Being visible: dance, disability and difference

Sarah Whatley
Coventry University, United Kingdom
s.whatley@coventry.ac.uk

Shawn Harmon
University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom
shawn.harmon@ed.ac.uk

Charlotte Waelde
University of Exeter, United Kingdom
C.E.Waelde@exeter.ac.uk

Abstract

Several UK dancers with physical impairments have been developing careers as dance makers, leaders and performers but there remain many barriers for dancers with disabilities to enter training and then the dance profession. Each has a story about the experience of being accepted, or not, within the 'mainstream' contemporary dance environment. This paper examines the experience of artists who are contributing to a research project that brings together experts in dance and law to discover more about what would better enable dancers with disabilities to play a full role within the cultural landscape. Observations based on witnessing rehearsals together with analysing the discourse that emerges from the artists' work shows the potential impact of this work on legal frameworks and the dominant aesthetic frameworks that take root in professional dance practice. The paper brings fresh insights to questions about how we critically engage with and value disabled dance.

Keywords: dance, disability, law, authorship, difference

Introduction

The InVisible Difference project is an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded empirical research project that seeks to extend thinking and alter practice around the making, status, ownership, and value of work by contemporary dance choreographers. With an emphasis on the experience of 'differently-abled' choreographers and dancers, the paper explores questions at the nexus of dance, disability, and law (specifically intellectual property, human rights and medical law). In undertaking its work, InVisible Difference relies on multiple methodologies including: multidisciplinary literature reviews; content analysis of governing instruments/texts and social media narratives generated in response to videos of performances; interactive workshops with a growing network of individuals who are interested in dance and disabled dance; micro-ethnographies of differently-abled dancers making dance in the studio and transitioning that dance to the public stage; and semi-structured qualitative interviews with dance artists, including, to date, UK-based artists Caroline Bowditch, Claire Cunningham, Chisato Minamimura, Marc Brew and Dan Daw.

Cultural heritage and disabled dance

One strand of the research is an examination of what is meant by 'cultural heritage' in an attempt to understand more about why disabled dance is largely absent from our cultural heritage and how it might contribute to it. At base, while 'cultural heritage' is intimately bound up in ideas of cultural and political identity, individual and community norms and traditions, and individual and collective rights, the international legal framework does not support one definition of 'cultural heritage', but rather a range of context-dependent meanings.

The first component of the definition is that a cultural practice be subject to intergenerational transmission and re-creation. This might seem to be a hurdle to the inclusion of dance. Indeed, it has been argued that dance may be indivisible from the dancer, ceasing to exist as an entity beyond its moment of performance.[1] However, the reality is that dance, even contemporary dance, is passed from generation to generation through the bodies of the dancers:

> From toe to toe, from hand to hand, from eye to eye, dance, more than any other of the performing arts, has been transmitted through time by human chains of dancers, choreographers, and others involved in its creation and performance (Brooks & Meglin, 2013, p.1).

Additionally, although the act of recording dance for purposes of its preservation has its challenges and detractors[2], the potential to record strengthens its intergenerational element. That, combined with the fact that many of the conventions specifically identify the performing arts, strongly suggests that dance must be viewed as included in our cultural heritage.

The second component of the definition is that the artefact, act or performance must link to the identity of a recognisable group. In short, just as achieving 'humanness' is a 'process of becoming', so forming identity is an active process or performance. Related to this, it has been argued that, in dance, the body is the source of cultural identity, as critical as the performance in the construction of meaning:

> More and more dancers and choreographers are asking that the audience see their bodies as a source of cultural identity—a physical presence that moves with and through its gendered, racial, and social meanings. With a renewed emphasis on text, narrative, and autobiography, much contemporary dance focuses on the dancer's specific physical, emotional, and cultural experiences within the moment of dancing. (Cooper Albright, 1997, p.xxvi).

Indeed, the body is very powerful:

> Because so many of our most explosive and most tenacious categories of identity are mapped onto bodily difference, including race and gender, but expanding through a continual slippage of categories to include ethnicity and nationality and even sexuality as well, we should not ignore the ways in which dance signals and enacts social identities in all their continually changing configurations. (Desmond, 1997, p.57).

However, the body, with all its differences, is also a complicating factor because of its potential to fragment the identity which dance might otherwise help forge. In short, a variety of identities are sought to be forged. For example, some may see disabled dance (and disability arts more generally) as work created by disabled people to be shared with, and to inform, other disabled people by focusing on the truth of the disability experience (Masefield, 2006). And there are examples of those who tell a story of disability through their art[3]. Others may seek to make great art that just happens to be about disability (i.e., disability is made visible through the work, but it is not the defining character of the work),[4] and it may not matter who makes the work. Still others make work that has nothing to do with disability other than being made and performed by a disabled artist.[5] Some seek to reinstate the classical within the disabled, whereas others celebrate the different or divergent body and its capabilities (Cooper Albright, 1997).

