

# Embodied Cognition: Strategies for Researching the Body in South African Dance Theatre

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i remember standing on the side of the dance studio sweating and waiting my turn, looking at the other dancers and ~~thinkin~~ thinking how apartheid had separated us because i was lighter, how something absurd had damaged and killed, all this effort spent trying to ~~see~~ force this phantasm of race into fact, into reality.



*How I Chased a Rainbow and Bruised My Knee*

## I. DANCING IS THINKING WITH THE BODY

My research focuses on South African dance theatre with its primary focus on the body, in order to develop an understanding of the body's political and social meanings in that performance and in the broader context of contemporary South Africa. A decade ago when I started my doctoral studies, I bought a domestic worker's uniform from Pick n' Pay for a practice-based research project that explored the relationship between white children and black domestic workers in Apartheid South Africa. An educational guide titled *EDU-Self: Empowerment Through Education* (Mackenzie and Wickee, 2005) came with this uniform and contained lessons and advice for employment as a domestic worker. This guide, as a document, was conflicting as it provided contradictory messages for the reader; it instructed on the procedure for cleaning of floors to using products for body odour; it offered advice on financial matters, recipes,

Thank-you to Professor Marié-Helen Coetzee for inviting me to present at 'Embodied Knowledge(s) and Embodied Pedagogies' hosted by The Arts Cluster. This paper is a brief survey of my research methodology and is in no-way a complete version. Rather, this paper hopes to serve as a catalyst for discussion around the use and importance of embodied research inquiry.

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and an opportunity to obtain a certificate, which would possibly increase the earning potential of the domestic worker; and it included photographs of a model domestic worker in various poses of labour. The guide visually portrayed the ambiguity of the disciplining of the body (Foucault, 1977), and my research similarly explores this ambiguity of the disciplining of the South African body by examining selected South African dance theatre performances and utilising practice-based research in order to highlight these moments of discipline.

I employ the concept that the body in South African dance theatre is a *Toyi-Toying* body and this makes apparent the relationship between political action and dance theatre; the political acts of moving bodies. The dancing body interrupts the representations of gender, race and nation and makes visible the ongoing state of identity construction because of the movement of the dancing body and the possibility of movement which is always present in dance performance and in bodies in political contexts. This movement also makes visible the fractures that occur amongst the numerous formations of the dancing body's cultural identities and its somatic/physical identity. I use this central idea of *toyi-toying* body in South African dance theatre as it historically represents the body dancing in opposition to the Apartheid regime, jumping from foot to foot, with its clenched fist raised in the air, holding a political banner with the other hand, surrounded by other bodies in motion chanting and *toyi-toying*. The *toyi-toying* body is a body that is visible, audible, and has a relationship to other bodies and objects much like how in dance theatre the performer's body moves, speaks and has a relationship to other performers, props, and sets. Hence, my research focuses on the visual, audible, and mediated body in South African dance theatre; how it is choreographed, how it is costumed, what text it speaks, its relationship to its scenery, such as photography and live media, and what it shares with or how it differs from other bodies on the dance theatre stage.

## 2. SOUTH AFRICAN BODIES MATTER

I am concerned that there remains a side-lining of dance scholarship that focuses on dance produced from outside the scope of North America and Europe. I realise that this is due to a variety of reasons, such as economic factors; nevertheless, my work is an attempt to address this hierarchical imbalance, and to raise awareness of dance from South Africa as contemporary and diverse. This emerges because of my own involvement in South African dance

