

body of knowledge: Creative Process and Movement Investigation as Translational Modality

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I am a choreographer/dancer/investigator from St. Lucia, a small island in the Caribbean archipelago. I create evening length performances that are abstract narratives, taking an idea or situation and expanding from my experience to the underlying human concerns I discover. I consider bodies to be archives. I extract gesture from conversations, from training, from life patterns, from tics and idiosyncrasies and turn them into a range of intimate and full-bodied dancing interspersed with text. I house these in scenic environments that aim to give a sense of place that is usually a combination of everyday and fantasy. In many ways, *this* is what dancing is; a tool owned and used by everyone that carries this immense capacity for emotional content. What is beguiling about a moving body is our imagination of what it would be or feel or look like to do what we see, or to be able to express what we experience in watching. As a choreographer with my particular aesthetic ideology, I therefore choose to exist within multiple spaces. Caribbean/modern/post-modern dancer/athlete/writer/bibliophile. A consumer of both information and sensation. The result is that more than reproducing or even directly hybridizing the vocabulary of a genre, I am invested in mining the ideas that shape its origins. In my studio, in the context of its evolution, the form becomes a more permeable medium, allowing for intersection with other, diverse sensibilities. In my studio, it is necessary to master articulation of both the physical content and the verbal language in which it is communicated to the artists involved. Often, deliberately arcing through multiple movement and musical genres within a given evening, I love the personal challenge of finding the relationship between classical, reggae, soca, folk, experimental or art/performance from any part of the world. For me, those relationships exist not necessarily in the sound or look of the 'thing', but in why it was made, the cultural purpose it fulfills and the subsequent responses of its audiences. What they feel or what they are intended to feel. Or think. Or see. Or do. As we move, literally, towards more hybrid performance forms, the translation of ideological content becomes more necessary, and, while we refine our technical skills, I am curious as to how we continue to refine those elusive, qualitative threads.

Before I fell in love with making dances, I fell in love with moving. In love with all the possibilities, with the idea that moving could be an intellectual practice in itself. I describe myself as a kinesiophile – a lover of movement information. I have yet to discover a way of moving that I did not love. Along the way, I have also discovered a love of questions, a love of challenge and a desire to translate visceral cultural experience. I marvel still that artifice could create such authenticity, that public display could somehow, indescribably, shape itself so naturally into liberating private moments.

Maybe I can be absurd and say that since Home is a volcanic island, molten flow is always just below the surface and it is in the nature of the soil to want to shift and heave. However it came to pass, this meld of societies, traditions and histories is a moving culture. There is rhythm and style and pattern in work, in play, in music. We duck and weave in language, speaking in allusions and references, describing but not saying, continuously implying. We fill in sentences with eyes and gestures and sounds that could

almost be inconsequential except for the absolute weight they carry. Conversations are physical as well as verbal. Movement language is playful in its physical manifestation: dipping, skimming the surfaces, balancing carefully held tensions and total abandon.

There, I was immersed in a complex layering of sensibilities that happened in my head or in my writing. I had developed ways of being and ways of thinking, but had not yet figured out how to translate them into ways of moving. I did not intend to be dancer or a choreographer. It seemed so finite and prescriptive. It was only later, in encountering postmodern ideas in dance, that I found and fell in love with these final layers of permission. The permission to define, the permission to use every available resource to feed an idea. I had to allow myself permission to create my own paradigms. I did; and then, very deliberately, chose to develop a body of work with a sense of ambiguity in its vocabulary and content, which left me with the task of communicating to my dancers (and collaborators), the specificity and sometimes the validity of the chosen palette. This has meant, for me, that the beginning of every rehearsal process is equivalent to a scene at the Tower of Babel. All the bodies in the room are gathered to achieve a similar goal, but suddenly find that they are from different cultures, speaking different languages. They have studied different ways of moving, of rehearsing, of being part of a creative process. As an idiosyncratic choreographer, my ideas and ways of moving may be so specific as to be obscure to the dancers. My way of seeing the world and cultural context may be foreign. My dancers may see the arc of a phrase of movement and completely miss the intent, the phrasing, the impulse or the sense of dynamics I want it to convey. In the rehearsal process we create a laboratory, complete with potentially explosive results. Misunderstandings, misinterpretations, clarifications, modifications, all contribute to making personal frameworks for understanding, while allowing us a common vernacular, so to speak – a shorthand that combines our collective knowledge and allows us to communicate expressively and idiomatically.

