non-meaning (James, 2000, 136).

### Pre-discursive Physicality

So far, this chapter has identified a pattern. It is difficult (if not impossible) to have access to the world or our bodies as things-in-themselves. The understanding that we do have is interpretive. It is based on culturally conditioned exclusions of ‘problematic objects’ or impulses and it is limited by the need to communicate within the codes of everyday language.

If we follow this pattern, then we end up in a kind of double bind between *silence* or *stereotype* (Hill, 2001, 108). On the one hand, we want to make coherent sense of our bodies for the sake of being able to communicate with others and be understood and be intelligible. But on the other, this communicability causes us to conform to codes of everyday language that are sometimes oppressive, which lead us to be alienated from our own particular corporeal intensity.

As Leslie Hill puts:

How to subscribe to the constraint of the singular sign when it is certain that such excess will result only in speechless madness? But, equally, how to renounce one’s ecstasy and live on within the stifling and alienating embrace of the all-pervasive code of quotidian existence? (108).

So if there is a kind of alienation at every turn, where do we move from here? In the introduction, I mentioned that I think contemporary dance has the potential for transgressive action, much in the same way that literature does. In the previous chapter, I argued that dance is politically potent because it has a way of drawing out the various layers of disciplinary habit that are inscribed on the body and come out in specific circumstances. I tried to suggest that dance travels into dangerous territory when it claims to be able to liberate a ‘natural’, pre-discursive, or authentic body. However, after considering the work of Pierre Klossowski, I am more willing to admit the possibility of a kind of pre-discursive physicality. Although, it is problematic to name it ‘the’ authentic body. Because, once it is labelled, or understood, it is pulled right back into the realm of everyday language, making it inauthentic, discursive, or coded. I am also sceptical that we can every consider understanding the ‘authentic’ body for the purposes of some liberatory or political project. Because, as I understand it here, the ‘authentic’ is only authentic when it is incommunicable, unexchangeable, or *absurd*. It is that which is precisely beyond our grasp.

Here, I am suggesting that dance, in some instances, but not all, also has the ability to tap into some kind of absurd authenticity in the body—engaging with the impulsive and singular character of the body. Here, dance’s relative freedom from the constraints of textual coherence is a strength. By non-textuality in dance, I refer to instances where dance gets caught up in

intensity, such that forms of code and convention break down. In a state of frenzy, the body loses its coherent form, different kinds of bodies merge together, conventional gestures break down, and the singularity of bodily impulsion is revealed. The next moment, the intensity disappears, and all that's left is a trace, which is more difficult to describe than it is to silently remember.

Parts of *I Want to Dance Better at Parties* address the notion of censorship of bodily impulses in dance. It plays with the varying extremes of censorship in different dance contexts and different kinds of personalities. In the process of making his film, Gideon Obarzanek interviewed a composer named Franc. Describing his attempts to dance as clumsy, awkward and foolish, Franc stated that dance doesn't allow him to present himself the way he really is and pretty much avoids doing it at all costs. During the points in the performance that feature him, Franc's character is represented amidst a group of dancing bodies, his own body frozen. When he makes attempts to dance, his body makes small movements, but his face is contorted. He is so uncomfortable dancing, he feels like everyone can see him make 'an ass' of himself. He censors his movement to the extreme. Later on in the dance, Franc's character is foiled by the 'macho' club dancer named Deon. In his interview, Deon states "dancing is like an explosion in the body that words cannot describe". He describes how he dances so wildly and freely at parties, attention just comes to him: "I don't go out with the intent of seeking attention, but, you know, when you dance the way me and my close friends do, attention comes to us". This sentiment is coupled with explosive, what looks like random and clumsy dancing; the dancers throw themselves repeatedly on a mat marked with a bulls-eye. In this way, *Want to Dance Better at Parties* is a good example of how there are a variety of ways in which bodies come together in imaginative unities; sometimes they are more constrained by the gaze of others and sometimes they are more impulsive, more carefree. Of course on some level, the dancer has to censor his or her impulses, in the same way that all bodies do when they are trying to come across as intelligible to another person. But in the context of the dance, the dancer has the freedom to make different kinds of choices. And when the dance reaches a high point of intensity, they can give themselves over completely to the dance, losing themselves. Dance oscillates somewhere in the spaces between the boundaries of code and communicability and impulse and singularity.

## Chapter Three Interlude

### First Contact

My first experience with contact improvisation was at an intensive workshop at the University of Alberta. Our first day, we began with a led-meditation. The instructor asked us to begin by lying on the floor and asked us to imagine our bodies at the level zero. Slowly, I began to feel all the anxieties stored up in my body melt away. Once we had reached the level zero, he asked us to move parts of our body using as little energy as possible. Doing this, I began to feel like a new body. All of the recognizable things about my body, my sore hip, and weak right leg, my hunched shoulders, begin to melt away.

Then the instructor split us into partners and asked us to play the zero-to-one-hundred game. One partner at the level of zero exertion and one partner at one hundred percent exertion. I started out at zero. My partner attempted to manipulate my heavy, unresponsive body. You could imagine that this would be difficult for her. She had to roll me back and forth, until my body found momentum, then wedge her body under mine so that my hips (the fulcrum of my body weight and my centre of balance) stacked onto hers. Only from there, could she move me around, and even then, she could not do much with me. She was exhausted. In this arrangement, we stayed close to the floor, burdened by gravity.

The instructor asked us to gradually even out our levels of exertion; 80-20, 60-40, and finally to 50-50. Gradually, I began to use more effort in my body and my partner began to use less. As our levels of exertion evened out, our possibilities for movement expanded. Pushing against each other with equal force, we were able to produce a dynamic point of contact. We were able to move from lying, sitting, and kneeling positions, to standing, lifting, and flying positions. After we spent some time experimenting with the ideal 50-50 ratio, the instructor reversed the flow. It was now my turn to move towards 100. It was my turn to take control of my partner's movement. In contact, it is never fully 50-50, there are always fluxes and changes, but this is the goal. Dancers should work towards a fusion of speeds and flows with each other. This will bring an intense and flowing quality to their dance; lines of flight become possible. Dancers have to be responsive to each other's strength and abilities. They have to be able to switch levels of exertion as though it were reflex. They have to be prepared to take opportunities when they

present themselves, and relinquish control when the movement becomes flowing. Starting at zero, the bodies of improvisation dancers come together, to build a new relational body. Bodies that were once separate become fully responsive to each other.

Skin is sprawling, slow and meticulous, sensuous, slithering (a becoming-snake). Bone brings about a weighted, stacking motion, folding at the hinges. Bones touch the ground and make noise. Bones touch other bones and make stacks. The skeleton organizes weight. The skeletal structure is a good indicator of which parts of the body can bear weight, which parts of the body contain weight. Bearing the weight of an adult body is difficult unless you find a way to stack the heaviest part on top of the strongest part. If I lodge my hips and lower back underneath the same area of another grown body, if I stack my bones like a table, all of the sudden I am able to carry someone across the room. This can be accomplished without the act of 'picking' someone up (manipulating the other body). This motion can be accomplished by the simple process of shifting weight from one body to the next.

Water-body is also weighted, but in a different sloshing, spiralling, crashing way. In this, the dancer has to tap into her inner fluids. The best way to experience this is to drink a bunch of water and then jump up and down. The fluids in your body will pull on your motion, like waves crashing or water rushing down a stream. But water can also be calm (every Taoist knows that when water is calm it is never still, there are currents of water circulating underneath the seemingly still surface). Bodies also have a component of wind. We take in breaths and exhale them. This motion varies. It can be rushed and forceful, or it can be breezy and lifting. The best thing about wind is its capacity for lift-off. The force of wind can take dancing bodies for a ride, helping them find a line of flight. The body finds new ways of moving by tapping into these multiple elements. Being able to disorganize the dominant ways of sensing and moving (i.e. with the strata of the body, placed in hierarchical sensing order, and operating as a unified whole) is something that dancers, with a lot of practice, can get really good at. It is about tapping into the various forces and speeds that make up the body.

### **Seizing Dance**

In December 2009, dancer Rita Marcalo stopped taking her anticonvulsant medication. As part of a performance, she locked herself in an enclosure for 24 hours, deprived herself of sleep, drank alcohol and caffeine, and stared at strobe lights. She did this in the hope that she

would induce a seizure in front of a live audience and video cameras. *Involuntary Dances* raised a national debate around disabilities and performance art—she was criticized for turning epilepsy into a spectacle or a ‘freak show’. Disability groups urged Marcalo to cancel the performance for fear of raising stigma. The performance also raised issues over the status of art or dance and dance choreography. Many people were enraged that she was given a federal grant to do something that involved such little skill, like ‘stopping her medication’. National headlines pejoratively proclaimed, “Dancer Rita Marcalo to have epileptic fit on stage” (Norfolk, Andrew, *Sunday Times*, 2009). Frustrated bloggers wrote ad nauseum ‘this is not dance’. It seems that people were angry at the lack of effort, or the lack of concern for aesthetic conventions. Rita Marcalo was seen as pushing against the formal boundaries of dance (performance), which today seems to be dominantly associated with technical proficiency and virtuoso choreography. This is evident in mainstream representations of dance, such as the television show *So You Think You Can Dance*.

Marcalo’s idea was to explore the dual relationship between her dancing body and her epileptic body. The former concerned with mastery and control, aesthetic image, and performance. The latter recalcitrant body, which can be managed with medication, but erupts in involuntary movement ever so often. In an interview, she spoke of this duality, first in terms of public/private: “if I feel a seizure coming on I go somewhere people won’t see me, it is the opposite of when I’m dancing in public, when I’m in control of my body”. Then in terms of mastery/resistance’:

As a dancer, since I was about 11, my entire life has been about gaining control and gaining mastery of my own body. But there are these points in my life where I lose control and my body is going to do what it is going to do. So for a long time, I have been thinking about this as my other body. My ‘involuntary dances’.

Rita Marcalo’s distinction between the dancing body and the epileptic body, I would argue, is a familiar move. It partakes in the ubiquitous binary system: mind/body, nature/culture, public/private or rational/irrational. The duality that Marcalo plays with in this piece is one that is central to this thesis; management, control, and choreography vs. spontaneity, unpredictability, and improvisation. The way I see it, *Involuntary Dances* calls attention to the sheer danger of improvisation—the real uncertainty and exhilaration that result from relinquishing choreographic control. Certainly, this danger is something that Marcalo’s critics latched on to; the danger of

making light of a condition that seizes the body in unpredictable and startling ways. But the appeal and excitement over this concept should be noted—to ‘catch’ the body in spontaneous movement, or to experiment with movement that is free from the disciplinary control of political forces, or to see what it is capable of outside of culture—it is tempting to say that *Involuntary Dances* was improvisation in the purest sense. Where the most difficult choreography to escape is our own personal patterns, aesthetics, or habits, the unconscious epileptic seizure is the farthest away from choreography one can get.

But of course it is never this simple. Even in this attempt to dance involuntarily, Rita Marcalo had to work very hard to harness the conditions under which such an involuntary dance might happen. For example, she had carefully timed and planned ‘triggers’, a protective enclosure, and a medical team in case anything went wrong. This is an example of how in most attempts to improvise movement, choreography and structure always seem to creep in. We might even call this a ‘structured improvisation’—a dance with just enough scoring to direct outcomes, but at the same time, with just enough open space for the movement to happen ‘on its own’. There are many examples of this; in rhythm and blues, musicians are limited by the blues chord progression, but can riff on them in whatever way they want. In the same way, Marcalo tried to perform this ‘freedom from discipline’ or ‘spontaneous movement’ within the limits of a ‘protective enclosure’ and a choreographic plan. Thus, she tried to gain control of her epilepsy by performing the seizure inducing acts, which is a kind of choreography in itself.