theatre, both as a practitioner and researcher. I have found myself frustrated with the scarcity of dance scholarship on South African dance theatre and disheartened by the limited knowledge of those outside the South African dance theatre sphere. Kariamu Welsh-Asante (2000: p. ix), writes that 'Whereas little work on African contributions to the field has been done, in general, almost nothing has been done by way of scholarship on the dance of the southern African region'. I want to foster knowledge and invite debate and dialogue throughout the international dance theatre community and across the borders of the many disciplines that this study travels. Furthermore, I want to challenge the concept of South African dance theatre as tourist-spectacle and for the performance practice to be rightfully located in the web of dance theatre which too often is dominated by European and North American companies and their respective works. I am not claiming that one is better than the other; rather, I am interested in representing the complexity that is dance theatre and its preoccupation with the body, and I argue that South African dance theatre is particularly aptly equipped to portray this complexity due to the history of the body in South African society and the diverse movement languages and dance forms that South African dance theatre utilises. The status of dance theatre in Europe and North America is different to the status of dance theatre in South Africa, and arguably, in some contexts, the subject matter of South African dance theatre is far more pressing than the content of European and North American dance theatre. My research is a political and social response to the particular urgency of the body in South Africa, as illustrated by the subject matter in South African dance theatre, such as HIV/AIDS, and by the very real impact these subject matters have on the bodies and lives of many South Africans. In *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*, Randy Martin (1998: 6) claims that 'dance displays, in the very ways that bodies are placed in motion, traces of the forces of contestation that can be found in society at large.' This is remarkably relevant in my study of the body in Apartheid and post-Apartheid South Africa, where bodies historically have had their movement curtailed because of Apartheid's legislation of segregation. My research investigates how South African dance theatre reflects Martin's claim and thus the body's value in Apartheid and post-Apartheid South African society.

My particular approach uses both the critical study and practice of South African dance theatre to develop my understanding of South African dance theatre and the body by employing my own and other South African dancing bodies. As a practice-based researcher, I am keen to advance the relationship between the theory and practice of dance theatre. My dance theatre training and my performance experience of contemporary South African dance theatre shapes my methodology of practice-based research. My practice-based research projects have raised my awareness of the effects of the disciplining - and enabling - discourses of race, gender, and nationality on the South African body. For example, in my practice-based project *I'm Sorry I Never Meant to Hurt You* I worked with dancers from the Flatfoot Student Training Company and explored what the concept of home meant to us as young South Africans. Our practical

experiments in rehearsal sessions uncovered our individual relationships to South Africa as a home and how this personal relationship is shaped by our experience of the discourses of race, gender, and nationality. André Lepecki in 'Introduction: Presence and Body in Dance and Performance Theory' (2004: 7) posits the dancing body as possessing the 'potential for energetic social action.' This informs my research strategy and is highly beneficial and empowering for my dancing body and others. I make use of this potential throughout my practice-based research projects and my critique of South African dance theatre works. The opportunity to explore my body's potential to be responsive, and my body's ability to expose and examine the discourses of race, gender, and nation, is a vital and important political commitment to post-Apartheid South Africa. A few examples of where I exercise this potential in my practice-based projects: In *How I Chased a Rainbow and Bruised My Knee* I utilise this in order to comment on what it means to be a white African; in *Mothers and Daughters* I responded to the call in Flatfoot Dance Company's *Transmission: Mother to Child* for all South Africans to be held responsible and accountable for the transmission of HIV/AIDS, and I examined how as a white South African I am to be held responsible and accountable for the transmission of Apartheid.

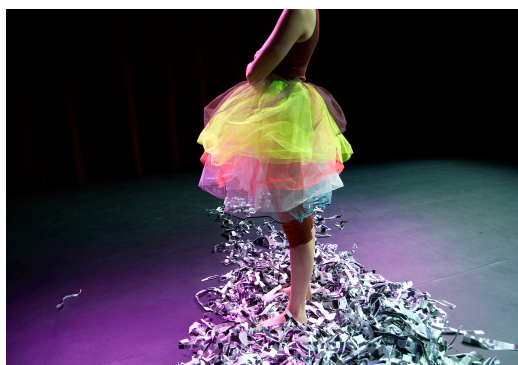


*I'm Sorry I Never Meant to Hurt You*

### 3. MANY BODIES, MANY DISCIPLINES

Due to the wide range of social issues highlighted in South African dance theatre works and because of the originality of my research, I have had to move beyond the scope of traditional dance studies research thus my critical research is multidisciplinary. I access feminist dance studies, such as Ann Cooper Albright's (1997) work on the female dancing body. I make use of race studies, for example the work of bell hooks (2003) in order to study the representations of blackness and whiteness. I utilise aspects of geography studies (Holloway and Hunbbar, 2001) as both geography studies and dance studies share a concern with the bodily experience of the spatial environment. I extend Iris Marion Young's (2005) phenomenological research into the construction of identity, and I conduct my own dance