In 2005, I travelled to Japan as a US/Japan Exchange Artist, performing and creating a piece on students at Matsuyama and Ehime Universities. My cast spoke very little English, yet this remains one of my most profound creative experiences to date. *Because* we lacked the verbal language, our communication was refined to its physical equivalent. There was careful attention to each action and each impulse, the quality of the movement – whether it was sustained or quick, weighted or light. Our sounds delineated texture and volume. It is still one of my favorite pieces. It looks different on my own company, though. The sense of collective breath is not quite the same. The words we keep trying to use to explain what is happening take us further and further away from the physical impulse driving it all.

The ease with which the piece unfolded in Japan was specific to its cultural location and the relationships between the dancers. For the new dancers in the United States, I had to create different imagery. Initially, we were essentially borrowing a foreign language and assuming fluency, putting on itchy, ill-fitting clothing. In order to work, the choreography did not simply have to be retailored, it had to be taken apart and reconstructed with different darts and seams, a change of lining, a few patches of another fabric. And while it did not look like the same object, the wearing of it gave us a parallel sense of place for this new context. As I envision it, the mind infiltrates the body and together they bring a thought into action. The thought and action are in a dynamic equilibrium, each affecting the other instantaneously in time. Until we DO them over and over and over, these two elements do not find the balance or nuance that allows them both to be embodied and fulfilled. It remains unpredictable, though. As performers we are

not able to guarantee what balance we find on which day. The beauty of our artform, dance, is that it remains alive. Every moment of performance is a decision that is an active interpretation of your experience in the interaction with your language, your fellow performers, your stage, your story and your audience.

As an artist, I take from my culture the idea that multiplicity is part of a natural evolution, that we all house multiple identities and affinities which are not mutually exclusive. There is no one way of being, just individuals synthesizing their cumulative history in their best attempt to have a conversation. How do you translate intention into form? How do you shape form outside of its own context? As a choreographer who works with an often-specific personal and social agenda, it is essential to me that the movement be a close reflection of the ideas I am working to express. The core movement begins with gestures that grow into larger movement phrases, then into dances, then into a theatrical narrative interwoven with text. The gestures themselves often come simply from the body language associated with the idea; I rehearse the conversation with myself until the physical language is repeatable without the words. That becomes the template for the new piece – the palette from which the entire evening of work is developed. When the dancers come in, there are two approaches: 1) to assume that the intent is so clear in the movement that the performance of the movement itself carries the weight of the idea, allowing the dancers to simply embody the information they are given, creating their own narratives as they rehearse; 2) to give all the relevant information of each gesture with the assumption that an explanation of the experience, context and intent will allow the dancer to find internal narratives or external parallels. Over time, in approaching anything outside of my body of knowledge – sometimes a literal **body** of knowledge – I have learned to expect that there are rules, expect that there are systems, but also to expect to question, to expect not to know and to expect to have to reconfigure my entry point. Every time.

As cultures and societies, we are continually engaged in some manifestation of that necessary attentiveness. As I work with dancers and non-dancers alike in workshop settings, I have come to accept that we do not understand each other in the ways that we imagine. Even when we speak the same words, it does not seamlessly translate into a common physical language. Every relationship is an ongoing investigation of intent and expression. What do you mean to say and how do you mean for me to hear/see/know/experience it? I see you through the filter of my expectations and predispositions. It may not be possible for me to create an objective distance. Each body houses and craves such specific information. Turning breath into action. Words into texture. Language into movement.