The irony of this particular performance is that, despite all her efforts over the 24 hours, Marcalo failed to have a seizure. After the performance, she spoke about her experience; 10 hours in, she felt like she was going to have a seizure. But perhaps in too much anticipation, the seizure slipped away. And for the remaining 14 hours, she had to come to terms with the elusiveness of this ‘other body’, the trickiness of gaining command over an epileptic seizure, and the incommensurability between voluntary and involuntary dances.

But even though Marcalo failed to produce a seizure on stage, I consider this performance to be more successful as a result. First, it introduces the distinction between nature/culture, or in the case of dance choreography/ improvisation. Marcalo’s ‘other body’, I would argue, is improvisational—she says, “it’s going to do what its going to do”. During some kinds of seizures, the person loses consciousness, falls to the floor, their muscles stiffen, and they begin to twitch or convulse. This movement is caused by electrical surges in the brain; the

movement follows neural pathways, skeletal muscles tighten and stiffen up (tonic phase), then the muscles contract and expand rapidly causing convulsive movements (the clonic phase). This results in strong and violent movements that cannot and should not be suppressed. Because this movement happens unconsciously, it lacks the technical quality of other kinds of physical movements, such as the ones that a dancer strives to perfect—that is choreography or technique. While there are lots of very technical movements we perform unconsciously—such as walking or typing—these movements are learned or inculcated into the body through discipline. Throughout this thesis, I will argue that most movement, especially in dance, takes on this technical (choreographed) quality. But the seizure is different; it demonstrates completely unlearned movement, wholly autonomic (authentic) movement. In the process of thinking about the socially interpolated movement capacities of the body, ‘the seizure’ often comes up as a counter-point. It is the example of bodily movement that is *untouched* by social force—it cannot be disciplined. As such, the involuntary dance takes on a kind of elusiveness or ephemerality. This explains one of the other motivations behind the *Involuntary Dances* project; Marcalo “has never seen herself as she seizes. She only has the witnessing of others. This would be her chance to have the experience recorded on film, her cameras and the mobile phones of others.” (Jo Verrent, 2009). For a dancer, who is always managing the movement, lines, appearance of her body, the curiosity just to see what your body might move like without any technique is understandable. But the problem is that in order to do so, Marcalo had to transform her spontaneous seizures into something slightly different, something more planned and performative—improvisation becomes choreography. She had to seize the seizure, something Marcalo ultimately failed at.

### **Darkness that Matters**

Judith Butler plays with the word 'matter' in *Bodies that Matter*. It is a noun; that which has corporeal substance. It is a verb; the process of becoming material and finally it is some kind of adjective or descriptor. When we say something matters, we draw attention to it, suggesting that it is important. In Crystal Pite's *Dark Matters* the word play also applies. Dark matter is the imperceptible (it can only be known by its affects), atomless matter that is said to make up the bulk of the universe—which Pite tries to dance, in the figure of the shadow. In this way, dark matter matters (materializes) in this performance, the figure emerges from the shadows—a body

that was present the whole time, but the audience just begins to notice, only to disappear again. And finally, Pite tells us that darkness matters. Whereas in most traditional theatre, the audience only pays attention to what happens in the spotlight, *Dark Matters* asks the audience to notice the dark spaces, behind the curtain, the anonymous puppeteers, the moments of silence, which make the visual spectacle possible.

The piece begins in a house, three walls, a table, and a window. A carpenter is frantically building a marionette. The use of lighting suggests the passage of several days. The lights come on to capture scenes of progress. Until finally the marionette is complete and comes to life with the help of four or five shadow characters in the spirit of kuroko in the Kabuki theatre. Each operator wields a long pole that controls one limb of the marionette's body. The lines emanating from the marionette remind me so much of the geometricalization of the body in Labanation or William Forsythe's improvisation technologies. Forsythe conceptualized movement as operating within virtual (unobservable but ever present) patterns. The dancer's body, too, has lines emanating from it.

Printed in the program is a quote from Heinrich von Kleist's *On the Marionette Theatre*. "Grace appears most purely in that human form which either has no consciousness or an infinite consciousness. That is, in the puppet or in the god" (1972, 26). As the dance continues, I find out what this means. The marionette and his maker dance together, embracing one another. The marionette moves with such grace and simplicity. It displays moments of emotion (the puppet assumes a kind of subjectivity); uncanny moments of astonishment, jealousy, rage, and affection. Watching this puppet move, I think of Quintilian--how simple movements of the head are more suggestive than words could ever be:

we can indicate our will not merely through the by a gesture of the hands, but also with a nod from the head: signs take the place of language in the dumb, and the movements of the dance are frequently full of meaning, and appeal to the emotions without any aid from words. The temper of the mind can be inferred from the glance and gait, and even speechless animals show anger, joy, or the desire to please by means of the eye and other physical indications (Quintillian, 1922, 280-281).

At one point, the carpenter embraces the marionette and then joyfully tosses the marionette in the air, sending it for a circular ride across the stage. As this happened, I let myself block out the bars and the black-clad operators. Time slowed down and gravity suspended; the marionette's head tossed back, ankle joints loose. The marionette's skeletal structure is so open,

movement from its centre of gravity transmits gracefully throughout its entire body. Free but not flailing. I wish I could move like this. I am jealous of the marionette.

### **Feeling Gravity**

I went to a workshop taught by a Japanese dancer, called Hideo Arai. He was trained in Noguchi Taisou technique; one half dance form and the other half general movement philosophy. The theme of this technique was allowing gravity to provide the main energy behind movement. Hideo gave everyone in the workshop a printed handout, with a few points and mantras:

- The main energy of movement is gravity, Muscle controls the start, speed and stop of the movement. It works as supporting player who supports weight in cooperation with the bone”
- The less we use muscle, the more power goes out”
- Forget the existence of the muscle, and the muscle will do the highest working at that time. Forget the existence of consciousness, and consciousness will do the highest working at that time.

Hideo did not speak very much English. He certainly did not give us much choreography or orders. Instead, he brought with him a few toys and props to aid the instruction and to encourage us to experience the kind of movement we all came to ‘learn’. He pulled out a slinky and laid it down on the floor. He shock one end of the slinky we all watched as the vibrations snaked their way to the end in a ‘s’ pattern. Then he invited us to lie on the floor and experiment with this form of movement in our spine. Later, he pulled out two eggs, one was hard boiled and one was raw. He spun both of them like tops, and then stopped the spinning. He showed us that the hard boiled egg stopped much easier than the raw one. The lesson to take away from this is that fluidity is hard to stop. If you need to stop the motion stiffen your muscles. If you want to allow movement to flow through your body and reach its natural terminus, maintain the fluidity in your body.

Finally, he showed us his collection of Japanese rice paper, which he uses in his dance performances; he showed us a fresh piece, a piece he had been using for a few weeks, and a piece he had been using for 10 years. The freshest piece was stiff and ridged. It made a shrill noise when you moved it. It certainly did not move with much grace. The ‘teenage’ piece of rice

paper was softer. I could see the wrinkles from where Hideo hands had held it. When you threw it in the air, it floated down to the ground like a butterfly. But the most graceful object he showed us was the 10 year old piece of rice paper. It felt like silk to touch, only softer and more delicate like human skin. And it floated in the air like nothing I have ever seen before—total grace, like a jelly fish in the water. And in a way that surprised everyone in the workshop (all mature dancers that have mostly come to terms with the fact that they have past their technical prime in dance, typically so oriented towards youth and childhood), Hideo Arai suggested that we, too, will one day be like the oldest piece of paper.

## Chapter Four Bodies That Don't Matter

The body which fails to submit to the law or occupies the law in a mode contrary to its dictate, thus *loses its sure footing—its cultural gravity*—in the symbolic and reappears in its imaginary tenuousness, its fictional direction. Such bodies contest the norms that govern the intelligibility of sex (my emphasis, Butler, 1993, 139)

Of all performances I have addressed so far, *Self Unfinished*, performed by Xavier Le Roy, represents the most subversive version of the body. It refuses to submit to the laws of gender, subjectivity, even gravity. His body dematerializes and rematerializes, going through at least three noticeable metamorphoses.

Andre Lepecki describes this performance; as the audience enters, Le Roy is already on stage, sitting at a table (2006, 41). After a while he stands up and walks around in a pedestrian manner. His walk eventually becomes choppy, even robotic, while he lets out unintelligible vocalizations. In another transition, Le Roy removes his shoes and his button up shirt—pulling a long t-shirt over his torso, arms, and head—exposing his only his center, feet, and hands. Bent over on all fours, Le Roy's body divides into two bodies, one male and one female, joined at the torso. The two bodies begin to move, like a couple dancing the tango—one body walking forwards, signalling to the other to move backwards. They move around each other, pressing into each other like two aggressive rams. The body breaks down into hyperbolic signs, with no subjective depth, like the properly dressed stick figures that tell us which bathroom to go into. They slither underneath the table and up against the wall, where the hands-becoming-feet now take the weight. What were previously legs now become arms, or spider-legs or tentacles—feelers guiding the motion alongside the wall.

From here, the body goes through another transformation, the most abstract and drawn out transformation of the performance. Le Roy loses all his clothes, curls upside down, tucks his head into his chest, and presses his butt in the air. The visual effect is that Le Roy no longer looks human; in fact, he looks more like a plucked chicken (Lepecki, page ,41). Arms and legs move in misshapen contortions. The 'they' becomes an 'it.'

Le Roy unfurls this chicken body and awkwardly makes his way back to the table—once again recognizable as himself, but this time naked and shaken from the events of the performance. Finally, Le Roy exits the stage fully clothed, leaving the audience with a boom box blasting Diana Ross singing “upside down/ now you’re turning me/ inside out/ round and round” (Lepecki, 41).

In *Exhausting Dance*, Andre Lepecki notes that Le Roy completely drops the notion of the subject “and consequently modes of arresting being within fixed categories: masculinity and femininity, human and animal, object and subject, passive and active, mechanical and organic, absence and presence, all the oppositions that psycho-philosophically have framed modern subjectivity within binomial options” (Lepecki, 40). These categories are replaced with a series of pure becomings. His body remains ontologically unfinishable, never falling into an intelligible category, but always reinventing. It is not man *or* woman, human *or* animal, but man *and* woman, human *and* animal (ibid).

One way to read *Self Unfinished*—the idea that bodily incompleteness is politically resistive to hegemonic conceptions concerning what a body is and what it can do. Andre Lepecki notes the transgressive potential of this performance; “we are no longer before a notion of the self as a proper home of the individuated subject, as presumed condition for a disciplined body to be inhabited by the choreographic” (43). Lepecki seems to suggest that this performance challenges a hegemonic conception of the body; “Le Roy’s *Self Unfinished* proposed an understanding of the body that challenges the confinement of the body brought on by modernity. The individual body, the monadic body no longer has a place” (44). Finally, Lepecki hints at an empowering function; “Le Roy proposes an entirely different understanding of what a body is: not a stable fleshy host for a subject, but a dynamic power, an ongoing experiment ready to achieve unforeseeable planes of immanence and consistency” (1999, 43). In this reading, Le Roy’s continual becoming not only subverts the dominant conception of the body, but it also offers a new one, one that opens up new possibilities for ‘dynamic power’.

