

8-1-2009

Faking It: The Necessary Blind Spots of Understanding

Katja Kolcio Ph.D.

Wesleyan University, kkolcio@wesleyan.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/dancfacpub>



Part of the [Dance Commons](#), and the [Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kolcio, Katja Ph.D., "Faking It: The Necessary Blind Spots of Understanding" (2009). *Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 2.
<http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/dancfacpub/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Dance at WesScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of WesScholar. For more information, please contact dschnaidt@wesleyan.edu, ljohnson@wesleyan.edu.

Faking It

Faking It: The Necessary Blind Spots of Understanding

Ellen Gerdes

Katja Kolcio, Ph.D.

Wesleyan University

23 Woodman Street

Middletown, CT 06457

860-685-3329 (work)

860-344-9928 (home)

kkolcio@wesleyan.edu

Biographical sketch:

Ellen Gerdes completed her undergraduate degree with honors in Dance at Wesleyan University. She is currently a graduate student in Dance at Temple University.

Katja Kolcio, Ph.D is Associate Professor in the Department of Dance at Wesleyan University. Her research culminates in writing and choreography.

Abstract

Scholarly research in the field of dance begins with the methodological premise that some things are only effectively known through their enactment. This paper utilizes movement practice as a site for cultural research. The imminent, fluctuating and heightened physicality of movement research, reconstructed here in writing, contributes a different perspective toward the understanding of authenticity in relation to the construction of knowledge. The is written in the present-tense from the perspective of the protagonist in order to convey the ethnographic site *in progress*, and to highlight the visceral aspect of the issues at hand.

Faking It: The Necessary Blind Spots of Understanding

‘How do you ask such a question? You don’t. You have to live it... over time.’

-Bill T. Jones, Choreographer, Wesleyan University, September 14, 2006.

In the quote above, Bill T. Jones was referring to issues of identity. What does it mean to be a woman? What does it mean to be man? Scholarly research in the field of dance begins with the methodological premise that some things are only effectively known through their enactment. Research happens through conscious, attentive practice. Knowledge must be lived...over time. This paper utilizes movement practice as a site for cultural research. The imminent, fluctuating and heightened physicality of movement research, reconstructed here in writing, contributes a different perspective toward the understanding of academic concepts such as identity, race, gender and, in this case, authenticity.

Moving the bones

Some call the room a cocoon, a womb; some a sarcophagus. The dance studio is buried in the basement of a large complex called the Center for Arts, a series of gray concrete buildings, with sealed windows protecting the air control system. It is a heavy structure that implies permanence, stability. The studio itself,

a 40 by 40 square foot space with no furniture, no windows, a 20-foot ceiling, fluorescent lighting, and a sanded wooden floor, alternately nurtures or stifles young dancers. It is where the class meets. The students sit on the floor waiting for class to begin. Christopher is sitting quietly in the corner jotting some notes on

This article and its actors are partly grounded in data, observation, theory, and partly imagined. Data includes transcribed classroom experiences and discussions, email correspondences, and journal writing. I arranged the data in the form of a story. Storytelling has been utilized as a strategy for communicating research, as in Margery Wolf's A Thrice-Told Tale. I write this story in the present-tense from the perspective of the protagonist in order to convey the ethnographic site in progress, and to highlight the visceral aspect of the issues at hand. A present-tense narrative foregrounds the immanent nature of meaning-making. I want to highlight the role of somatic awareness – the moment when theoretical understanding and visceral experience collide -- as part of the research process.

My approach is also intended to emphasize the simultaneously collective and personal ways that meanings are constructed. Movement and cultural scholar Pirkko Markula advocates scholarship that acknowledges the participants' and researcher's physical presence in the research (2003:49). Markula's work examines and demonstrates "the power of evocative writing to acknowledge the context of the writer's experience as well as the context of the audience's reading (49)."

a piece of paper. Anya and Ben are talking about an assignment due for another class. Kati, Jess, Adriana are comparing injuries. Dennis is sitting cross-legged, head tilted in thought. Ellen rushes in, just having finished her breakfast in the hallway. Today you have planned to give them a challenging dance to try; one that can feel as bare and artificial as the room in which you are sitting, so you pause to gather momentum, and then begin...