ethnographic research to explore South African identity. As a direct consequence of my topic of South African dance theatre and the politics of the body, my research does employ African and South African studies (Bozzoli, 2004; Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1997) and poststructuralist works such as Michel Foucault's (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. I do not exclusively bring into play postcolonialist theory (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2006/1989; Gainor, 1995) and this is because South Africa does not fit neatly into postcolonial studies due to the country's history of colonialism and Apartheid; it is far more accurate to consider South Africa as post-Apartheid or post-conflict than post-colonial. I, too, am also aware that a postcolonial studies approach at times blurs the geographical, historical, and national distinctions amongst countries that have had a colonialist history.



*How I Chased a Rainbow and Bruised My Knee*

As my work is a multi-disciplinary thereby requiring concise and clear writing. I try to include photographs of the chosen dance theatre works and performative writing extracts written in response to these dance theatre pieces. (Do see Pellias, 2005; Phelan and Lane, 1998; or Fraleigh 2004 for examples of performative writing). These extracts and photographs serve as methodological tools to describe the dance performances and bodily memories of my experience of growing up and living in South Africa. These creative writing extracts and my use of photographs are intended to provide the reader with documentation of these performances and historical moments. These inclusions aid the reader in their journey through South African dance theatre, and are embodiments of my research into the body as a site of struggle in South African dance theatre that populate my text. I not only offer case studies in which I investigate the politics of the body in South African dance theatre and by extension South African society, I also model a wide range of creative strategies in my practice-based research and case studies, such as choreography, partner work, velocity, composition, costuming, lighting, music, media, spoken text, and other theatrical elements. I perform in solo works and I work with other dancers such as those from the training company of Flatfoot Dance Company. These practice-based research projects are either performed to a small invited audience or are performed to a larger audience at dance festivals. My practice-based research has not only

run parallel to my case studies of selected South African dance theatre works but has greatly shaped my reading and teaching of these dance theatre pieces. I am a fierce advocate for the use and value of combining both critical research and practice-based research in investigating the politics of the body. As a South African and a choreographer, I have an embodied experience of both South African society and South African dance theatre, and this has been a valuable resource in my research.

My material body, classified as white during Apartheid, represents and performs without my consent a racist cultural identity that does not conform to my own anti-racist and anti-sexist beliefs. My particular materiality - fair skin - represents, unfortunately in some instances, a white racist. My dancing body is what Kim Atkins (2004: 345) in 'Narrative Identity, Practical Identity and Ethical Subjectivity' refers to as being 'both the questioner and the question' (Atkins, 2004: 345). Because of this, it is imperative that I mobilise my dancing body and utilise its potential for energetic social action against racist and sexist aspects of society. Included in this political act is the acknowledgment of the materiality of my body and how this has and will influence my environment. To be anti-racist and anti-sexist, I need to and must recognise how the dominant repressive discourses of gender, race, and nation have resulted in my specific experience of the socio-cultural context. My physical skin colour and my biological markings have permitted me a particular experience of South African life and has as Posel (2001: 89) reminds me 'inform(ed) every aspect' of my life. As a South African, I wear the history and the future of my country on, in, and through my body. These prepositions - on, in, and through - are chosen because they imply movement. These are words that direct action in a sentence. These are words that choreograph the movement of a subject and a verb. These are words that can literally imply the process - the dance - of identity formation. My skin, the surface on my body, represents my identity. My history, my experiences, are embodied in my body. And my choreographic practice, on the stage and in life, moves through my body, my gestures, my pathway, my direction, and intersects with other bodies. This choreography of prepositions is constantly forming and re-forming, an endless dance, which results in my future bodily directions and bodily experiences, and my embodied cognition of South African dance theatre.

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