Gendering discourses in modern dance research

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As a dance practitioner who also works in academia, I have been trying to think through some problems of conceptualisation in dance studies, particularly with respect to modern dance. I have been asking, what basic terms structure the ways in which dance practices are discussed and theorised and what assumptions might these terms imply? What objects of research are made visible through dominant conceptual apparatuses and what other possible objects are rendered relatively invisible or unintelligible? For example, what assumptions are implied by the apparently straightforward terms *dancer* and *choreographer* and what kinds of relationships are assumed to exist between them? How does this pair of terms amongst others work to structure what gets written or said in contemporary modern dance scholarship?

The two terms 'choreographer' and 'dancer' must be engaged with but not taken for granted.[1] These terms have a history and they help to structure what can be said about dance practices in concrete ways. Specifically, the two terms have a history in ballet – a tradition that as Cynthia Novack put it has 'cultural power.'(1993:39) Part of this cultural power derives from the alignment of ballet with a binary mode of thought associated with the mainstream of the Western philosophical tradition. Within this tradition the terms choreographer and dancer are taken to refer to a mutually exclusive division of labour conceived along the lines of a division between mind and body, subject and object. Dancer and choreographer are assumed to form a system, or relation, of complementarity. This is evident, for example, in ballet commentators Clement Crisp and Mary Clark's observations that:

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[1] Grosz urges: 'In dissolving oppositional categories we cannot simply ignore them, vowing never to speak in their terms again. This is neither historically possible nor ever desirable insofar as the categories must be engaged with in order to be superseded' in (1994) *Volatile Bodies*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1994, p.24.

It is not sufficient for the dancer to be well trained in the mechanics of his art; the basic vocabulary of movements of which he is master has then to be turned into a poetic or dramatic language by the choreographer. (1984:124)[2]

Clark and Crisp position choreography and dancing on either side of a set of classic dichotomies such as those I have just mentioned between mind and body but also between art and craft, idea and matter, techne and imagination. And this is a widespread understanding – whether implicit or explicit – of the kind of system that dancer and choreographer form; this kind of *instrumental* relationship is used to explain, or is taken *as though* it explained, how dances get made.

Throughout the history of modern dance, however, the dancer and the choreographer have not been so clearly opposed since, at the very least, in the modern dance tradition the choreographer also dances. Numerous commentators have noted this distinctive feature of modern dance particularly in relation to early modern dancers' solo practices.[3] But modern dancer/choreographers continued, beyond their solo investigations, to dance as members of their own groups. It is the *implications* of this fact for the relationship between the dancer and the choreographer as a dance-making relationship in modern dance that has not hitherto been widely discussed.

In terms of how 'dancer' and 'choreographer' are understood, I think it is very important to make a distinction between ballet and modern dance at the level of these basic concepts. The concept of the dancer is not the same in modern dance as the concept of the dancer in ballet. And the concept of the choreographer in modern dance is not the same as the concept of the choreographer in ballet. That is, one may use the same terms but be speaking a different language.

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[2] For Andre Levinson, by contrast, the dancer embodies 'poetry' (as opposed to simply 'mechanics') by submitting, not to a choreographer but to the 'law of the dance': that is, for Levinson, it is in ballet technique itself that the aesthetic dimension resides: 'The technique of a dancer is not like the mechanical workings of a jointed doll; it is physical effort constantly informed by beauty. This technique...is the very soul of the dance, it is the dance itself.' Levinson, A. (1974) 'The Spirit of the Classic Dance (1925).' In *Dance as a Theatre Art*, edited by Selma Jeanne Cohen. Princeton: Dance Horizons, p.114.

[3] See Roger Copeland, for example, in 'Dance, Feminism, and the Critique of the Visual.' In (1993) *Dance, Gender and Culture*, edited by H. Thomas. London: Macmillan, pp.139-150.

One way of understanding the difference between these terms in the two dance traditions is to unpick another often taken for granted concept in dance studies, the concept of 'training'. The idea of training has a history both inside and outside of dance practices and it is important, I think, to give an account of this history in order to try to understand how training, as both concept and practice, structures what can be said and done in dance.

According to Michel Foucault's analysis in his much quoted work *Discipline and Punish* (1977), the concept of training emerged as part of the wider development of the disciplinary, social economy of modernity where the regulation and production of human bodily energies became a matter of institutionalised public organisation and control. Previously, 'training' had concerned the management of vines and horses (training them to pull the plough in a straight line). As the nature of production changed from the medieval into the modern period, the term was extended to the processes of producing and governing human energies. Training became the 'chief function of disciplinary power' in sites such as schools, factories, and army barracks.