“Move your bones,” you say signaling the beginning of the warm up. “Move your bones,” and you literally mean for them to move their bones. “Notice them stacking up on one another. Notice them rolling over one another. Notice their points of articulation, the joints.” You are easing them in gently, with a relatively familiar, tangible image. So the students begin to move. They are doing their bone-dance. Maybe they draw on memories of skeletons they have seen, or maybe on the solid hardness of bones they see and feel jutting out underneath their own skin. The movements tend to be clunky, angular. The bone-dance almost always works.

“Move your muscles!” The dynamic in the room shifts. “Activate, release, push, yield! Find the movement initiated from your muscle tissues.” The quality of the movement changes. Maybe they recall images of body-builders. Or maybe they picture the shades of red color used to depict muscle fibers on the posters lining the gym walls. Maybe they simply experiment with the flexing and

extending of their own soft tissue. The muscle-dance tends to be more resilient, more fluid than the bone dance.

“Now let your muscles soften, melt, release your weight toward gravity.”

The muscle dance, like the bone dance, seems reasonable. Here comes the tough one. You take a deep breath and...

“Now find your cells.”

It is less familiar territory. There are fewer references to draw from; fewer tactile experiences.

“Initiate movement from the cells of your body.”

You imagine the students are trying to fathom something very, very tiny. The room shifts again. The movement slows. You lead them through a movement exploration based on the work of Deborah Hay, an influential dance artist who experiments with consciousness on a cellular level. They try to follow your suggestions. You state your instructions ceremoniously, with conviction. The students move closer to one another, continue to move slowly, eyes barely open. The movement seems to consist primarily of either rising up off the floor or melting back down again. As the cellular-dance draws to a close it is not altogether clear whether it worked.

“That was weird.”

“I don’t think I was really moving from my cells. Was anyone?”

“I kind of watched what everyone else was doing and tried to do somewhat the same thing. I figured at least I should blend in.”

“I was just faking it.”

Faking it?

Pirkko Markula and Jim Denison ask whether it is “possible to produce timely embodied accounts of people’s movement experiences given that the act of studying movement privileges language and writing (the intellect) and often reduces any movement experience (the physical) to an object of analysis (2003:18).” They seek to address the problem of written research that “results in the disappearance of the person or people studied, not to mention the author or any of the social conditions that produced that text (18).” I am asking similar questions through the crafting of this article. I write in my regular talking voice, placing my “data” in the text in ways that I hope enliven the individuals involved in the research. I consider the visceral impact of my words and the visual organization of the text. Utilizing these strategies my hope is to “[plunge] the reader (and writer) into the interior, feeling, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching worlds of subjective human experience (Denzin 1997, cited in Markula and Denison 2003:8).” It is an attempt to meet Markula and Denison’s challenge to combine “the sensibilities of an artist” in the crafting of ethnographic research.

Faking it

At 11:26 AM -0500 1/29/04, kkolcio@wesleyan.edu wrote:

Dear Class,

I was thinking about the problem of "faking" experiences. The thought came to me that acknowledging a "fake" experience implies the existence of some "real," "authentic" experience. It made me think...

(hmmm)

Choreographer Deborah Hay asks us to attend to our cells - she doesn't say there is a right or a wrong way; she doesn't expect that cellular consciousness will result in any particular kind of movement; she doesn't even suggest that it should be an enjoyable thing to do. It IS whatever happens when you are attending consciously to your cells.

Or – is there a more authentic way of attending to your cells? And if so, who decides? How do you know when you've achieved it or when you're faking it?