This identity issue is complicated by the fact that identity in disabled dance may be dependent on the particular dancer.[6] If the dance is dependent on a very particular body, which is often the case in disabled dance, then the work might be viewed as even more vulnerable. But there are ways in which this vulnerability can be countered. One example is Candoco's[7] reconstruction of Trisha Brown's *Set and Reset*. Originally made in 1983, *Set and Reset* has been reconstructed for different companies over the years. Its restaging by Candoco was its first revision for a mixed group of dancers, and its (re)naming as *Set and Reset/Reset* acknowledges its re-imagination. A role within the dance was revised for a dancer with cerebral palsy (Dan Daw), and then re-revised for a wheelchair dancer (Rick Rodgers). While this serves to establish the individual identity of the disabled dancer who 'creates the role' in a particular way that cannot be reproduced by a dancer with a very different physicality, it also, importantly, reaffirms the substitution of dancers that is common within a repertory company.[8]

The revision thus asserts the value of the dance while challenging the authority of a single version and so the formation of a singular authentic identity. This is made possible by the collision of three aesthetic sensibilities:

• the aesthetics of the culturally and historically located work;

• the aesthetics of the revising repertory company; and

• the aesthetic proclivities of the individual dancers.

The result is that the work itself may be more securely located within our cultural heritage, but the specific version performed by the dancers who are core to the work is subsumed within the work's generic identity. Viewing dance and its revision as such softens the impact of a multiplicity of identities, suggesting that disabled dance is amenable to capture by the legal definition of cultural heritage.

(Disabled) dance artists and the idea of legacy

Our curiosity about the place of disabled dance within our cultural heritage has coincided with a period of observation of our core artist in the project, Caroline Bowditch, and her current project, *Falling in Love with Frida* (2014), which speaks to this subject in more ways than we had anticipated. Developed out of a period of

research into Mexican artist Frida Kahlo (1907–1954), known for her art, particularly her portraits, and not so much her disability, Bowditch's project is part homage, part re-imagination of Kahlo's relationship with her changed body post a devastating accident, and part reflection on how disability has intervened in the twists and turns that Bowditch's own life has taken towards her career as dance/performance artist. Project members spent time in rehearsals as the project developed during which time we spoke with Bowditch and her co-performers, Welly O'Brien and Nicole Guarino, and have since reflected on the work now it is in the public domain.

A series of vignettes reveal different episodes in Bowditch's life intertwined with Kahlo's. By finding a theatrical form for her 'love affair' with Kahlo, Bowditch shows us something of Kahlo's hidden life, the life behind the paintings. Her co-performers seemed able to reconcile the external source material that was so important to Bowditch (Frida Kahlo) with their own internal impulse for moving. Consequently, the work began to draw attention to the ways in which images (in this case the iconic images of Frida Kahlo) might transmit the somatic experience of disability, and how this can be re-embodied through dance. The process also provided Bowditch and her dancers with what seemed to be information about their own somatic experience of physical impairment as source for the performance.

Overall, what Bowditch seems to be wanting to share with us in this evocation of visual artist Kahlo, whose artwork remains, is her desire to leave her own mark, to be remembered, to leave a legacy—to enter our cultural heritage. This desire is developed through several theatrical gestures. For example, each audience member is given the script of a message that was sent to Bowditch from a childhood nurse who 'found her' through her online presence. Bowditch reminds us that we do leave traces and pass on our work in ways we don't necessarily know or imagine, and these traces are not always through admired paintings in galleries, or in other forms of material objects, but in the memories of those who know us. The performance concludes and postcards are handed out as the audience disperses with an invitation to write something and post it to a friend, and also to leave some words behind for Bowditch in the gallery.

Dance critic Mary Brennan picks up the theme of legacy, describing *Falling in Love with Frida* as registering 'like a massive crush' on Kahlo but continues by asking; 'What, if anything, is legacy? Frida never knew that 50 years after her death, Bowditch would lovingly celebrate her in a performance that is, in itself, full of memorable vitality (Brennan, 2014).[9]

The historical 'Frida' is reconfigured and re-embodied through the contemporary bodies of Bowditch and her dancers. Bowditch's desire to bring attention to Kahlo's disabled body provides her with ideas about how to use Kahlo's story and the materiality of her own body and that of her co-performers as source for creating a poetic performance work. What emerges is a poetics of disability that defamiliarises the body as it is normalised within performance practice. But Bowditch's interest in leaving a mark will depend on the records that she makes and an acknowledgement

by others that the absence of disabled dancers in our cultural heritage needs to be addressed.