But what if we are to read Xavier Le Roy’s *Self Unfinished* alongside Judith Butler? While her thought leaves some room for this sort of metamorphosis, it is far from idealistic. For Butler, we will find that the question of ‘what a body can do’ is limited by ‘boundaries of discursive intelligibility’ (1993, 16). The question is not ‘what a body can do’ but ‘how do bodies come to matter’ and ‘*which* bodies come to matter’. Butler argues that bodies come to

matter by ritual citation of hegemonic norms. Bodies that fail to cite these recognizable norms, like Le Roy in *Self Unfinished*, fail to take on significance and fail to matter. These bodies that don't matter are crucial to Butler's argument. Rather than focusing on the purely productive potential of discourse or power (like Foucault), Butler shows how the realm of intelligible bodies simultaneously produces a domain of radically unintelligible bodies as a necessary constitutive outside. 'Bodies that don't matter' expose the constructed quality of normalized bodies and their limits. On some level, they possess the potential to force change in hegemonic conceptions of the body. But at the same time, Butler argues that 'political action' or resistance is impossible for 'bodies that don't matter', unless they are tethered to hegemonic norms which provide intelligibility. Without adhering to or participating in recognizable signs of bodily life, 'bodies that don't matter' are without agency, subjectivity, or status as 'human'. Thus, for Butler, the project of resignification must take place in reference to tried and true hegemonic norms: "those who are abjected [will] come to make their claim through and against the discourses that have sought their repudiation" (1993, 224).

Thus, Butler's thought poses a formidable challenge to the main argument of this thesis—which is to suggest ways in which contemporary dance can not only challenge hegemonic norms surrounding and captivating the body, but also expand the possibilities for the body. For Butler, bodies cannot simply materialize in any way—they must materialize in an intelligible way. This challenge has a direct bearing on what the dancer is capable of doing—i.e. origination becomes less possible because every act, every movement or gesture, if it is to 'matter', must take place with reference to the intelligible norm. Cultural norms of intelligibility are, for Butler, an enabling constraint, for which she sometimes uses the metaphor of weight or gravity. Intelligible bodies with a secure position in the symbolic are weighted. Bodies which "fail to submit to the law or [occupy] that law in a mode contrary to its dictate" (139), they certainly "contest the norms that govern the intelligibility of sex" (ibid). For Butler, this kind of contestation causes bodies to 'lose their sure footing'—they stumble and flail. Without the added weight of the norm, the abject body's movement lacks force or intention; upside down, inside out, even motionless. Thus, for Butler, the primary way to challenge the hegemonic norm is to participate in it—Butler calls this the double movement—to gather the necessary strength and agential capacities provided by the norm, only to turn on it and playfully subvert it, exposing its naturalized status.

But can we think of Le Roy's *Self Unfinished* as a viable form of resistance when it offers nothing but weightless abjection and the loss of eloquent (intelligible) movement? In this chapter, I will explore Butler's argument for the materialization of the body under the constraints of the hegemonic, heterosexual symbolic, a critique of materiality that is important for dance and its tendency to fetishize the 'presence of the body'. I will frame this as a challenge to contemporary dance performances like the ones addressed in this thesis. But in the end, I will argue that Butler's conception of political subversion is too limiting. I will argue that a complete departure from the hegemonic norm can be thought of as politically profound, and I will use *Self Unfinished* as an example of this. I will also try and reformulate Butler's notion of performativity as citationality, where intelligible acts are perpetually 'chained' to convention, into a theory of performance where 'the norm' serves as an entry point into unexpected and original movement.

### **From Material to Materialization**

In many ways, Butler's insights on the body are relevant to contemporary dance performance and experimentation, particularly her argument for the 'materialization of the body'. Butler is critical of certain political movements that fetishize the materiality of the body (such as the discourses of modern dance I discussed in the introduction to this thesis), where the body is framed as that which is repressed and confined by culture. Political rebellion, in this formulation, is characterized by a nostalgic return to this innocent presocial materiality. This is a pattern that appears often in dance, for example, in Anna Halprin's work with children or 1960s improvisation movement. As Janet Wolf notes, this trope "depends on a mistaken idea of dance as intuitive, non-verbal, and natural, and that it risks abandoning critical analysis for a vague and ill-conceived 'politics of the body'" (1995, 70). In much the same way, Butler argues that the uncritical notion of materiality is sedimented with "discourses on sex and sexuality that prefigure and constrain the uses to which the term can be put" (1993, 29). Every time the concept of materiality is invoked, the degradation and exclusion of the feminine is implied. There is a passive materiality that is penetrated and actualized by an active culture. Rather, her account stresses the ways in which this concept is produced and regulated through acts of signification. Butler cleverly inverts her critics who say she neglects the material presence of the body, using this very critique as an example of the performative constitution of the body. She argues, "there is no reference to the body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body" (10).

Every time the body is referred to, it is enacted. These references are engrained in the structures of language. Every experience of the body is mediated through cultural frameworks, language, and signification” (Jagger, 2008, 64).

Rather than accepting the materiality of the body as something that is simply given in biology or nature (a kind of essentialism) she suggests bodies are always in a process of materialization. Butler conceives of matter “not as a site or surface, *but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*” (1993, 9, emphasis original). Like the other theorists I have been working with in this thesis, for Butler there is no body outside of power /discourse. She refuses to distinguish between something essential upon which construction works. The way we experience and perceive bodies (including things like anatomical organization) are produced through normalizing discourse. In other words, there is no stable body as such, but rather a process of becoming a body. For Butler, this process of materialization is instigated and regulated by cultural norms. This materialization is “structured by a culturally complex signifying chain that not only constitutes sexuality, but establishes sexuality as a site where bodies and anatomies are perpetually reconstituted” (90).

Butler plays with the different inflections of the word ‘matter’. On the one hand, matter implies the ‘stuff’ that bodies are made of; skin, bones, blood etc. But because Butler rejects the constructivist paradigm (where culture is engrained ‘into’ or ‘onto’ a body), this use of matter is called into question. In this sense (and here Butler is similar to Foucault), matter inseparable from power. Thus, she avoids positing the body as a surface for ‘inscription’.

Butler refers back to the Aristotelian notion of *schema* or ‘principle of recognizability’. For Aristotle, it is pointless to ask whether the stamp and the shape given by the stamp are distinct entities because each element can only appear in combination with the other. In the same way, matter never appears without its *schema*, that means that it only appears under a certain grammatical forms and that the principle of recognizability, its characteristic gesture or usually dress, is indissoluble from what constitutes its matter” (33). In other words, ‘the body’ is only accessible through mediating cultural significations—signification captures a set of energies (or desires) into a coherent whole (a body). This permeates right down to the body’s anatomy; “the very accessibility of anatomy is dependent on this schema and coincident with it” (65). The fact that we understand our bodies in terms of primary organs has to do with the cultural

heirarchization and signification of those organs. Thus, the materiality is never fully stable. This constant need for reiteration opens up opportunities for variable modes of materiality. However, this variability is limited by normative regimes (this is something I will discuss more later in this chapter).

The other inflection of matter that Butler plays with is the notion of ‘meaning’ in matter, materialization also means ‘becoming significant’:

To speak within these classical contexts of *bodies that matter* is not an idle pun, for to be material means to materialize, where the principle of that materialization is precisely what ‘matters’ about that body, its very intelligibility. In this sense, to know the significance of something is to know how and why it matters, where to ‘matter’ means at once to ‘materialize’ and to ‘mean’ (1993, 32).

One of the views that Butler criticizes is the idea that materiality is ontologically distinct from intelligibility (33), or that we can have access to a body outside of culture, discourse or power. Bodies never appear without their principle of appearance, their form, or their schema. Bodies might never fully materialize in the ‘real’, but they materialize in the perception of the other through the performance of recognizable cues. Thus, there is no body as such, only that which is intelligible as a body. We do not have access to pure materiality outside of signification/significance. In this understanding, coherent bodies are only recognizable if they cite culturally intelligible norms or categories. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler analyzes sex as one of the primary categories by which a body materializes. Xavier Le Roy’s performance, I think, illustrates this point. Le Roy begins the performance by referencing a normalized conception of the body; a white, able-bodied male, sitting at a desk. But as the performance continues, his body loses coherence as his sexed positionality becomes multiple. The body becomes more formless and unstable when it fails to meet any sexual cues at all. Even though Le Roy’s body does not undergo any radical material changes, he does not include props in order to build a new assemblage, there are no optical illusions, or special effects. Even still, the body undergoes radical qualitative and quantitative changes, just by playfully subverting gender and sex norms (and norms of verticality). Not only does this call into question the coherence of his body, but it also undermines his position as a ‘subject’. If the viewer allows herself to be fully captivated by the performative illusion, it is difficult, if not impossible, to speak of Xavier Le Roy as a subject in certain parts of the performance. In the process of dancing, Le Roy’s body proliferates and refuses to stay put in a sexed positionality. At certain points, it makes more sense to speak of him

as a multiplicity—a ‘they’. At other times, it makes more sense to speak of him as an ‘it’. As he moves farther and farther away from recognizable bodily forms, it is more and more impossible to attribute agency to him, without error. In such a realm of abjection, Le Roy loses the ability to speak, gesture, communicate, even locomote; he (sic) is immobilized, upside-down on the floor, only able to pathetically wiggle its limbs. While *Self Unfinished* radically destabilizes the hegemonic conception of sex and the body, it comes at the cost of abjection. Butler states this paradox; “if there is *agency*, it is to be found, paradoxically, in the possibilities opened up in and by that constrained appropriation of the regulatory law” (1993, 12). In Butler’s formulation, it seems this would be a performance that ‘does not matter’, i.e. it is insignificant.

### **Performativity as Citation**

Neither power nor discourse are rendered anew at every moment; they are not as weightless as the utopics of radical resignification imply (Butler, 1993, 224).

With Butler’s rejection of essentializing discourse, there is room for alternative possibilities for materialization. However, she is extremely careful to avoid the idealism or utopianism implied in the idea that bodies are performatively constituted; a critique she was given after she published *Gender Trouble*. Where performativity or constructivism sometimes implies the freedom to construct alternative identities for oneself, in *Bodies That Matter*, Butler stresses the idea that ‘not just anything goes’. Gender/sex/the body should not be thought of as performance in the theatrical sense; “that could mean that [she] thought that one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night” (x). First, Butler complicates the understanding of this freely choosing subject. For her, the subject is produced under highly constrained (even compulsive) normative frames—it cannot simply choose its gender as actors pick a part in a play. Because the subject is produced through the norm, there is no ‘stepping outside’, where that which initiates the ‘stepping’ is always already within normalizing discourse; “where there is an ‘I’ who utters or speaks and thereby produces and effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that ‘I’” (225). Second, certain instances of performativity will be lost in the ether without binding power and authority, a power that causes certain performances to ‘stick’ or to ‘matter’ in the eyes of the audience. This binding power is provided by a previous form of power or authority:

This productive capacity of discourse is derivative, a form of cultural iterability or rearticulation, a practice of resignification, not creation ex nihilo...[W]hat is invoked by the one who speaks or inscribes the law is the fiction of a speaker who wields the authority to make his words binding, the legal incarnation of the divine utterance (107).