What is "fake"? Is it an issue in the making of a dance? What do you think? If you have any thoughts on this topic, either share them via email or bring them to class. I'll see you after this weekend, unless you fake it, in which case maybe it never happened. Yours, Katja

Ellen throws herself into a series of quick turns, jumping from left foot to right, arms perched to both balance and propel her forward through space, her focus consciously softened but intently returning with each spin, to the same spot on the wall in order to maintain her sense of orientation in the empty studio.

Deborah Hay has developed an approach to movement invoking “cellular consciousness.” Hay describes her approach: ‘I dance by directing my consciousness to the movement of every cell in my body simultaneously so that I can feel all parts of me from the inside, from the very inside out moving (1977:21).’

Hay “redefin(es) her subjectivity as neither more nor less than the cells of the body... Hay and her dancers are simply the sum total of the body’s cells, each of which participates fully in the moment of the dance (Foster 1995:13).” In this way Hay transcends her-self. In other words, she transcends the socially operative concept of the individual and sovereign self as primary organizing structure, and communes with the natural world. Her approach is imaginative. Yet it is dependent on the idea that cells are real. Cells are scientifically defined. Cellular dancing has parameters. It is not a free for all, and the students are aware of the possibility that they could be doing the cell dance all-wrong. Right? The issue can be paralyzing.

Done. Ellen sits down, discontent, armed only with the movement problem given earlier in class. She spends her first twenty minutes spinning because that is her favorite move to practice, and because it helps distract her from the task at hand.

The movement problems assigned in dance class can seem pointless. This one particularly so: *Create a movement phrase initiated through cellular awareness.* They had practiced cellular consciousness earlier in class that day. It had not been a satisfying experience. In fact, she felt that she had faked it, which troubled her teacher, who seemed somewhat annoyed with the class for faking in the first place.

Excerpt of Class Journal, Ellen

As I lay down with closed eyes, I sensed the weight of my shifting body against the floor. Although I attempted to visualize my body's cells and to allow the rhythm of my breathing to affect the rhythm of my movement, I wondered whether, in fact, I appropriately responded to my professor's prompts... Many of my classmates displayed their calm comfort...by repeatedly returning to the floor before reaching a standing position. As for me, I grew impatient and began judging my desire to stand up quickly and, therefore, my impulse to move in contrast to my classmates. I felt as if I were performing...with an inadequate level of commitment and enjoyment. As a choreographer and dancer in an academic setting, I often wrestle with this feeling of "faking it."

Ellen stands up and resumes her spinning, practicing her orientation. It is nice to feel the clear difference between spinning successfully, maintaining orientation, verses spinning unsuccessfully and falling down. When finished, she begins work

on cellular movement, still not feeling altogether good about it. She rolls around. She reaches her right arm up toward the ceiling and then lets it, bit by bit, drop toward the floor. She inhales and expands her limbs, exhales and softens. She twitches for a while. It is indeed movement inspired by her attention to her cells, but it feels arbitrary and made-up. She blames herself.

Methodologist Patti Lather writes, “Within newly emerging patterns of inquiry, approaches to validity must reach beyond the obfuscating claims of objectivity used by positivism to skirt the role played by researcher values in the human sciences (Lather 1986:66).” Ellen struggles with the issue of validity as she wrestles with unfamiliar concepts experienced in class. I wrestle with it in the context of this research project. I insert theories and outside references into bracketed boxes to help contextualize my paradigmatic position and identify my methodological strategies; but I want to “break any illusion of mastery via a provocation of something unknown/unknowable (Lather 2004:5)”. In this case authenticity and authority are called into question in both the content and the methodological structuring of the write-up. Francois Lyotard asks, “Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside (1984:xxv)”? The depiction of this research as a micronarrative is an attempt to avoid the pitfalls of overgeneralization and moreover, highlight “knowledge that loses itself in the necessary blind spots of understanding (Lather 2004:1)”.

Why, you think, is faking it such a problem and authenticity such an obsession? Worse, why is it that you can tell when your students are ‘faking’?