Lay literacy of disabled dance

Recognising that the legal status may not be the sole determinant of the disabled dance, whether or not disabled dance does or could fit into the definition of 'cultural heritage' we have also embarked on an analysis of social discourses, examining comments of (1) the lay public posted on YouTube in response to a number of performances by differently-abled dancers, (2) critics through published reviews, such as that by Brennan above, and (3) dancers through questionnaires and our micro-ethnographic observations. In our survey of social media, we started by examining YouTube comment boards associated with video clips of differently-abled dance artists attached to the project, and then expanded the sample using a snowballing method. We viewed 18 clips, with many of them visited multiple times between July and November 2013. We acknowledge at the outset that social media sites, including YouTube comments pages and other computer mediated communications, are not commonly associated with deep critical thinking, and that they impose limitations on argumentation based on their structure. However, the power of such online discussion forums for enhancing education and facilitating the exchange of ideas and the formation of identities is well known. And this makes an examination of their textual content relevant. The videos that we examined exhibited wildly different levels of engagement, with some having zero comments, and others having many comments. An holistic analysis of the comments, many of which were ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations, exposed five broad and overlapping typologies of responses: gushing; projecting/sympathising; questioning; resisting; and critiquing.

The first and most populated typology is the 'Gushing Typology', which was dominated by representations about being inspired or amazed, and which resonates strongly with the image of the 'supercrip' discussed in disability studies.[10] Not far removed from this typology is the 'Sympathising Typology', which is characterised by statements such as: 'I feel bad but it was wonderful,' and 'I feel sad for them :('. The third typology is the 'Questioning Typology'. Symptomatic of this are the many comments to the effect of, 'I don't get it.' While it would be wrong to read too much into such bland responses, they could nonetheless be full of meaning and significance: they could be a reference to not understanding the narrative, or the overall aesthetic; they could be a questioning of the very presence of a disabled dancer; or they could be the benign statements of individuals seeking further instruction. Alternatively, they could be grounded in an absence of language with which to evaluate or discuss the dance (i.e., ignorance). In any event, they seem most aligned with the 'baroque stare' theorised by Garland-Thomson (2009)[11].

The fourth typology, and the one that generated the most interactive and visceral discussions, was the 'Resisting Typology', which contained an arc of comments ranging from the dismissive to the marginalising, with no apparent value other than to show disdain. The last typology is the 'Critiquing Typology', which was by far the least populated. Here, commentators offered an assessment of the aesthetic or

mechanics of the dance and the feelings or imagery it evoked and that can serve the interests of those artists by speaking to the quality of the work.

Ultimately, there were precious few comments that engaged with the dance itself (i.e., that intellectually analysed the dance or explored the meaning, or focused on the body as an expressive mode of communication in its own terms).[12] This is almost certainly contrary to what the dancers would have wished; since it is widely accepted that the dancers would prefer to create the 'engaged stare': a stare that draws the looker in and toward the object, drawing its intensity from a need to know or make sense, and it is often associated with some control on the part of the staree (Garland-Thomson, 2009). The dancers' impairments were central to most comments, positive or negative, and there was a strong narrative of 'overcoming' their disability.

Critic literacy of disabled dance

In our second line of investigation, we examined the place of the critic in relation to audiences for disabled dance, who are often equally challenged when looking for ways to talk about disabled dance. In an examination of newspaper articles and online reviews of dance companies featuring disabled dancers from the early 1990s to 2011, Bowditch and Pell note:

> Critics predominantly discussed the morphological differences between disabled dancers and their non-disabled peers (or indeed peers whose disabilities are less visible). With disabled dancers observed as specimens and alluded to as victims, medical model perceptions of disability were embedded throughout. (Bowditch & Pell, 2012, p.148)

Too few reviews seem to follow Brennan's example. There seems to be an absence of focus on the dance: instead attention is placed on the 'otherness' of the differently abled body by comparison with the able bodied using language linked to the Sympathising Typology outlined above through the emphasis on the medical model of disability.

