Deconstruction and embodiment: steps towards the decolonizing of dance discourses.

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If, as Fanon (1967) argues, the process of decolonisation involves simultaneously a psychic and political rebellion against structures of representation and power then a decolonising of dance might involve questioning how specific concepts in the field of dance studies have been linked to political, economic and social processes. It can also mean that we need to understand more about the relationship between knowledges in different contexts, such as what makes certain ideas of dancing bodies, individual and social subjectivity, or aesthetic practices, more or less powerful. Such an attempt to decolonise dance invites, as Homi Bhabha (1990) suggests, therefore a wider ‘ambivalence’ towards discourse formation within the national contexts where competing forms of knowledge about dance have been produced and mobilised.

In this essay, I want to examine the ways in which dance discourses in Australia, as only one version of a postcolonial society, help to articulate and challenge concepts of identity, tradition, difference and the social community. By utilising concepts from postcolonial theory, I want to look at how certain oppositional categories organise the structures that shape institutions, economic values around production and consumption, as well as bodily behaviours. To consider a ‘politics of identity and difference’ that does not reproduce old antinomies represents a challenge to the historian or writer of dance narratives. From an insider-outsider position in Australia, I hope to advance a critical reading of a series of contradictions and shifts taking place in dance discourses. In what follows, I will however suggest that dance discourses do more than describe a discipline, or narrate a nation. The work of dance scholars can also include valuable steps towards the decolonising of power/knowledge in those locations where dancing is able to produce an ambivalent discourse.

To undertake this work, I have found it useful to engage again with two concepts that are often opposed in cultural theory, the first is that of deconstruction and the second, that of embodiment. Deconstruction, according to Jacques Derrida, implicates writing, or language with the iterative powers of discourse. The work of embodiment, from Maurice Merleau-Ponty to Elizabeth Grosz, emphasises the ontological and subjective dimensions of material existence. I choose these two concepts because cultural production can be reframed against histories and disciplines of knowledge by the former, and because Australian dance scholars have imaginatively used phenomenology to shape new understandings of agency, social identity and cultural difference. Alongside international developments in dance scholarship focussed on race, nationalism and
globalisation, these two concepts and methods are critical if we are to unravel dance from the complications of its place in modern systems of power-knowledge.

**Deconstruction and dance discourses**

Postcolonial theorists have usefully identified various features of knowledge formation in nation-states formed by colonial power (Ashcroft et al. 1989, Gandhi 1998). These include the ways in which the process of colonisation depends upon knowledge hierarchies, and systems of oppression, introduced by the imperial power but later repeated and maintained by postcolonial subjects. And, although colonialism leads many of its (nation)-states towards modernity, postcolonial societies often experience periodic interruption to, or the failure of, the social movement towards political or imaginative autonomy (Mbembe 2001). Finally, as Couze Venn explains, an after-effect of colonialism is that they produce nation-states resistant to difference, or their own others, because they are ‘built on the destruction of the culture of the colonised’ (2002: 67).

Postcolonial contexts, as centres and peripheries of Western knowledge production, therefore depend on oppositions within disciplines such as history, anthropology, politics, literature and geography. Venn elaborates on the connections between these rational forms of knowledge and colonisation:

> It is colonialism that makes available to the new sciences appearing from the 17th century the vast store of knowledge about cultures, beliefs, languages, new geographical environments and ecologies, species of plants and animals that fundamentally invalidated the classificatory systems that had sufficed for Europe for centuries. The new knowledges were systematically gathered and reported through expeditions sponsored by the colonizing states and trading interests. They contributed centrally to the new, modern order of things being reconstituted, including, importantly, Europe’s reformulation of its own place in the world and in history. (2002: 68)

These ‘new knowledges’ were thus able to produce new disciplines and disciplinary methods, such as Levi-Strauss’s structure of symbolic interpretation within ethnology. When Derrida (1978) interrogates these methods of structuralism, his critique is relevant as much to postcolonial analysis as it is to thinking about dance as a humanist discourse. In this deconstruction of the disciplines, the foundation of structuralist anthropology (as with linguistics and psychology) was the episteme, for instance, the concept of the primitive, an idea bound together with other epistesmes by a cluster of organizing principles (Derrida, 1978: 279). These discrete units of
knowledge privileged a fixed centre or point of origin, and could constitute a desire for full presence in a system. Each individual unit was to have the semblance of coherence within a structure composed of contradictory or individual parts. An episteme also involved a sense of play that could make the rules of the structure flexible enough and capable enough of transformation in different contexts to become durable.