Now, training is an appropriate term in ballet because Louis XIV sought to regulate the formation of the dancing body - and to govern its 'forces' - through the institution of a universal pedagogy.[4] In his book, *Dance as Text: Ideologies of the Baroque Body* (1993), US scholar, Mark Franko, argues that Louis wanted to bring 'potentially seditious nobles, their spectacle, and the noble body' under his control. The letters patent establishing the Royal Academy of Dance in 1661 'isolated dance from the surrounding spectacle' and singled out the dancing body as 'in need of training'. (Franko 1993:109) The establishment of the Royal Academy effected the transfer of dancing from an independent theatrical scene to a state controlled pedagogical one. In order to limit and contain what theatrical gestures might be made, Franko argues, Louis sought to 'remove dance from the hands of master musicians and their guild system as well as from independent choreographers: potentially seditious nobles'. (111)

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[4] Louppe, L. (2001/2) 'What is political in dance'. *Writings on Dance*, volume 21, 67-69.

By these accounts, to speak in terms of training is to invoke a rationalised, eminently civic notion of the dancing body and of the relationships of dance production. The concept of training suggests a form of socialisation and the development of normative aptitudes. *Ballet* choreographers accept, or indeed require, that dancers' training has already taken place within publicly recognised and accredited institutions and they also accept the socially instituted values embodied in that training. This is why Arnold Haskell regards the choreographer as only a minor artist who is 'half-way between the creative and the interpretative artist.' (1938:41) Training, since it comes *before* choreography, both enables but also limits what the choreographer can do; and training in identified training sites is seen to be a necessary pre-condition of *being* a dancer - or of being a *professional* dancer. Indeed historically, concepts such as professionalisation, functional specialisation and accreditation are intimately linked to that of training.

All this is a problem for understanding the development and processes of modern dance with its commitment to choreographic (that is, *dancing*) individuality and difference. The assumption of training has tended to forestall in discussion of modern dance any recognition of the fundamental place of a bodily relationship between the dancer and the choreographer. Historically, to become a modern dancer has necessitated dancing in an intimate way with a choreographic artist. To a large extent dancers' formation took place in their dancing with the choreographer: through rehearsing – often in the choreographer's home - and dancing with them in their performances. Whereas in ballet, training mediates the choreographic relationship and makes of it a modern, public relationship of production, modern dance practices have been founded upon intimate, intercorporeal and personalised relationships.

Training as Foucault understands it, and as I have outlined here, has been integral to modernity. The history of ballet, although not discussed by Foucault, is closely articulated to the wider history of training regimes, and in this sense ballet practices and the concepts of dancer and choreographer in ballet are eminently modern. The question has to be, then, how modern dance practices and the dancer and choreographer in modern dance have been *differently* modern. The modes and relations of dance production in a ballet company are modern-industrial, where the roles of choreographer on the one hand and dancer on the other are distinct,

specialised, professional functions. Within a ballet company the integrity and interests of each professional group are maintained by spatial, financial and other articulations, and rules governing their interrelations and boundaries are strict. I suggest that the choreographic relationship in modern dance has been more *medieval* in the sense of having the character of an artisanal, master-apprentice relationship where there is inequality of knowledge and experience but a continuity or blurring between the roles and bodies of choreographer and dancer and a physical intimacy within a quasi-domestic working space. I suggest that in this sense dominant characterisations of modernity and its cultural productions have been blind to the distinctiveness of modern dance practices, and of *modern dance's* modernity.

In terms of conceptualisations I am trying to make 'thinkable' the *non-professional* modes of production in modern dance. Marcia Siegel, one of the few commentators to note the distinctiveness of modern dance groups as opposed to ballet companies, has commented that 'the nonprofessional factor in American dance is something few Europeans understand'. (1985:17) Writing about Denishawn, Siegel argues that at the very inception of modern dance Ruth St Denis and Ted Shawn created a group entity that,

> was a model nonprofessional company in the contemporary American sense. Because it was independent, the company's finances were precarious, and dancers were paid little and had to do their share of the company's housekeeping chores. (1985:17)

Denishawn was a constantly transforming and unstable entity and, in this, it seems to have represented a kind of experiment about what *organisation* might be, or mean, for modern dance. Doris Humphrey as a member of Denishawn was negative about Shawn's plans to build a stable institution. She wrote:

> My fear is that such a tremendous organization would either swamp me, or I will be required to work for the good of the institution to a greater extent than I want to (1972:71)...(Shawn) is most interested in building the institution of Denishawn, which he wants to do by everybody's cooperation with himself as

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dictator. And he's right, I think, if your aim is a smooth-running organization. (1972:74)

Humphrey preferred the informal, what she called 'living-working' arrangements she had experienced dancing with St Denis and she herself maintained a rigorously de-institutionalised practice throughout her career.[5]

The celebrated successive aesthetic ruptures in the history of modern dance can be seen at least in part in terms of a refusal both of industrial modes of organisation and of the ways in which organisation conceived in these terms defines the dancer and choreographer as separate and opposed. Of course, modern dancers have often sought to legitimate their practices by setting up schools and companies. But I think it is important to recognise that modern dance history has shown both a tendency towards professionalisation and functional specialisation (where one is *either* a dancer *or* a choreographer but not both together or one becoming the other) and a rejection of these in favour of ways of organising group practices so that the choreographer's close bodily relationship with her or his dancers – their impact upon one another – can be maintained. I think this is what Sara Rudner is getting at when she says,

Taking a class is a very different process from working intensively with one person. That's one of the hardest things about modern dance. Once companies got larger the choreographer wasn't so available to teach in a certain way. (1992: 40)

And Lucy Guerin comments that her own relationship with Rudner began with her becoming a babysitter for Rudner's son. Guerin says that,

I think now, that our having built a relationship previous to working together was important to Sara, and that this kind of relationship with the dancer is at this point necessary to her developing work. (1992:42)

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[5] See Humphrey, D. and Cohen, S-J. (1972) *Doris Humphrey: An Artist First.* Connecticut: Wesleyan UP.