Thus, Butler revises her notion of performativity espoused in *Gender Trouble* to include elements of speech-act theory. Performative speech acts, according to J.L Austin, actually bring into existence that which they name, for example, the marriage ceremony where a couple is pronounced ‘man and wife’, the naming of a ship, the pronouncement of ‘guilty’ by a judge. The performative speech-act contains the power and authority to produce a kind of outcome. Drawing from Derrida’s reformulation of speech-act theory, Butler argues that this authority does not originate out of some divine will (creation ex nihilo). Rather, it stems from convention, what already makes sense within a domain of intelligibility or a linguistic community. More specifically, this authority stems from the utterance’s ability to relate to other utterances in a general economy of meaning.

The binding power that Austin attributes to the speaker’s intention in such illocutionary acts is more properly attributable to a citational force of the speaking, the iterability that establishes the authority of the speech act, but which establishes the non-singular character of that act. In this sense, every ‘act’ is an echo or citational chain, and it is its citationality that constitutes its performative force (282, n.5).

The possibility of communication depends on the condition that every mark, sign, gesture, or movement can be cited in relation to each other, like a code. There is no inherent connection to signs and what they signify, only what is culturally intelligible. Butler frames the performative as an instance of productive power or enabling constraint. For example, the naming of the girl “initiates the process by which a certain ‘girling’ is compelled”... “this girl, however, who is compelled to ‘cite’ the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not the product of choice, but the forcible citation of a norm” (232).

However, the performative is not purely productive or enabling—it also disables certain modes of being. Communication (like its root form community) also depends on exclusion; for example, grammatical rules that prohibit linguistic formulations. Thus certain performative acts will necessarily be unintelligible, pathologized, abjected, and ‘queered’ in the pejorative sense. Modes of bodily being that defy the heterosexual imperative exist as the necessary and

constitutive outside to normative materialization. This boundary structures the possibility for intelligibility. The performative which produces the intelligible body always implicates the unintelligible body: “if the performative operates as the sanction that performs the heterosexualization of the social bond, perhaps it also comes into play precisely as the shaming taboo which ‘queers’ those who resist or oppose that social form” (226). Here, ‘queer’ stands for that which does not belong within the hegemonic linguistic community.

Finally, it is important to note that this notion of citationality is not mechanical repetition or simply “replicas of the same” (226). Linguistic trends are never fixed throughout time. Rather, linguistic communities tend to adapt to new signs, marks or gestures. In every circulation of iteration, there is room for movement and transformation, more like a spiral than a circle. The failure of the law to fix meaning and rules of intelligibility exposes its seams; “a citation will be at once an interpretation of the norm and an occasion to expose the norm itself as a privileged interpretation” (108). This is precisely where Butler sees the opportunity to strategize change and resignification—in taking advantage of the moments where what appears as ‘natural law’ (for example, sex) fails to repeat itself properly. And rather than reinstating that hegemonic law, Butler encourages the effort to dislodge its monopolizing authority, while still paying attention to the modes of communication and subjectivity that this law enables.

Butler’s formulation of the performative also includes physical practices as discursive acts—physical acts, if they are to be recognized, must also cite norms and they must be repeated in to become efficacious. This citation through physical act is something like a learned habit, like Foucault’s notion of discipline, deeply integrated into everyday practice. Butler also warns us that this citation is not ‘free-play’ or ‘theatrical self-presentation’ (95). Adherence to intelligible norms is more like a compulsion; we are attached to the modes of being which provide the subject with recognition or intelligibility. “The subject must desire recognition, and so find himself or herself fundamentally attached to the categories that guarantee social existence” (Butler, 2004, 191). Normalizing power weighs upon this attachment to the rewards offered through participating in a discursive community. Again I would like to point out the double inflection of ‘matter’; citing recognizable norms allows bodies to be recognized as significant, but it also seems (at least metaphorically) to provide grounding, gravity, attachment, or binding; weighted constraints which provide the conditions for movement or dance.

### Double Movements

To ameliorate and rework this violence, it is necessary to learn a double movement: to invoke the category and, hence, provisionally to institute an identity and at the same time to open the category as a site of political contest (Butler, 1993, 221-222).

Butler suggests that subjective life is unlivable without reference to and identification with the normalized categories provided by discourse. Identification with a normalized category is necessary because it provides access to the image of oneself as a coherent whole. It also provides access to the linguistic community, intelligibility, recognition, subjectivity, and agency (all of those elements of social life that are produced within the logic of enabling constraint). But then there is the other side of the equation; those that don't participate are 'queered' (shamed), pathologized, abjected, and to echo the quotation that begins this chapter, "they lose their sure footing—their cultural gravity" (139). In the final chapter of *Bodies that Matter* Butler discusses the project of resignification surrounding the category of queer. The aim of this kind of political strategy is to remain carefully critical of the category, while not deconstructing or destroying the category all together; "the political deconstruction of 'queer' ought not to *paralyze* the use of such terms, but, ideally, to extend its range, to make us consider at what expense and for what purposes the terms are used, and through what relations of power such categories have been wrought" (my emphasis, 229). Again, the metaphor of motion and stillness shows up; the necessary error of intelligible identity categories allows for continual movement, or at least the ability to move oneself. The paralyzed figure—or the abject—is limited in its capabilities for movement, at least in the metaphoric sense.

Butler reinvokes the notion of 'sign chains' in *On The Genealogy of Morals*. We do not know things for what they are in themselves but rather how they link up to other things in our schemas of knowledge. A sign is a simplified or abbreviated abstraction for the thing—on its own, it does not mean very much, but in connection to other signs (linked together in a chain) lets us gain a total perspective. Thus, our understanding of things is weighed down by 'historical continuity' in the way that the intelligible sign is always situated in the context of what is already understood. Butler asks, "must there be a way to think about the constraints on and in resignification that takes account of its propensity to return to the 'ever old' in relations of social power"? It seems Butler affirms the historical weight of the sign chain and the necessity for

performative acts to constantly make reference to the ‘ever old’. Whereas ‘the chain’ in liberal theory is a metaphor for repression or restriction of movement (for example the prisoners chained to the cave in Plato’s republic), the chain emerges in *Bodies that Matter* as something which enables movement, without which we lose ‘sure footing’ and spiral off into the weightless realm of the abject.

Thus, she emphasizes the importance of what she calls ‘a double movement’ as a resistive strategy; “a movement towards a discursive identification, taking from it whatever is necessary, and a movement against that category, a turning back on that identification, “interrogat[ing] the exclusions by which it proceeds” (222). This encompasses the necessity of identification coupled with the necessity that this identificatory movement be open to reinscription and change. In other words, the double move includes a citation and inhabitation of the hegemonic norm, and a playful subversion of that norm from within. This strategy “involves denaturalizing and destabilizing the duality of sexual difference as it stands in the hegemonic symbolic order, which [Butler] characterizes as heterosexist, as well as phallogocentric, in order to open up the possibilities for alternative imaginaries that are neither masculine nor feminine” (1999, Jagger, 75).

The public assertion of ‘queerness’ is an example of citational politics, but as a double movement. It reworks abjection into political agency, defiance and legitimacy (21). The occupation of ‘queer’ as a site of identification cites the previous, historical usages of the term, including the pejorative, cruel, and dehumanizing connotations, “this interpellation echoes past interpellations, and binds speakers, as if they spoke in unison across time” (226). This is the first movement; a move which, for Butler, always enacts a relation with the hegemonic norm and enters into the intelligible domain. This relation is, to repeat myself once again, paradoxically restricting and enabling.

Without the first movement (i.e. the citation of some already existing, already intelligible norm), a performative act “cannot enter into the dynamic by which the symbolic reiterates its power” (106). The act is powerless, toothless, weightless, and unsuccessful:

If a performative provisionally succeeds (and I will suggest that ‘success’ is always only provisional), then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices* (emphasis original, 226-227).

Also, without the first move we might be left with a ‘paradigmatically presentist conceit’ that Butler rejects “the belief that there is a one who arrives in the world, in discourse, without a history, that this one makes oneself in and through the magic of the name, that language expresses a ‘will’ or a ‘choice’ rather than a complex and constitutive history of discourse and power” (228). Without discourse, we are left with the idea that individuals can produce their own original identities. This is problematic for three interrelated reasons. First, the choosing subject is a function of discourse. Second, the possibilities for ‘fashioning oneself’ are limited by what will be understood or intelligible. And finally, this kind of interpellation is always somewhat out of the subject’s hands. One does not have complete control over the way one is read by others. Thus, the first movement is to “avow a set of constraints on the past and future that mark at once the *limits* of agency and its most *enabling conditions*” (228).

The second movement comes in as an opening of such categories as ‘sites of permanent political contest’.

Paradoxically, but also with great promise, the subject who is ‘queered’ into public discourse through homophobic interpellations of various kinds *takes up* or *cites* that very term as the discursive basis for an opposition. This kind of citation will emerge as *theatrical* to the extent that it *mimes and renders hyperbolic* the discursive convention that it also *reverses* (232).

The critical strategy, in other words, is not to demonstrate the viability of new and alternative subject positions, establishing new categories of intelligibility or new political signifiers. For Butler, this would simply be a continuation of the violent and exclusionary logic of liberal identity politics. Rather, the aim is purely to “contest and disrupt the hegemonic *heterosexual imaginary* that depends on their abjection and sustains a binary notion of sexual difference” (Jagger, 76). This contestation takes place through the referencing of the hegemonic norm, while simultaneously exaggerating it, making it hyperbolic, exposing the artificiality of the norm in the first place.

Butler reformulates drag as one example of this double movement. Here it is not a matter of embodying gender norms, but rather it is more like playing with the performativity of discourse. “At best, it seems, drag is a site of ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes” (125). The political potency of drag is ‘ambivalent’, as Butler says, because it is chained to gender norms. But that being said, it

cites these gender norms while simultaneously scrambling them' "the queer appropriation of the performative mimes and exposes both the binding power of the heterosexualizing law *and its expropriability*" (232). In other words, it shows the spaces for movement within the law, or how the law can itself be moved to apply in different contexts and to different subjects. But, it is important to note, that although it is being critiqued and expropriated, the law remains intact. The double movement always remains "a kind of talking back" to the hegemony. This kind of strategy wouldn't result in the proliferation of different bodily forms. Rather, it would result in the exposition and denaturalization of the normalized conception or organization of the body. This leaves us with a purely deconstructive strategy, where the only aim, the only course possible is the exposition of the instabilities of dominant discourse. Every resistive gesture, every politically potent practice remains tethered to the hegemonic norm structure. They must remain tethered, otherwise they are gestures that don't matter.

How does Le Roy's *Self Unfinished* stand up to this challenge? What about the singularity and originality of his body during moments of his performance? Of course, there is a difference between Butler's point of analysis, gender performativity, and my own, dance performance. Perhaps where the two realms cross over is in the metaphorical overlap; Butler often uses the language of movement to discuss politics—i.e. resistive practices need the weight and binding power of citation and norms. Something similar happens in dance. Without the weight and musculature or enabling constraints of physical discipline, normalization, and organization, dancers are often left floating in an abyss, unable to grasp on to anything. Something like this happens in Le Roy's *Self Unfinished*. As the performance goes on and Le Roy departs from recognizable bodily form, he is no longer able to 'dance' in the conventional sense of leaping and spinning etc. Instead he is, as Diana Ross sings, 'upside-down, inside-out, round-and round'.