Authenticity is a concept often linked to an essentialist perspective and, on those grounds, intellectually attacked. Critical modern and postmodern perspectives substitute the notion of a singular reality with multiple, disjointed and often paradoxical realities. Intellectually, authenticity is best spoken of only in terms of strategic political practices and platforms. Judith Butler speaks of mobilizing the ‘necessary error of identity’ as a vital strategy of radical democratization because it exposes that which is excluded (1993:229). The concept of authenticity has also been challenged within dance scholarship, notably dancer/scholars who engage multiple dance genres in their dancing and writing (S. Jeyasing, 1998, A.C. Albright, 1997, A. Meduri, 2001, B. Browning, 2001, P. Markula, 2001) and those who deal with dance reconstruction (M. Franko, 1993, H. Thomas, 2004).

Despite the sustained academic critique, the concept of authenticity is still embedded in the practice of politics, medicine and education.

If we agree that authenticity is culturally constructed, where does this leave the student? The scholar? The teacher? The ones with more or less power to decide?

Authenticity yields authority. In dance the issue of authenticity is foregrounded most vividly in the performance and teaching of so-called cultural or world dance forms. For instance, we value the ‘native’ dance teacher for their direct connection to a heritage. In turn, authorities determine and certify cultural and other forms of authenticity. Each term, authenticity and authority, establishes the other. That would render both terms meaningless. But it doesn’t. These intertwined concepts are the foundation for power, value, right, privilege, the basis for identity, and the determinants for truth.

Authenticity also implies being true to one’s own personality, spirit or character. So, authenticity can be approached from two angles. On one hand, authenticity is determined by objective criteria, externally verifiable, authenticated. On the other hand, authenticity implies an internal verity. These two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. That would be too simple. Instead they depend upon one another, even while they contradict one another. It is expected that internal and external verity should concur. When they don’t, an individual is likely to blame him or herself, as Ellen did.

The canon of academic knowledge has historically been assessed and validated by those with the political authority to do so. The institutional importance placed on external authentication in academe can lead students and scholars to question the verity of their own experiences. Dance holds a uniquely critical role in this academic context. Dance privileges the individual experience. This can turn even the most entrenched academic Truths upside down.

Nevertheless, even in dance the line between authenticity and its alternatives are blurred. The dancer's medium, the body, is both real and imagined. It consists of cells, bones, muscles and other real structures, yet it is capable of transformation, ecstasy, and poetry. The practice of dancing requires a person to decide and enact what is real and what is meaningful; the dancers must believe what they are performing. The choice may be explicit or implicit. In

Reading Dancing, Susan Foster writes:

Dancemaking...becomes a form of theorizing... The theoretical, rather than a contemplative stance achieved afterwards and at a distance, becomes embedded (embodied) within the practical decisions that build up, through the active engagement of bodies, any specific endeavor. (2002:16)

This could be called imminent authenticity. Dance research invites and converges on "knowledge that loses itself in the necessary blind spots of understanding (Lather 2004:1)," because its ongoingness defies static definition. It demands ethical accountability from scholars, educators and students in the decidedly non-neutral process of knowledge construction. It is a potent sight for examining the intricate interplay between authenticity, authority, power and knowledge and the social impact they wield.

You think of Ellen and wonder, ‘what happens when you don’t believe in your choreography? Or in your dance? Faking in this case is an inadvertent, and sometimes advertent manifestation of a theoretical stance.

Blind spots of understanding

Back to your class, and to cellular awareness. Is it possible, even generative, to ask your

Judith Butler, referring to gender, similarly sets out to “show some ways in which reified and naturalized conceptions... might be understood as constituted, and hence capable of being constituted differently (1997:402).”

Butler’s writing suggests that reality is constructed through action. The dancers task is to physically enact realities, both existent and potential.