Participant experiences of disabled dance literacy

Our dance artist participants reported persistently thinking and re-thinking on what their work is about, and the relationship of their work to disability. The participants also reported having thought deeply about their interactions and relationships with their audiences. All had experienced reactions to their work that would fit into our typologies. One participant stated, tongue in cheek, that if she set up a dance company she would call it 'Ain't They Marvellous', a reflection of the sometimes dominant audience reaction to her work, which is of the Gushing Typology.

So far the research tells a single and consistent story. At base, there is a significant mismatch between the ways in which our artist participants think about themselves, their work, and the place of disability in that work on the one hand, and their lived experiences in professional dance on the other. The dancers might like to control or at least profoundly shape the 'stare' to which they are subject, however, doing so requires the building of relationships with audiences.

Conclusion

Work on the InVisible Difference project focuses on the intersections between two subject domains and explores how shared knowledge can reveal more about authorship, ownership and agency in the context of disability dance. We recognise that the idea of 'cultural heritage' is littered throughout the law, which imposes on policymakers and social institutions the obligation to give effect to this concept and the rights associated with it. But artists such as Bowditch are confronting the problem of 'legacy' in the context of the performances they want to make.

Given our initial identification of the problem (i.e., that dance made and performed by dancers with disabilities is almost entirely absent from our cultural heritage), and our empirical evidence (i.e., that publics, both lay and professional, lack the literacy to move disabled dance into its rightful place within our cultural heritage without significant help), a starting point for thinking about what the right to participate in cultural life might mean on a practical level must be the creation of an arts environment in which disability dance and the performers can thrive.

Developing a critical literacy will enable meaningful and informed discussions to take place over what is 'good' dance, and what is merely mediocre. It will enable the audiences to move away from the first four categories of responses we highlighted in our discourse analysis—those of gushing; projecting/sympathising; questioning and resisting—towards the informed and meaningful critiquing that disabled dancers crave and deserve. But how, once engaged, can the audience develop the necessary tools for informed criticism? Garland-Thomson talks of the 'visual activism' that some differently abled individuals engaged in during the 1990s and beyond (2009, p.193). This consisted of three stages: look, think and act. The 'look at me' and 'think about me' stages were designed to lead to the 'act' stage whereby the starer starts to feel a sense of obligation, and that sense of obligation results in behavioural changes. These changes might be 'to vote differently, to spend money differently, to build the world differently' (p.193). Our dancers occupy the 'look at me' stage. What is now needed is to give the audiences, the starers, the opportunities and the tools to enable them to develop informed thinking addressing the 'think about me' stage, and extend it to 'think about me and about my work'. Using this knowledge, audiences can enter the 'act stage', becoming the catalyst for disabled dance to be included more securely in our cultural heritage.

------

1. Graham McFee (2012, p.43) posits that dances are not 'eternal', but reach a time when they can no longer be performed because no dancer has the appropriate 'craft mastery'. Indeed, there are many examples of re-created dances that seem to diverge so far from the intentions of the original work that they cease to be that work as was.

2. Basically, the ephemeral nature of dance makes it difficult to substitute with a hard copy recording (Whatley, 2005, p. 89). Meskin (1999) has gone so far as to state: 'Video and film recordings of dance performances, however, do not allow us access to those dance performances. We do not see dance performances when we look at video or film; we see representations of them. The video and film media are not transparent since they do not present us with the first-person spatial information that is essential to vision. With dance, this means that important spatial information, and spatial experience (for example, the experience of having the dancers move towards you) … is missing' (p. 46).

3. Claire Cunningham's *Ménage à Trois* and Caroline Bowditch's *Girl Jonah* are examples of such work.

4. As in Caroline Bowditch's *Falling in Love with Frida*—although one intention behind that work was to draw attention to the fact that the artist, Frida Kahlo, was disabled but hid that disability and did not make it a centre of her art, thereby demonstrating how the visual artist can separate from the body whereas the disabled dancer is bound by her body.

5. Claire Cunningham's *Give Me A Reason To Live*, inspired by the work of Hieronymus Bosch, has no overt disability message.

6. A claim which harkens back to Graham McFee (2012, p. 67).

7. Candoco, based in the UK, was founded in 1991 as a company of 'disabled and non-disabled dancers' (http://www.candoco.co.uk).

8. Additionally, one might note that ballet is rife with revisions, including Ek's *Giselle* (1982), Morris's *The Hard Nut* (1991), and Bourne's sometimes irreverent revisions of *Nutcracker!* (1993 and 2002), *Highland Fling* (1994), *Swan Lake* (1995), and *Sleeping Beauty* (2012).