### **Bodies That Don't Matter**

Why Le Roy's performance is interesting to me is that it does not produce a radically alternative body from the beginning of the performance. In the first stage of his performance, he begins with a normalized body. But from there, it 'doubles over' and performs parts of masculinity and femininity. At this point, Le Roy is practicing a citational performativity, but with a parodic twist. This is evident in the audience's laughter. In this stage of the performance,

Le Roy successfully performs the kind of playful subversion that Butler focuses on. *But it doesn't end there*. It continues into *Rather*, it builds intensity from the norm. As Le Roy's dance departs from the hegemonic norm the performance goes somewhere else, all together. It is not clear that he is citing anything at all.

On the one hand, I think we can read *Self Unfinished* in a citational way. For example, Ramsay Burt frames *Self Unfinished* as deconstructivist; Le Roy “uses strategies of defamiliarization to challenge and disrupt conventional expectations about the charismatic presence projected by a solo dancer” (Burt, 2008, 49). Again, “Le Roy investigates inhuman movement in order to remind the beholder of what is needed to become human” (ibid). Certainly, *Self Unfinished* is provocative because it is deconstructive. The very position Le Roy has as a male, solo dancer, performing in front of a paying audience, already interpellates him into a historical chain of expectations. By shattering these expectations, refusing to seduce the spectator, and leaving the audience hanging without an explanation, Le Roy exposes to the audience their naturalized assumptions about what constitutes dance performance. It produces a kind of anxiety and furor; audience members and dance critics scramble to try and find a narrative and meaning to the performance they just saw, exposing the desire for explanatory narrative. While *Self Unfinished* does do these things, I think it also does more, even though this ‘more’ is difficult to articulate. To only leave dance with only a deconstructive capacity seems too limiting. Why does this resistive strategy always have to end by citing dominant conventions?

I want to make clear that I am not advocating a remaking of the body ex nihilo. I agree with Butler's assertion against this kind of prediscursive presocial agency or body that can create or move. I find discourses of dance (especially improvisational dance) that boast this kind of god-like creativity to be frustrating. This is why I think it is important that Le Roy begins *Self Unfinished* with a playful subversion of a recognizable norm. Rather than thinking of this norm as something the rest of the performance perpetually relates to, I like to think of the norm as an entry point into unexpected or even original movement, much in the same way that an improviser thinks about social norms or artistic conventions (this will be the focus of my next chapter). Beginning from the entry point of a domestic, recognizable setting and bodily form, Le Roy becomes increasingly disarticulated, he becomes a body that doesn't matter. As the performance builds intensity, the body becomes unintelligible. For a few moments, it does participate in any

citational strategy; it loses its cultural weight and footing, and achieves something of a singular bodily becoming. Despite the fact that this body does not participate in historical sign chains, it still maintains a kind of potency. *Self Unfinished* begins from and returns to a state of intelligibility. To echo a phrase from the discussion of Klossowski, Le Roy oscillates between becoming a body that matters to becoming a body that doesn't matter. When he loses momentum as a body that doesn't matter, he returns to a recognizable form, and gains the momentum to leave the stage.

Perhaps this interpretation of the dance is not that far off from what Butler says about the citational practices by which bodies come to matter. After all, Butler does give some attention to the possible spaces that open up in every citational practice; “reiterations are never replicas of the same” (226). There are moments of suspension in every reiterative cycle; where a body transforms from one that doesn't matter to one that matters. I think that Butler cautions us to not get too caught up in the weightlessness of privileged experimentation, to continue—“with all the weight and difficulty of that labour”—to remain in conversation/contestation with the hegemonic powers that continue to oppress.

Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a ‘pure’ opposition, a ‘transcendence’ of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labour of *forging a future from resources inevitably impure* (241).

This notion of ‘forging a future from resources inevitably impure’ will serve as a transition into my next chapter, where I will discuss the possibility of the improvisational body.

## Chapter Five Relational Improvisation

Throughout this thesis, I have been working from a theoretical standpoint that bodies are nothing (unformed, lifeless, motionless, immaterial, absurd, abject) without the disciplines and discourses that activate them. I still maintain that this frame of analysis is very useful for understanding an extremely important level of bodily being. Dance is extremely effective on this level. The dancing body can move with and occupy normative gestures and with a slight shift, move against them in the same instant, as in De Keersmaeker's *Rosas Danst Rosas*. I do not dispute that part of the aesthetic pleasure of both performing and watching dance has to do with its being situated in a contingent aesthetic community. I also recognize the enabling power of aesthetic norms. As an improviser, I know that referencing a recognizable gesture is often an effective way to begin a movement. However, at a certain point, the discursive understanding of the body fails to provide a full account of the actual experience of dance. Specifically, it does not account for certain aspects of improvising, especially the experience and process of improvising. In the last chapter, I wrote about Xavier Le Roy's *Self Unfinished* under the rubric of Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter*. Part of what is interesting about Le Roy's performance is the playful and parodic subversion of regulatory norms. But as I mentioned, there is more to it than that. There is a kind of singularity or originality that (for a few moments) does not participate in hegemonic norms. This is where Butler's frame of analysis fails us. We cannot begin to understand the novelty of Le Roy's performance using Butler's theoretical language. Thus, analyzing dance improvisation, where the primary objective is unexpected, un-coded movement, using theories like Butler's, we end up with strange results; improvisation is seen as either impossible or disingenuous, and the potential for originality is pushed to the side.

In "The Predicament of the Improviser", I reiterate some of the problems I have already been discussing in this thesis. Using a semiotically focussed theoretical language, I show how a romantic account of improvisation is problematic mainly because it posits an over-ambitious sovereignty of the individual performer. I argue that, taken to its logical end, this romanticized form of improvisation would be a painfully isolating experience. Framed in this way, improvisation is no doubt ontologically troublesome.

However, after writing this section, I began to think more about the empirical nature of

improvisation. It seemed contradictory it was that I was writing about improvisation as being impossible, while still going to the studio and actually improvising with other artists. They didn't seem to think it was *impossible*. This latter half of this chapter asks a different question; what conditions, techniques, or tricks do improvisers use to foster new and exciting movement? Shifting to the practicalities of improvisation meant, for me, taking a step away from the theories and theorists I had been working with. Thus, for the rest of this chapter, I explore some the key conceptual themes developed by Brian Massumi and Erin Manning; affect, intensity, incipient bodies, and relational movement. Drawing on these concepts, I argue that 'an improvisation of sorts' is possible. Rather than seeing improvisation as the expression of individualized authenticity, I argue that improvisation is an outcome of the always precarious relationality between bodies and environments.

It is also important to note that I am not proposing improvisation in terms of a strict binary: choreography vs. improvisation or structure vs. freedom. Rather, I suggest that improvisation emerges through relation to a norm, structure, or habit. This part of the argument runs parallel with Butler; in her strategy for critical citationality, bodies can paradoxically inhabit hegemonic norms of sex and gender, pointing towards their limitations, contingencies, and excesses. This part of my argument is also compatible with Klossowski; bodies oscillate between everyday gestures that make sense and, during moments of intensity, absurd impulses that rupture our stable sense of the body. In all three cases, excessive bodies emerge through relation to the norm—and they eventually return. Where my analysis differs is in my focus on the 'how' of this excess emerging. How can the dancer prolong the period of emergence and work with it to create new possibilities?

### **The Predicament of the Improviser**

Most intolerable, to be sure, and terrible par excellence would be for me a life entirely devoid of habits, a life that would demand perpetual improvisation. That would be my exile and my Siberia—Nietzsche, Book Four of *The Gay Science*.

The focus of this section will be the notion of 'perpetual' improvisation, specifically, why the idea of 'total improvisation' is so troubling, or as Nietzsche says, the most intolerable and terrible par excellence. I argue that improvisation is particularly troubling when it is thought within a binary logic, where bodies are either totally inscribed or totally emptied of all regulatory

discipline or habit. If we expect improvisation to be ‘pure’ or ‘perpetual’—that is with absolutely no trace of structure, or pattern, or habit (quite a few discourses of improvisation do this)—it becomes extremely troublesome, both theoretically and practically (i.e. for the experience of the improviser and her audience). Thus, I have to agree with Nietzsche; a life of perpetual improvisation (conceived in a pure sense) would be terrible.

Romanticized discourses of improvisation begin from a blank slate. The task of the improviser is to ‘mark unmarked space’. Improvisers are encouraged to meditate and drain out their old habits. From here, the movements that are performed spontaneously and quickly somehow escape or subvert the clutches of choreographic convention—providing access to what has been repressed by culture, and articulating an authentic expression of the body. This is often accompanied with the mantra, “be in the moment”.

In dance, one of the best examples of this treatment of improvisation is from dancer, Anna Halprin. She said recently of her use of improvisation, “one of the biggest things motivating me was that I was trying to get away from cause and effect relationships in performance. I wanted to free myself from preconceptions. The real goal was to perceive reality in a fresh way” (in Ross, 2003, 45). Halprin’s improvising philosophy was focussed on the dancer as an individual; “it is a means for seeking out the private person in each child and fostering the tastes, inclinations, and movement distinctions of that unique individual” (ibid). Children figure prominently in the ideal of improvisation; “young children are endowed with the gift of seeing the world around them intuitively, with an innocent freshness as yet *unaffected* by the rational dictates of experience” (my emphasis). What I find most disconcerting about Anna Halprin’s framing of improvisation is that, in striving for the blank slate, she encourages the dancer to become disengaged with ‘reality’. Once the dancer forgets already existing ‘marks’—including relations of cause and effect—they do not have much to work with, except a kind of narcissistic self-examination; zooming in on the inclinations of the individual, and divorcing oneself from past experience—turning the focus inward, reflecting on internal emotional process. In my view, this puts an immense amount of pressure on the improviser, one that doesn’t really foster movement, per se, but creates a feeling of freezing and disconnectedness, to echo Nietzsche, “my exile and my Siberia”.

Derrida speaks of the predicament of the improviser in the documentary, *Derrida*:

It's not easy to improvise, it's the most difficult thing to do. Even when one improvises in front of a camera or a microphone, one ventriloquizes or leaves another to speak in one's place. The schemas and languages that are already there, there are already a great number of prescriptions that are prescribed in our memory and our culture. All the names are already preprogrammed. It's already the names that inhibit our ability to *really* improvise (my emphasis). One can't say whatever one wants; one is obliged, more or less, to reproduce the stereotypical discourse. And so I believe in improvisation, and I fight for improvisation, but with the belief that it is impossible (in Peters, 2009, 168).

To some degree, we can say the same about dance and the gestural languages of the body; if bodies communicate through movement and gesture, the same prohibition applies "one can't say whatever one wants; one is obliged to reproduce the stereotypical discourse". And, as we saw in the previous chapter on Butler, what obliges us to do so is precisely the need to be intelligible to the other. So, if we are 'really' improvising, this means *not* participating in language or any schema of intelligibility—including recognizable forms of movement, such a dance technique or even gestural expression. *Really* improvising would be to affirm a kind of abjection—a path which Butler warns is dangerous. The body is so interpolated with meaning and language, is it even possible to be read as a 'body' outside the framework of language? Does an improvising body still count as a body? Discourses that romanticize freedom from structure in improvisation do not take seriously the social investments we have in the structures of language. This structure enables us relate with others. The risk is that the improviser, if she is *really* improvising, will be speaking a language that only she understands, outside domains of intelligibility, suffering the burden of 'exile' or 'abjection' in Butler's lexicon. Hence, when improvisers claim to be doing something completely original, their movements are still within some kind of frame of social intelligibility. Rather than recognizing this process as psychically challenging, advocates of improvisation often romanticize it as a kind of escapism, or worse, an authentic expression of the individual will.