The values that Rudner and Guerin highlight here are those to do with the importance of a personalised one-to-one relationship as the pre-condition of dance-making. In other words it is important to make a distinction between dance practices founded upon the sensuous impact of one idiosyncratic individual upon another, and those that are founded on the impact of an institutionalised form of socialisation upon the bodies of many – as in ballet. We need to be able to allow that an artist such as Rudner chooses to work in ways that are not valued in terms of professionalisation, not by default or because of lack of resources but because modern dance has required, and been transmitted through, intimate bodily relationships.

To return to the question of conceptualisation, then, and of what objects might be visible or invisible in dance discourses I want to draw upon sociologist Anna Yeatman's critique of sociology's relegation of the 'domestic' world in her essay 'Women, domestic life and sociology'.[6] Following Yeatman's argument here, I suggest that it is important to recognise and address the fact that discursive frameworks and concepts used in discussion of modern dance practices tend, like sociology, to privilege the so-called public aspects of social existence. They 'render residual', to use Yeatman's expression, precisely those, let's say, 'domestic' aspects of dance making upon which historically and aesthetically modern dance has been founded. According to Yeatman, sociology has excluded the distinctive historical world of women associated with domestic life, private life and love relationships from 'the social,' or has reduced or denied the difference and interdependence of this world from that of the public domain. What Yeatman describes as 'small-scale intimate social-interactional contexts where the orientation of the actors to each other is particularistic and committed' are not adequately recognised either in sociology or dance studies. (1986:167) These contexts are either cast outside the social or reduced to micro instances of bigger social structures – such as when 'the family' is taken to be a microcosm of 'society' – or, in this case, when modern dance groups are taken to be *like,* but smaller than, ballet companies – rather than being understood as different kinds of social entities in which fundamentally different kinds of relationships pertain.

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[6] In Gross, E., and Pateman, C. eds. (1986) *Feminist Challenges:Social and Political Theory.* Boston: Northeastern UP.

The discursively and sociologically instituted reduction or exclusion of the so-called 'private' or personal aspects of social life needs to be resisted if the 'non-professional' – that is the relatively intimate physical and personalised relationships of modern dance practices are to be reclaimed. I want to give an example of the kind of problem that I am referring to. In the introduction to her seminal work *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* (1986), US dance scholar Susan Foster acknowledges that she is uncomfortable with privatised notions of processes of dance transmission and creation because for her these are too closely associated with the feminine and 'the natural,' and she is concerned to wrest dance from its naturalist associations. Citing early modern dancers' own association of their work with nature she writes:

> As long as dance participates in the pursuit of the 'natural'...little can be said about the art of choreography. The 'natural' creative process, an intensely private search for inspiration and appropriate expression, cannot be learned but only assimilated by rehearsing and performing in a choreographer's dances. (1986:xv)

Foster for her part wants to make choreographic practices able to be understood as coherent body cultures or systematic, rational ways of creating different body languages. And she makes an important contribution in this regard. I would argue however that Foster herself accepts the exclusion and denigration of certain kinds of bodily relationships and certain modes of knowledge transmission from the social rather than questioning this exclusion. I am referring to her apparent exclusion in the quote just cited of what she calls 'assimilation' (with its bodily connotations) from the category of 'learning' (with its cognitive associations). After all, in modern dance, 'choreography' is in the first instance the choreographer's dancing: in other words, it has precisely the unpredictable, idiosyncratic and personalised *bodily* elements supposedly excluded from choreography as systematicity. In modern dance the choreographic relationship, as a learning relationship, has been based in the choreographer's dancing for the dancer, their dancing for one another and their dancing together. And from these inherently risky and sometimes painful relationships affect desire and emotion cannot be excluded.

But what I want to stress here is that the non-professionalised modes of modern dance practice and transmission are different from *not lesser than* industrial ballet company models. The preference for what I have called *artisanal* relationships has been based in artists' choices about the micro-social conditions necessary to sustain choreographic difference, to pass on highly specific body knowledge to members of their groups. In other words modern dance groups have been the sites where dancers get intimate access to the body of the choreographer – and vice versa.

The language of training and professionalism (so much a feature of what is now accepted as the 'arts industry') continually devalues what is distinctive in the relationships of modern dance transmission. The acceptance of 'dancer' and 'choreographer' as modern, quasi-industrial categories casts the modern dance-making relationship as a division of labour rather than as a physical relationship of proximity, an intimate encounter in which bodily differences must be confronted. Appreciating distinctive, historical modern dance values, therefore, requires the development of concepts that recognise the intimate, intercorporeal and personalised social configurations of modern dance transmission and choreographic practices.

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