Butler’s notion of performativity situates reality as performance. But it is not a theatrical performance, rather it is dependent on the complete conviction in the actuality and necessity of the performed events. Butler’s performativity depends on the authenticity of the acting participants.

students to *suspend disbelief*, in other words to move beyond what they think they know? The dance studio and the theater become microcosmic worlds of possibility, not bound to conventional rules or logic. Improvisational artist Penny Campbell writes,

The dance space, like a ritual space, is both ordinary and extraordinary. It is just a room, but it is also the place where the reality of most daily activities is suspended, transcended, allowed to separate into many precious fragments to be woven into other patterns of reality. When you enter improvisational space, it is appropriate to acknowledge a transition, a crossing of a threshold, a passage into other, expanded ways of knowing and being. These are not essentially different from the ways that we live our more social lives, but are amplifications. (Excerpt from unpublished *Improvisation Journal*, Middlebury College, 1992)

Indeed this can be applied to any classroom or research site. These sites of transformation allow us the time/space to ask, “how solid are our rules, anyway?” You become excited imagining the possibilities.

Concepts that dominate Western understandings of bodily constitution: muscles, bones, skin and cells, are tested, transformed. It is done in an effort to discover new realities without compromising accountability to the implications and consequences of these choices. The dance experience need not be about pretending or faking. Nor about the illusion of new realities. The studio is a place where dancers confront elements of weight, time, space, and concepts of gender, sex, size, race, and age. Its efforts are as serious and committed as those of the scientist in the laboratory. Referring to ethnography, anthropologist Ruth Behar

writes, “For us to transform reality, we must first be able to imagine – to stage and thus recover our utopias (1999: 483-484).”

It becomes clear that something more than performance quality is at stake. The dance experience itself becomes about challenging verity, authenticity. It is a political endeavor. Performance theorist Eugenio Barba writes:

Artistic discipline is a way of refusal. Technique in theater and the attitude that it presupposes is a continual exercise in revolt, above all against the comforting assurance of one’s own intelligence, knowledge, and sensibility. It is the practice of a voluntary and lucid disorientation in the search for new points of orientation. (2000:56)

Stories of knowledge: a kind of falsity

A reading response written by Ellen:

You have been held,
Held up and supported
So that you are contorted,
Confined, and subtly
Constructed.

You claim ownership
Of your opinions, even personality
But personally, you are molded

Molded by the space you occupy
By those who force you divorce you from your own time.
You are utterly incapable of pure desire
Of pure gender
Surrendered to
The influence and fluency of men
Inescapable even through
Modern form.

And you will not escape
The expectations and subjugations
Of this space
Of this time
Not through your post-modern
Interpretations and
Installations.
Because you are a product.
Is anybody any different than you?

Is any body?

Ellen returns to her dorm room, after spending most of the night practicing spins, her manner of procrastinating from the task at hand. She sits down and writes:

At 6:17 PM -0500 1/30/04, ellen@wesleyan.edu wrote to the class:

This is how I see it applying to our work:

The idea that we are attempting to conform to vague norms through our choreography is a big issue. How do we deal with creating movement according to rules that may not actually exist? Everything may be here and real because it is happening in our bodies, but what happens when we feel that we don't believe in our choreography enough? Even if we all agree that "fake" as a state or concept does not exist, it is important for us to remain resilient during the times that make us feel as if we are "faking" something. Ellen

You come to class the next day, reassured that your students will not defect. They will stick this out even when the material feels false. And they will continue to question their assumptions and their biases. But *how* will they trust enough to not know. And *when* will they trust what they know?

Excerpt of Class Journal, Week of Performance

I am fashioning a dance for winter dance. It is composed of a multitude of things, some of which I understand and others that I most certainly do not. It is a spectacle, it is composed of a ranging of different things that popped out

of my mind at a given moment. One thing, one thought, one view triggered another. I made it all up last night. Where do these thoughts come from. I would say I know some things about African, Asian, and "Western" cultural aesthetics. These thoughts, this meaning, history has been imbibed in me through time, through listening when I did not know I was listening and seeing when I did not know I was seeing. How do these things make their way into me. Is it the result of globalization? Here I am speaking of the personal affect and not the economic one, though the degrees to which these two things can be separated can and are continually debated. Is this history within my mind, within my consciousness, within my stored library of knowledge and instinct, is this a sort of stealing? Who am I stealing from and if we are stealing it is the product of the mind or the sensory channels. We are all meant to learn. How far and to what reaches can we ever divide ourselves? That, I believe, has been a goal or at least a kind of falsity since the beginning of time or at least for a really long time.