As I have mentioned previously, this romantic interpretation of improvisation contains problematic and naïve assumptions about the body. It presumes a neutral body outside of discourse or social choreographies, which is also able to speak and act and improvise. Butler's point, Foucault's as well, is that there is no subject who can speak and act outside of discourse. The disciplining of habits is precisely what gives the subject the capacity to act in the first place. The phrase 'dancer drained of all habits' is contradictory. There is no such thing as habitless dancer or subject. How can the dancer improvise outside of habits, if those habits are what makes

it possible for her to move at all? How is the improviser supposed to move or create anything if their very position as a subject is put into contestation by the relinquishing of all structures? Habit, pattern, knowledge of cause and effect; these are all things that pull us out of inertia. They are, in theoretical terms, enabling constraints or productive power. How are we to dance without any recourse to these habits? For example, in contact improvisation, when two bodies are dancing around a point of contact and the point of contact falls to the ground and loses momentum; it is extremely difficult to get the point of contact moving again, without some sort of technique.

What does this presume about space? In some models of improvisation, the goal is to mark unmarked space. From a space of blankness or openness, the improviser becomes the ‘prime mover’, spontaneously creating a new universe with movement, music, paint, words, etc. Take this description of the beginning of an improvisation from Ladonna Smith: “beginning in silence, holding only an instrument, listening within, observing a point for departure into the inner world of a sudden creative expression, tapping into the well to draw out a first sound in musical exploration” (in Peters, 2009, 26). Some free improvisers “want to mark unmarked space; their ideal is a pure virgin territory within which to commune with the other” (ibid). In such an unmarked space, what else is going to tip the balance from potential movement to actual movement but the willing individual? How stressful! How narcissistic! This can only lead to disappointment. There is something about this model of improvisation which can only be called “idiotic”—that is, in the etymological sense of idiot as ‘private’ or ‘individual’. Andre Lepecki discusses how some instances of dance performance create “socially severed, energetically self-contained, emotionally self-propelled idiot”.... “the idiot is not necessarily stupid, or feeble of mind. Rather, the idiot is isolated, self-contained one fanaticizing subjectivity as an autonomously self-moving being” (33). It is strange how these discourses of ‘pure’ improvisation lead to either extreme passivity (i.e. the improviser doesn’t contribute anything because they have renounced all habit), or it results in autonomous control of the subject (i.e. in the void of all habits, the improviser becomes the ‘unmoved mover’). This romantic and individualistic construal of improvisation (if it were even a remote possibility) is uncomfortable for the performer and usually results in stale movements.

## Fight for Improvisation

However, like Derrida, I “believe....and fight improvisation.” And while I still consider romantic conceptions of improvisation to be impossible or unlikely, to reject it outright would be unacceptable considering the fact that I have *really* improvised and I have seen other dancers and artists improvising beautifully. How could I say improvisation is impossible? To a certain degree, throughout writing this thesis I have been so caught up in certain theoretical disciplines rendering all improvisations impossible or failed, that I have forgotten about my very real experiences. Could the ‘predicament of the improviser’ simply be a problem for discursive theories of the body? Is the predicament simply that certain iterations of poststructural theory (specifically the ones that don’t allow for moments of excess) do not have the conceptual language to account for what happens? What would happen if we moved the ‘site’ of improvisation out of this particular frame of analysis? This will mean altering the question from whether it is theoretically ‘possible’, to the actual practice of improvisation. I maintain an understanding, of course, that there is no clear duality between theory and practice. Practices, to be sure, are highly disciplined, normative, and discourse-based—they have their own grammars and regimes of intelligibility that are rooted in theoretical assumptions of bodies and space. However, this relation between theory and practice works both ways. In the practicing of practices (or in the becoming of movement), bodies and space blur, they move beyond technique or discipline, even norms. By actively challenging and possibly changing the meaning of ‘body’ or ‘space’, practice also informs and pushes against theory.

In his book, *Parables for the Virtual*, Massumi articulates a similar frustration with semiotic theories of the body (and oddly an accurate summary of the thesis thus far): “this thoroughly mediated body could only be a ‘discursive’ body: one with its signifying gestures. Signifying gestures make sense. If properly performed, they may also unmake sense by scrambling significations already in place” (2). The purely discursive body, which is totally dependent on discipline, code, or intelligible norms for actualization, is incapable of moving or materializing outside of linguistic mediation. So improvisation, original movement, or change becomes impossible:

(W)here has the potential for change gone? How does a body perform its way out of a definitional framework that is not only responsible for its very ‘construction’, but seems to prescript every possible signifying and countersignifying move as a selection from a repertoire of possible permutations on a limited set of predetermined terms? How can the grid itself change? (3).

While still maintaining a complex view of the body, Massumi’s thought opens up space for dance to be valuable, important, effective, and original without always having to participate in norms of intelligibility. This mode of analysis opens a lot of space for originality and creativity—giving bodies, objects, and space a much more active role—a theory more conducive to improvisational movement.

Erin Manning’s work is also important for this kind of project. In her text, *Relationescapes*, she does not speak of dance from a philosophical perspective, per se. Rather, through experimentation with tango and contact improvisation, she creates a language for articulating the felt-experience of dancing or moving. We could call this approach post-linguistic. Through this new language, rooted in practice, which she ends up challenging the hegemonic conception of what a body is/what it can do.

This ‘affective’ turn also means reframing the way we think about improvisation. Rather than holding onto the notion of ‘pure improvisation’, I argue in favour of impurity<sup>3</sup>. This means shifting the focus from spontaneous, inspired creation out of the open (or the ‘marking of unmarked space’) to something more modest. It means allowing space for reference to marks, habits, and disciplines that are already there. It also means that improvisations might never be purely improvisational—they will contain ‘a choreography of sorts’ (Manning, 14, 2009). On the other hand, improvisation requires that bodies be not fully determined by constraints or structure. This will mean shifting the focus from a body that is thoroughly disciplined to a body that is more creative—that is able to relate with the ‘already there’ or ‘already felt’ to produce original movement—a body that is allowed to exceed discourse in moments of intensity.

Improvisation is, what Erin Manning calls, relational movement. It is a precarious transmission of affect between the space and the dancer[s]. “It draws on intensities within the relationships between movers that are embodied in a tango and contact improvisation but goes beyond both, emphasizing the relationality and connectivity between bodies moving together,

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<sup>3</sup> This is a reference to Butler in the conclusion of the previous chapter, “*forging a future from resources inevitably impure*” (241).

not the actualized movement forms that the movement produces” (Rubidge, 2010, 162). Movement, or flow, occurs when there is a connective element (normativity), a shared commonality which draws performers into relation to one another. This ‘shared commonality’, will be structured by limitation or prohibition; foreclosing certain possibilities and enabling others. For example, the field soccer players play on, the rhythm connecting musicians in a band, or the rules of an improv. game in theatre sports. Even though there is some predictable element either in the field that connects performers or in the technique used to initiate a movement, relational movement is improvisational because it is unpredictable. It is like throwing a bouncing ball down on the pavement—we never know which direction the ball will bounce. It is out of this instability that origination arises. It does not have to dance on the level of sense making and unmaking, qualification or intelligibility (even though it can, and often does, do this). It is in this way that bodies in motion sometimes exceed language’s signifiability.

### **Beyond Discourse**

In “The Autonomy of Affect”, Brian Massumi discusses a psychological experiment where different groups of children were shown different versions of a film; one with factual narration, one with ‘emotional’ including words expressing different emotions at different times, and finally, the original wordless version. The study found that the children reacted most strongly to the wordless version, and this reaction took place most prominently on the skin (Massumi, 2002, 23). The children reacted differently to the versions with narration; it caused more cerebral and emotional reactions (24). The versions including words produced more cerebral or cognitive reactions. What we can learn from this study is that there are multiple levels of perception. I extend this a bit further to argue that there are also multiple levels of aesthetic appreciation. On the one hand there is the level of registering the ‘meaning’ of an experience, indexing it in relation to other experiences, assessing its content and its qualifications. This is the level of perception and appreciation I have been primarily discussing in this thesis. Audiences watch for gestures and the deeper meanings of movement—either these gestures or movements belong in the context, or they don’t, and the gestures that are seen as a-contextual are read as deconstructive or transgressive. But the gestures and movement are always mediated and interpreted through intelligible forms. As is often the case in modern dance, audiences often struggle with performances that do not appear to have narrative or symbolic meaning. I

frequently over-hear confused audience members after the performance, “I just don’t get it!” Dance loves to trick people in this way.

What Massumi wants us to notice is the other level of perception characterized as affect and intensity. “Intensity is embodied in purely autonomic reactions most directly manifest in the skin—at the surface of the body, at its interface with things” (23). Brian Massumi argues that there is a distinction between systems of signification and intensity (25). Intensity is

Outside expectation and adaptation, as disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration, as it is from vital function. It is narratively delocalized, spreading over the generalized body surface like a lateral backwash from the function-meaning interloops that travel the vertical path between head and heart (25).

For me this is a familiar experience in watching dance; I am sitting in the audience, the dancers on stage make a rapid sweep across the stage, and although there is no narrative significance for what they are doing, I directly feel the wind on my face and the transformation of the space, and I get chills. This experience, alone, demonstrates that dance’s power is *more than* purely discursive or sociolinguistic. This reaction is what Massumi calls intensity; a reaction that is manifest in sensation.

Massumi suggests that the main difference between intensity or affect and qualification or intelligibility is one of directness or interference. The ‘factual version’ of the film in the experiment was disjointing, the flow of the images is stopped or interrupted by the narration “expressing in as objective a manner as possible the common sense function and consensual meaning of the movements on the screen” (23). The practice of qualifying and explaining an event slows down and mediates the directness of the transmission of affect. It is the same in dance, the narrative or gestural dimension of dance interrupts the flow of movement in order to communicate a symbolic meaning. Take, for example the structure of classical ballet; it is broken down into sections dedicated to pure dance and sections designed to reveal the plot. The part of the ballet where the plot is revealed is usually very still, made of poses and mimed gestures. In other words, the flow of movement is interrupted to convey narrative meaning. I end up at a similar point made in chapter two on, Klossowski; the intensity of experience is traded or filtered out by everyday language in order to maintain a coherent or intelligible body subject. “The system of signs abbreviates the gestures of the impulsive constraint and lead it back to the coherent unity (of the agent), which forms the (grammatical) subject” (Klossowski, 1997, 49). Because affect (or impulse or intensity) has different quality than signification, Massumi

suggests that arguments for the discursivity of the body (alone) are inadequate. This is especially the case in dance, which in my opinion frequently operates on the affective level.

My interpretation of affect is slightly different than Massumi's. Affect is not at totally independent from discourse or signification. The fact that certain events are more affective than others—for example the dance that gave me chills in the theatre—has to do with their already privileged (discursive) positions as dancers, performing in a certain aesthetic community. Affect, thus, has a necessary relation to signification. However, the affect, as a concept, is useful because it opens up the capacity to be 'moved' by events which do not 'communicate' or 'express' any recognizable message, but rather play with force, form, or dynamic. This allows for an aesthetics of movement/stillness for movement's sake, rather than what it symbolizes (non-representational movement).