9. It is notable that the reviewer, Mary Brennan, is based in Scotland, a jurisdiction with a history of supporting disabled dancers through public funding, and there have been some excellent reviews in Scotland of Claire Cunningham's work, *Menage a Trois*: see http://www.clairecunningham.co.uk/index.php?id=13.

10. The 'supercrip' is someone who has excelled beyond what people expect are the limitations of their condition; they seem to *transcend* or overcome their physiological limitation (Silva & Howe, 2012, p.174–194). They have been described as 'someone who has excelled so much *in spite* of his or her handicap that others who do not measure up are regarded as inadequate' (Nelson, 2000, p.185).

11. The 'baroque stare' is theorised by Garland-Thomson thus: 'Unconcerned with rationality, mastery, or coherence, baroque staring blatantly announces the states of being wonderstruck and confounded. It is gaping-mouthed, unapologetic staring' (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p.50).

12. We would disambiguate the role of, and response to, Heather Mills on *Dancing with the Stars*; neither her performance nor her role as a 'dancer', nor indeed the reactions to her performance on that programme are representative of, or generalisable to, disability dance (Quinlan & Bates, 2008, p.64–80).

References

Bowditch, C. & Pell, L. (2012). Below the waterline. In Keidan, L. & Mitchell, C. (Eds.) *Access all areas: Live art and disability*. London: Live Art Development Agency.

Brennan, M. (2014, March 10). Review of Falling in Love with Frida. *Herald Scotland*, Retrieved 14 June 2014 from: http://www.heraldscotland.com/arts-ents/stage/dance-review-falling-in-love-with-frieda-cca-glasgow.23635833

Brooks, L. & Meglin, J. (Eds.) (2013). *Preserving dance across time and space*. London: Routledge.

Cooper Albright, A. (1997). *Choreographing difference: the body and identity in contemporary dance.* Hanover: Wesleyan University Press.

Desmond, J. (1997). Embodying difference: issues in dance and cultural studies. In

Delgado, C. & Muñoz, J. (Eds.) *Every night life: culture and dance in Latin/o America (Latin America Otherwise)* (pp.33–63). Durham: Duke University Press.

Garland-Thomson, R. (2009). *Staring: how we look*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McFee, G. (2012). *The philosophical aesthetics of dance: Identity, performance and understanding.* Binsted: Dance Books.

Masefield, P. (2006) *Strength: broadsides from disability on the arts*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.

Meskin, A. (1999). Productions, performances, and their evaluations. In G. McFee (Ed.) *Dance, education, and philosophy* (pp.45–61). Oxford: Meyer & Meyer.

Nelson, J. (2000). The media role in building the disability community. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 15, 180–193.

Quinlan, M. & Bates, B. (2008). Dances and discourses of (dis)ability: Heather Mills's embodiment of disability on Dancing with the Stars. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 28, 64–80.

Silva, C. & Howe, D. (2012). The (in)validity of supercrip representation of Paralympian athletes. *Sport & Social Issues*, 36, 174–194.

Whatley, S. (2005). Dance identity, authenticity and issues of interpretation with specific reference to the choreography of Siobhan Davies. *Dance Research*, 23, 87–105.

This article has not been published, submitted or accepted for publication elsewhere.

Biographies

Professor Sarah Whatley PhD, is professor of dance and Director of the Centre for Dance Research (C-DaRE) at Coventry University, UK. Her research interests include dance and new technologies, dance analysis, somatic dance practice and pedagogy, and inclusive dance practices; she has published widely on these themes. The AHRC, the Leverhume Trust and the European Union fund her current research, which is broadly focused on the impact of digital technologies on tangible and intangible cultural heritage. She is founding editor of the *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices* and sits on the editorial boards of several other journals.

Dr Shawn Harmon is Lecturer in Regulation and Risk at the University of Edinburgh. He is interested in medical and human rights law and jurisprudence, governance and regulation of new and emerging technologies, particularly those implicating human health, interactions between law, science and the arts, and the operation and impact of law and ethics in society and their application in dynamic and culturally contested settings. His particular interest is in how high-level and deeply-held socio-moral values are expressed in regulatory frameworks, and how regulation is performed and experienced in society.

Professor Charlotte Waelde LLB (Hons), DipLP, PhD, is Professor of Intellectual Property Law at the University of Exeter, UK. Her research focuses on intellectual property, new technologies and culture. Her work is international in nature, but also has strong comparative, European and domestic influences appropriate to the subject areas. Charlotte's focus is on the interfaces between intellectual property law, changing technologies and culture, the changes in the law wrought by those technologies, and the impact that those changes have on the way that the law is both perceived and used by the affected communities.