[P]ost-modernism involves the development of new rhetorics of science, new stories of knowledge 'after truth'... The postmodern world is without guarantees, without 'method'... All we can do is invent. We must construct and exemplify the rhetorics of the future... through ...endless stories. Like this one.
(Tomlinson, 1990:44,57, from Lather 1993:1)

References

Albright, A.C. (1997). *Choreographing Difference*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Barba, E. (2000). The Deep Order Called Turbulence. *The Drama Review* 44.4.

Behar, R. (1999) Ethnography: Cherishing Our Second-Fiddle Genre. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 28, pp. 472-484.

Browning, B. (2001). Headspin: Capoeira's Ironic Inversions. In A.C. Albright and A. Dils (eds.) *Moving History/Dancing Cultures*, pp. 103-113. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Butler, J. (1997). Performative Acts and Gender Constitution. In K. Conboy, N. Medina, S. Stanbury (eds.) *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. New York: Routledge.

Denzin, N. (1997). *Interpretive Ethnography*. London: Sage.

Franko, M. (1993). *Dance as Text: Ideologies of the Baroque Body*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Foster, S. (1995). Choreographing History. In S. Foster (ed.) *Choreographing History*, pp. 3-21. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Foucault, M. (1979) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Alan Sheridan, Trans.). New York: Vintage/Random House.

Habermas, J. (1992). Themes in post-metaphysical thinking (W. Hohengarten, Trans.). In *Post-metaphysical thinking: Philosophical essays*, pp. 28-57. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Jeyasingh, S. (1998). Imaginary homelands: creating a new dance language. In A. Carter (ed.) *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, pp. 46-52. London: Routledge Press.

Lather, P. (2004). Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts Toward a Double(d) Science, Paper presented at AERA, San Diego, April 12-16, 2004.

Lather, P. (1993). Fertile Obsession: Validity After Poststructuralism.

Sociological Quarterly, 34(4) 673-693.

Lather, P. (1986). Issues of Validity in Openly Ideological Research: Between a Rock and a Soft Place. *Interchange*, Vol. 17, No.4 (Winter 1986) 63-84.

Lyotard, F. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Markula, P. and J. Denison (2003) Introduction. In P. Marula and J. Denison (eds.) *Moving Writing*, pp. 1-24. New York: Peter Lang.

Markula, P. (2003) Bodily Dialogues. In P. Marula and J. Denison (eds.) *Moving Writing*, pp. 27-50. New York: Peter Lang.

Markula, P. (2001) Traveling with Tango: An Ethnographer's Stance. *CORD Proceedings*, pp. 207-213. New York: CORD Proceedings.

Meduri, Avanthi. (2001). Bharata Natyam – What Are You? In A.C. Albright and A. Dils (eds.) *Moving History/Dancing Cultures*, pp. 103-113. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Stone, A. R. (1993). Violation and Virtuality: Two cases of physical and psychological boundary transgression and their implications.
Retrieved July 30, 2005 from www.sandystone.com/violation-and-virtuality.

Thomas, H. (2004). Reconstruction and Dance as Embodied Textual Practice. In A. Carter (Ed.), *Rethinking Dance History: A Reader*, pp. 32-45. London and New York: Routledge Press.

Trinh M.H. (1991). *When The Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge.

Trouillot, M.R. (1991). Anthropology and the Savage Slot. In Richard G. Fox, (Ed.), *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, pp. 17-44. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.

Weedon, C. (1987). *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell Press.

Wolf, M. (1992). *A Thrice Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism & Ethnographic Responsibility*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.