### **Incipient Bodies**

As I mentioned above, Massumi suggests that arguments for the discursivity of the body, while extremely useful, they are unable to think about change:

structure is the place where nothing ever happens, that explanatory heaven in which all eventual permutations are prefigured in a self-consistent set of invariant generative rules (27).

This is why theories like Butler's and Derrida's have difficulty allowing for improvisation. Every movement, if it is to matter, must take place in the context of the already-been-done, "all eventual permutations are prefigured", novelty is either disingenuous or impossible, a thought process I worked through in the beginning of this chapter. Bodies are either totally coded with disciplinary norms and discursive practices. Or, they are unactualized (Foucault), absurd (Klossowski), or abject (Butler)—all three options are considered naïve, impossible, or unlivable. The only 'realistic' strategies for resistance are articulated as a kind of parody or playful subversion of already constituted norms. Massumi suggests "the problem arises when no way is provided to conceptualize the in-between [or the affective, or original movement] as having a logical consistency, and even ontological status of its own" (70).

Massumi and Manning are better guides to theorizing improvisation because they provide some way to conceptualize this 'in-between' body as having an ontological possibility—one that does not always rely on the already constituted norm, one that can bounce back and forth from the 'already there' to the completely unknown. They refer to bodies in motion, but not motion

only in the sense of movement from point a to point b, which Manning terms displacement. What Massumi and Manning consider important about movement is not actualized form, but its incipency. Incipency is the in-between moment where what exists is the potential for movement rather than actual movement. Incipency is “the feeling of movement’s in-gathering, a welling that propels the directionality of how movement moves” (Manning, 2009, 6). During incipient movement, we can never be sure how it will take form, or which direction it will go. This ‘just before’ movement is unterritorialized by discursive structure or discipline because it has not yet materialized as a movement. As Massumi says, it is real, but not actual (virtual). This incipient body is a body that doesn’t matter (in Butler’s words). It has not yet been actualized by recognizable form. This virtual body is “a pressing crowd of incipencies and tendencies, is a realm of *potential*” (30), only a selection of impulses or incipencies will emerge through the gates of consciousness. Only once it emerges does it begin to take on sociolinguistic meaning and enter into linear action-reaction circuits focused (31). At this point, the impulse moves from the realm of the affective into the realm of the discursive.

Through this potentiality, we can legitimately (un-naively) think about change or novelty in movement creations. Incipient movement in the body is always ‘new’ because it has not yet had a chance to crystallize or take-form in a recognizable pattern. This certainly makes sense with improvisation. It is more often the process of improvisation that is more interesting than the final product. Perhaps this is because the performers and the audience both get to be a part of the process of incipient or potential movement become actual—the collective becoming of the dance. There is a period of suspense when neither party knows exactly which form it will take. One of the tasks of the improviser is to draw out this formation or ‘becoming-movement’ as long as she can, maintaining and intensifying the suspense. Creativity is situated in the process and not the final product. Gordon Peters makes a similar point in *The Philosophy of Improvisation*:  
 The peculiarity of free-improvisation is that it does not produce works....it is a working without a work; indeed, in certain respects it might be considered a working to *avoid* works (2009, 44-45).

Perhaps this is why many postmodern dancers have renounced music. Popular dance music draws movement out of incipency and into actuality almost immediately—many people cannot even think about dancing without the stimulus of music. Dance music is an extremely effective way to initiate movement (displacement), but this movement is almost always unoriginal, in the

sense that the form of music dictates a recognizable dance form (i.e. salsa music and salsa dance). Radical ‘originality’ is not a quality prized in this kind of social dance.

### **Relational Improvisation**

Turning our attention to the ‘how’ of improvisation, we see that rarely do artists think of improvisation in a pure sense (in absence of all discourse and structure). Instead, they often welcome certain rules or elements of structure to foster the playing of music or the creation of dance. The point, however, is not to become over-coded or determined by the ‘enabling structure’. In this way, we can think of improvisation emerging out of the relation between different idiosyncratic bodies (with their own impulses) and the structures they inhabit (or inhabit them); “improvising with the already felt” (Manning, 2009, 30). The notion of relational movement is conducive to improvisation is in the way they take the pressure off the solitary individual. In “The Political Economy of Belonging”, Brian Massumi rewrites the tension between the terms ‘body’ and ‘culture’ by showing, using the figure of a soccer match, that they emerge-together in a relation. Massumi suggests that it is neither the formal rules that structure the game, or the individual players. Massumi shows how the game emerges out of the relation between players and with the ball—simultaneously propelled and directed by the goal posts—all of which are connected and foregrounded by the field (2003, 72). When all these conditions line up, this leads to an improvisation; an intensive release of highly charged, potentialized movements with no pre-conceived notion of what will transpire, except perhaps the scoring of a goal. The scoring, itself, is never as interesting or exciting as the way in which the goal was scored. Novelty happens in the process of the game and not its end results. Massumi reminds us that the players themselves must have some technical training—but training is never enough on its own. The players must let go of their preparedness and sense-with the intensity of the game. It is not about the individual player’s technique—or even her personal sense of style—the player becomes part of the environment. The individual body is just another transducer of affect: “the body figures not as an object, but a conversion channel, a transducer—the substantial elements of mixture, along with the shards of the already abstracted elements they carry into sensed-potential” (74).

Massumi’s description of soccer is perfect for capturing the kind of intensity, even competitiveness that makes improvisation work, as in Keith Johnstone’s theatre sports. These are

structured games designed to produce unexpected outcomes under a certain degree of healthy pressure. The games often have strict time constraints, and performers who go over time can be punished, by being asked to perform the same scene without their shoes or acting as a pig. The rules of theatresports are broken all the time—they exist mostly to generate intensity, both as a training exercise for actors and because it is entertaining for audiences. The game structure is less about enforcing rules and punishing actors (for theatre hambones the punishments are often more fun than the regular game). Rather, the game structure is more about introducing a kind of directedness or intensity to the extremely difficult practice of improvisational theatre. In the same way that the goal posts exists as “inducers of directional movement” (Massumi, 2003, 72), theatre games operate by narrowing the field of possibilities, establishing a workable field of relation. In this way, theatresports is almost exclusively focussed on the work and the working of the work rather than on the performers. The competition is between one work and another, rather than one performer and another. Performers are ‘judged’ in relation to their skill in keeping the work working, open, and mobile rather than in response to any display of individual performative virtuosity or dialogical prowess (Peters, 2009, 58). “The virtuosity of the improviser should not be measured in terms of technical mastery but, rather, in relation to an ability to create or mobilize strategies that keep the work happening, even if this requires sacrificing oneself and one’s precious hard-won talents to the continuance of the work—the virtuosity of sacrifice” (60).

In a similar way, relational movement admittedly contains a ‘choreography of sorts’—some enabling constraint to foreground a relation. Erin Manning’s example is Argentine Tango: In Argentine Tango, which is fully improvised, while you never know what kind of movement will emerge, you do know that the movement will never diverge from the basic tenet of the walk: keeping one foot on the ground at all times (n.10, 2009, Manning).

In tango, the dance is improvised out of the walk, not out of nothing; the dance is improvised, not on the spot, but out of familiar patterns of movement. This structure gives the movement ‘sustained felt relation’. When the improvisation loses force, the dancers have something to return to. It also prevents the dance from spiraling out of control “without the rules of walking, we could invent infinitely, but this infinity would likely be chaotic” (31). Here, the walk serves as an entry into improvisation. Thus, relational movement allows some space for habits and patterns—they should not be thought of something to escape. Even though patterns can grow

stale and hamper creativity, they also open up possibilities for movement.

In relational movement, some structure is necessary. Without it, a movement would not be capable of creating a ‘sustained felt relation’. In the following passage, British writer and improviser, David Toop describes the experience of ‘getting stuck’ in a musical improvisation:

Experiencing the work for the first time, I experienced a sense of disconnectedness ... Sounds tended to be brief—the kind of short, harsh, messy sound that happens when dust is brushed off the stylus of a record turntable, or a plug is inserted into an amplifier socket when the volume is turned up. These sounds don’t feel aggressive, however, and in fact, references to emotional states such as aggression seem irrelevant...Sometimes there are long, high tones, which introduce smoother lines into the broken impact sounds and crackles. Nothing lasts long enough to become intense, or reveal a conscious method. There is a stillness, without the progressive resolution we call development...The initial impression is disconcerting, because this seems to be extreme Minimalism without the ideology of Minimalism, or its self-conscious dedication to process. I can imagine it would be possible to listen to this...and not hear it as music, or any kind of significant event at all, other than a faint disturbance in the atmosphere (David Toop, Quoted in Peters, 2007).

It seems the trouble in this improvisation was that there were not enough ‘catalysers’ or ‘instigators’ in the field—it may even be that there was no clear field connecting the musicians at all. Like a soccer game without goal posts or a ball, there is nothing drawing the musicians together. In Massumi’s words, there are no transducers. Thus, they get stuck in incipient or potential music and aren’t able to draw themselves into actualized music. It is also interesting how norms of what counts as music come into play in this description as well; “it would be possible to listen to this...and not hear it as music, or any significant event at all”. In Butler’s words, this would be an improvisation that doesn’t matter—that doesn’t quite materialize. It remains in that vibratory, inarticulate or (*pre-articulate*) incipience. In this way, the improvisation’s ‘not being recognizable as music’ carries the potential for novelty and perhaps a radically novel form of music. But again, the pressure of starting a new form of music ‘from scratch’ prevents the flow of production, and remains in a state of interruption. What the musicians would need in order to get past the feeling of ‘disconcertedness’ is a familiar element; a rule, perhaps, a rhythm or a melody—something to smoothen out and foster their beginning.

As Erin Manning suggests in the example of Argentine Tango, habitual movements are often very useful for ‘getting things going’ or establishing a field of relation. As Manning suggests:

In relational movement, once I know that it is possible for my body to move a certain way, it is much more likely that I will experiment with that way of moving... They are stubborn because we are never completely free of them. They tense up our shoulders, lock our knees. But they also teach us techniques that open up possibilities for movement that in turn become emergent possibilities, proposing entries into otherwise impossibly small holes (39).

Improvisers can think of their habits as a useful entry point into an improvisation, or even a resting point when movement loses its charged potential/intensity. They can even play with and subvert these habits through parody, until they seem strange and unnecessary, pushing gestures to their expressive extremes. But the improviser should not remain wholly determined by their habits—their movement should continue to become out of the habit, if the habit is serving as an entry point or a resting stop. How do we move past habit?

William Forsythe's instructional CD-ROM *Improvisation Technologies* might provide some answers here. Rather than seeing space as 'unmarked', Forsythe encourages dancers to imaginatively create lines in the space in order to augment or alter the space and the way they relate to it. But the mark is not necessarily imaginary—dancers should think about the marks as 'really there'—virtual lines. In the same way actors work around the structure of a theatresports game, working around the concrete mark serves as an inducer to movement, rather than the solitary impulse of the individual dancer. In really paying attention to relations of cause and effect, the movement takes on a kind of purposeful intensity or force. While it is determined to some degree by the shape forcing a relation, the movement is still improvisational in that it is not wholly determined by a script. What happens is what needs to happen given the terms of the relation; "space and body are in continuous shifting dialogue" (Manning, 2009, 18).

Forsythe's *Improvisation Technologies* also aims to break habitual patterns by fundamentally altering the dancer's relationship to space and throwing off their habitual sense of balance. For example, in one section of the film, Forsythe strikes a ballet pose (tendu to the front, with arms in first position). He freezes that image of himself in ballet first, and then proceeds to manoeuvre around the image. He sneaks up through the hole in his arms, through and under his carefully positioned legs. His improvising body must contort into new shapes and move in more curving patterns, in order to *move around* the habitual image of himself. This improvisation begins with a recognizable technical form, it serves as a useful entry point, but then it breaks down into more original movement. "In a space-time of continuous reorientation, not only do

bodies metamorphose, but so does the space created by the incessant reorientation of the malleable coordinates of stagecraft” (Manning, 2009, 18).

### **Inertia**

Using the concept of relational movement, we can also begin to understand why some improvisations fail—or appear to be impossible. In “Taking the Next Step”, Erin Manning draws on a psychological study done by Oliver Sacks on patients suffering post-encephalopathy. In this condition, patients are incapable of “activating displacement without assistance” (2009, 51). Patients suffering from this condition need some kind of external impetus towards movement, otherwise they are completely immobilized. They are unable to initiate movement on their own.

If you throw Hester a ball, she will catch it, even when apparently ‘immobilized’. Or if you place her in front of stairs or other landscape affordances, she may suddenly be able to climb. But place her in an open space and she will stay stock still. On her own, especially where experiential space-time is ‘smooth’, Hester cannot move (ibid).

This calls to mind the performance I discussed in the previous chapter, Xavier Le Roy’s *Self Unfinished*. Le Roy’s set was an empty white room, except for a black table and chair. The performance exhausts itself when Le Roy ends upside down, up against the back wall, literally tied into a human knot. At this point, he rapidly loses speed and options to shift the direction of his movement. He loses the ability to respond to his environment (even though there is nothing much there for him to respond to). This is why the final section of the dance seems painfully long. This exhaustion echoes the post-encephalitic condition Erin Manning discusses:

To connect (to) environments is to directly perceive the environment’s relation to our moving body. When implosion occurs—an inertia at the level of the infinitesimal—it becomes impossible to sense with. There is no toward to which to relate. Frozen, encephalitis lethargica patients are in a constant, immanent state of sense implosion (53).

It is important to note that this state of implosion is not a stillness, per se. Rather, it is a sinking deep into incipient movement, an intense period of welling-up, without the necessary discharge that allows potential movement to transform into displacement. This condition makes functional or social bodily life very challenging.

Manning also discusses the techniques these patients have to invent to instigate space-relations and, with them, the ability to turn this implosion into displacement. For example, one patient carries a supply of small paper balls. As she feels herself slipping to a immobilized state,

she drops a ball. Rolling across the floor, the ball leaves a virtual line, a trace for her to follow—a way to stimulate movement.

This kind of technique is also used by the improviser, like William Forsythe's virtual lines in *Improvisation Technologies*, or the Keith Johnstone's theatre sports, or the walk that ground's Erin Manning's relational tango. The post-encephalitic condition is analogous to the solitary improviser, with no access to the surrounding environment, no 'habits', no tricks to get moving, no choreography whatsoever—this solitary improviser might be full of potential (incipience), but will have a difficulty expressing this potential, or beginning any process (of displacement) at all. This is exactly what Nietzsche was talking about, I think, when he said the life of perpetual improvisation would be the most terrible.

Part of the revulsion that Nietzsche has to 'a life of perpetual improvisation' has to do with the purity of the concept. The more I thought about improvisation, I couldn't really find many examples of performers who actually believe in 'pure' improvisation. Most improvisations are structured to some degree; they contain some enabling constraint that draws the performer into relation with other performers, a space, an instrument or medium etc. Take for example a blues chord progression, or a rhythm that brings multiple musicians into relation. Nevertheless, all kinds of artists continue to frame improvisation in a highly problematic, highly individualistic and romantic vein. The notion of pure improvisation is so daunting that it scares audiences and artists away from the practice. Rather than two separate or distinct concepts, I see improvisation and choreography along a continuum. Choreography is movement that is fully determined by a written code, inscribed movement, a relationship of total control between the choreographer or text and movement. Improvisation, on the other hand, is that which is free from textual command, free from all habit or pattern, where outcomes are uncertain, every performance is completely different. Choreography and improvisation bleed into one another; every time a musician performs a famous composition, there will be some difference, some element of interpretation that is specific about that performance. In the same way, elements of choreography should be accepted in the practice of improvisation. However, this 'compromise' or 'choreography of sorts' does not nullify the creative potential of improvisation. Every time a dancer, actor, or musician responds to a structure or stimulus (in a relational vein), it becomes new—we can expect unexpected results.

In Manning and Masumi, there is a fundamental rethinking of the body. They posit a

virtual body; one of pure potentiality, or welling up of energy, incipient movement, preacceleration. This virtual body is not the solitary, idiotic, isolated soloist. I am not advocating for a complete departure from the enabling chains of shared intelligibility that thinking linguistically allows us to understand. Dance also does more (it is excessive). And it is able to move (weightedly, importantly) beyond the opportunities that cultural intelligibility provides. We should think of the practice of citing recognizable norms as useful entry point into movement; a mode of gathering interest and community, but then allowing for the dance to evolve—let it become something other than narrative or representational practice. Allowing it to simply be movement, or stillness; unintelligible, but affective and captivating on an alternative level than linguistic significance.

For most of this thesis, I have been writing about dance from the perspective of an academic or theorist. In this last chapter, I have begun to think about received academic discourse from the perspective of a dancer. Where some of the theoretical languages I have been working with understand the body in its positioning in culture—its intelligibility or unintelligibility—dance concerns itself more with kinetics and experience. It doesn't mind that sometimes it moves into the realm of cliché or ventriloquism. But dance also refuses to disavow the possibility for newness or change.

## Curtain: Bodies in Motion

Dance as critical theory and critical praxis proposes a body that is less an empty signifier (executing preordained steps as it obeys blindly to structures of command) than a material, socially inscribed agent, a non-univocal body, an open potentiality, a force-field constantly negotiating its position in the powerful struggle for its appropriation and control (Lepecki, 2004, 6).

I began this thesis with the idea that normalized feminine gestures are constraining, drawing on Iris Marion Young's paper "Throwing Like a Girl". Gender norms are more than just the clothes we wear; they are engrained into our skeletal structures and occur deep within our muscle memory. As a feminist and dancer, these habits frustrate me. Moving beyond constraining habits through dance improvisation is, to me, an important political act. One that is concerned with change, and thus, admittedly has its own normative assumptions and aesthetic goals—including novelty or originality<sup>4</sup>.

The question I began with was how can dance call attention to norms regulating the body's movement and how can free the body from the constraints of convention. This kind of question risks romanticism. Through wild, spontaneous unstructured movement, we can loosen the grip of political control—positing a dualism between the moving body and political culture in a relation of domination and suppression. As I mentioned in the introduction, this resembles the plot of the 1980s film, *Footlose* (which I have just recently revisited). What always puzzled me about *Footlose* is how in a town where dance has only just been made legal, the young teenagers move like professionals. Where did they learn how to dance if dancing was prohibited? Of course, this has something to do with typical Hollywood exaggeration, but I think there is a deeper message; it seems to suggest that dancing is an innate human attribute that needs no training or discipline. It suggests dance is a characteristic of the natural body *from the beginning*.

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<sup>4</sup> I do not have space for a more in-depth discussion of novelty, here, even though it might have been interesting. Gordon Peters, in *The Philosophy of Improvisation*, is critical of the obsession with 'novelty' in improvisation. Rather, he argues that improvisation should thought more as a 're-novation' of the old (2009, 2).

Positing an essential dancing body risks establishing another hegemony, violently silencing those bodies that do not conform. At the climax of *Footloose*, during the scene when the young teenagers are having their hard fought for prom dance, a group of rivaling students, who opposed the dance the whole time, come to pick a fight. The dance enthusiasts (the heroes of the film) win the fight by brutally beating and kicking their opponents. In the end, the dancing heroes render five people unconscious and return to the party as if nothing ever happened. At the end of the film, it seems that dance and rock n' roll are firmly established as the new order.

In the spirit of avoiding this kind of violence, this thesis has complicated (and even contested) the notion of a natural, stable, coherent body. Even the dancing body (and to some degree the improvising body) has a constitutive relation to the culture and language it is situated in. Bodies in motion are not fully independent from signification, discipline, and technique. I have drawn on cultural theory (Foucault, Klossowski, and Butler) to complicate this idea of a post-habitual, convention-free dancing body. The body is not a fixed object of thought (Butler) that has any stable characteristics to be drawn on. In this complicating move, bodies are mediated through man-made concepts and cultural artifices. Thus, on top of what we normally think of as physical limitations (i.e. gravity means that we cannot fly), there are also countless social limitations. The way we carry ourselves is limited by norms of cultural intelligibility. However, these limits are often helpful. While gravity means that we cannot fly, it also means that we can walk, run, and tumble. Similarly, the fact that some gestures or movements are unintelligible structures a field where certain movements become symbolic, for example a hand wave or a curtsy.

Dance struggles with the paradox between limitations and creativity, simultaneously requiring limitations and consistently pushing up against them. The body in motion is limited to some degree by cultural codes of conduct, but not fully limited by them. In the deconstructive model (as I have argued in Chapters One and Four), dance infiltrates recognizable gestures and pushes them to their extremes, exposing their contingencies.

Combining these theories, which explore the body in its signifiability, with the material experiences of watching dance performances (like *I Want to Dance Better at Parties*) and engaging with dance as a practice, I have (somewhat unexpectedly) arrived at my own conclusions or 'theoretical conception' of the body—one that moves somewhere in between the body fully dependent on cultural sign-chains and one that is fully free from social convention. I

argue that the ‘body in motion’ moves in between these two extremes.

Bodies in motion are not dominated precisely because they are *in* motion and not already moved. While they might need some structural impetus, there is no telling where they will end up—only until after it is done moving (Masumi, 2003). In this way, bodies in motion prefer to be incomplete and unfinished. Because they are *in* motion, they move through gestures, rather than stopping on them as points, poses, or postures. Thus, even if they are coded to some degree, they exist primarily *in between* the ‘moves’ and ‘commands’ of the code. They are impulsive; they move without being noticed; they are caught up in the subtle ebb and flow of movement below the surface of perception (chapter Two). Bodies in motion are difficult to capture in language (perhaps this is why people are often perplexed by dance performances). As Butler states “bodies...tend to move beyond their boundaries” (1993, ix). In the same way, bodies in motion move beyond the boundaries of language.

Bodies in motion engender a politics of relationality. The individual subject is decentered. What is important is the interaction (mutual reaching-towards) the surroundings and other bodies. Bodies moving relationally do not aim to dominate or control one another; they their movements are mutually affecting. The dance alters the space, in the same way the space alters the dancer:

Watch a dancer reach upward—if she is doing it well, you cannot help watching.... Space opens ineluctably before that hand (or foot: for example, the arabesque with the balletic winged foot, has precisely this effect). But it is also drawn around the reaching hand, the stretched foot, the tilted head or the arched back (MacKendrick, 2004, 149).

Bodies in motion are different than regular moving bodies. The latter are walking to the bus, typing on a keyboard, drinking coffee, even dancing on a stage. Their movements are charted and will probably end up where we expect them to. Bodies in motion, on the other hand, are careful and meditative. They are focussed on maintaining the feeling of incipience—prolonging the suspense before turning the corner, looking for spaces within their enabling structures, full of potentiality. Theirs is a politics of possibility.

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