In dance research, for instance, an episteme might involve the concept of choreographer, the activity of dancing or its relation to representation in a performance; and any of these might be the centre for knowledge production. For dancers, their embodied experience of dancing is claimed as an origin, thus the individual subject becomes the constitutive bearer of authority. For critics, on the other hand, choreography provides the text or social practice that bears meaning and its interpretation has authority. When the structure of dance is based on a system of knowledge involving dancer-dancing-choreographer-spectator, this I would argue, is built upon hierarchical, perhaps imperial, white, often bourgeois systems of knowledge and power. In relation to formal traditions within dance history, this claim has implications for every aspect of dance knowledge because dance as a statement of authority often seeks to align itself with dominant models of power. To decolonise dance therefore involves critical examination of how historically specific modes of articulation reproduce Western knowledge systems or, alternatively provide new ways for thinking about dance.

Disturbed by the reiterative use of certain categories within dance discourses, I undertook a survey of Australian dance research during the last thirty years (Fensham 2005). Most monographs were celebratory about the ‘pioneering’ of ballet in Australia; and many texts narrate ballet’s ascendancy from the 1930s to the 1980s using themes of tradition or national identity (Pask, 1982; Lisner, 1983; Potter 1991). A larger collection of books and essays discussed Aboriginal dance and multicultural dance, often in association with music; including studies of ritual (in anthropology) or social groups (in cultural studies) (Lommel & Mowaljarlai 1994; Gibson 1998; Kleinert & Neale 2000). Lesser journals and newsletters documented developments in modern and postmodern dance and arts policy (Dempster & Gardner 1990 -2008; Dyson 1993). Beyond the arts journals were essays on popular culture and educational dance in sociological publications ( Card 1998; Luckman 2000; Brabazon 2002). In summary, the dominant discourses divide into clusters that establish relations between each dance episteme with a system of other knowledges. Ballet is established with a claim to national and historical significance; aboriginal and multicultural dance is utilised to exemplify a sacred and subcultural margins; contemporary
dance is associated with government policy; and the utility of dance in everyday contexts is isolated from official public culture.

On another level, the quality and diversity of these publications and their different fields of reception represent what Pierre Bourdieu (1990) would call a ‘habitus’: that is, a series of ideologies, attitudes and practices that together circulate as meanings about dance in Australia. If as Derrida argues, these knowledge structures depend on binary epistemes, then closer examination identifies three significant contradictions in the discourses that traverse this habitus. The first problem is the remarkable insularity of ballet history from more recent narratives of modern and postmodern dance. While these two histories remain separate, the involvement of both forms of dance in modernity, with attached values of individual expression, artistic innovation, social franchise and nation building, are distorted. Ballet’s history (so often portrayed as the pale shadow of an imperial tradition) within Australian modernity suffers then from a failure to recognise its interdependence with modern dance history. In real terms, this leads to a defensive posturing on both sides that perpetuates an artificial hierarchy of privilege which produces a politics of resentment over scarce dance resources.

The second categorisation separates Western histories of dance from Aboriginal or multicultural forms by identifying non-White dance with expressions of identity, tradition and cultural ownership. This separation of the aesthetic from the cultural constructs serious problems for dialogue between different groups and artists in part because dance discourse does not acknowledge how this politics has been grounded in colonial histories, such as where different dances have come from and when. I will return to the discussion of cultural difference and identity in the latter part of the essay.

A third problem sees dance within the sociology of culture represented as an activity unlike high cultural events. Popular dancing is aligned to everyday bodies, and ‘ordinary’ people with ‘lived experience’, while choreography becomes attached to art, abstraction and policy. The high/low distinction inhibits readings of culture that would shift between forms of dance practice, as ‘high’ increasingly borrows from ‘low’, or in which ‘the popular’ increasingly seeks legitimation in terms of the dominant. The high/low distinction tends to reinforce a belief that artistic and exclusive forms of dance belong to a privileged elite, of highly trained practitioners and fee-paying knowledgeable audiences; while social, vernacular or community dance lacks a complex semiotics and is thus more relevant and accessible to its public. Assumptions about production, consumption and class are yet to be challenged by any sustained empirical analysis of dance economies in Australia.
In Derrida’s terms, these epistemic binaries assign values to different concepts, subject positions or disciplinary institutions. They also place academic boundaries around dance knowledge. Over time, the structure helps to legitimate or confine certain orders of dance to regimes of relative significance. Deconstruction, as a critical reading of these knowledge systems, reveals that primitive bodies who perform in the context of colonizing social practices and artistic hierarchies are still effected by anthropological discourse. Deconstruction might also show how ballet and modern dance have been aligned with the production of aesthetic and moral values that appropriate ‘the ethic of archaic or natural innocence’ in order to assert the artform’s cultural superiority (Derrida, 1978: 292). Deconstruction of other binary logics might challenge how political and religious authority uses science and the law to condemn ‘irrational’ dance practices, such as raves, or how dance academies and dance institutions use hierarchies of pedagogy and government administration to exclude more social and informal dance practices. National cultural structures are therefore knowledge systems that mark out those who have ‘writing’ and thus power - that is, the ‘people’ with dance vocabulary, style, genre and discourse - from those who do not. To decolonise dance, these structural oppositions between the ballet and the modern; the white and the indigenous or multicultural; and the high and low, would have to be subject to close historical analysis. As Venn writes:

Postcolonial theory establishes that modernity, too, is polyglot and hybrid, grafted on vernacular cultures [and] philosophical critique would target the deconstruction of hegemonic discourses founded in the model of colonialism. (2002:75)

Deconstruction, therefore, assists the dance scholar to develop a critical understanding of how the polyglossalia of dance discourses contribute to modernity in a postcolonial context. Much as structures work towards authorisation of a discourse or field of knowledge, the potential substitutions that inform any text or discourse are however inexhaustible (Derrida, 1978: 289). It is through this idea of the supplement that traces of the other can exceed the linear progression of rules of signification. It is in the supplementarity of an episteme, that the limits of symbolic thought can be extended or ruptured and new forms of responsibility for difference (the repressed, silenced or excluded voices) can be located.

In dance studies, this work began with a rethinking of problems of representation and a questioning of the subject (artist-choreographer) as unified voice of authority or power. It has been further unsettled by scholars whose interest lies in processes of embodiment rather than in histories of the text. A careful attention to the material significance of corporeality by Australian
scholars working in interdisciplinary fields, such as performance studies, philosophy, sociology and cultural anthropology, has, I want to suggest, further opened dance discourses to the gaps, and performing spaces, that admit to the experience of sexual, ethnic and indigenous difference. In this decolonizing of discourses, new concepts and new social relations emerge.

**Sexual difference**

Notable early work in Australian dance studies was informed by feminist theory and featured questions of sexual difference. Elizabeth Dempster’s (1998, first published 1988) essay ‘Women Writing the Body: Let’s watch a little how she dances’ adopted the *l’écriture feminine* distinction between being written by language, that is inscribed by instruction, genre or choreographer, as opposed to writing, that is bodies themselves creating dance. In its focus on female subjectivity, however, this essay contributed to the extended decade of studies about women in dance internationally. It also began, rather sketchily, to suggest that different aesthetic structures, such as ballet, modern and postmodern dance, produce different kinds of agency for the dancing body. Because of the considerable influence of corporeal feminism, most notably from the work of Australian philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (1994), on dance scholars it became possible to theorise the complex embodiment of dancing as a bodily knowing that challenged the disembodied mind of Western logocentric thought and gave the dancer herself power. These phenomenological approaches to dance research have since expanded into how systems of spatial, kinesthetic and haptic awareness influence perception and thus how these different knowledges feed into (non-dominant) choreographic processes (Dempster 2004, Rothfield 2005).

From a focus on the female body and the experience of women dancers involved in the social production of modern dance, the feminist research on embodiment has been taken in different directions in queer studies. Building on a performance studies framework, the phenomenological approach was utilized by Jonathon Bollen in his ethnography of the gay dance community in Sydney. His detailed movement analysis of performances and social interactions led him to see a liberating agency in dancing: ‘Once you have found somewhere to dance… relations on the dance floor, are experienced as an ‘ongoing opening onto others’’ (2001: 293). Because club dancing accommodates a profusion of social relations, or shifting proximities, it generates a surfeit of ‘pleasure that can sustain interest for hours’ (293). For this reason, according to Bollen, clubbing produces a radical sociality in which one becomes both more and less like those moving with and around you. On the utopian space of the dance floor, straights can dance with gays and men with women without simply being one like the other or one for the other. While the range of options from girly poofter to cool dyke are heterogeneous in the gay scene, he is careful to suggest that
these performative identities are not ‘sites of unbridled gender fluidity’ (295). Instead, there is a particular desire that becomes active by learning and using choreographic practices which enables participants to experiment with different kinds of social relations.

The narrow equation of performativity with an individual’s choice to do gender differently (mistakenly associated with Judith Butler) is displaced by dancing and becomes instead a negotiated encounter with different bodies. In this sense, identity formation in dance departs from that of image (representation) and self-construction (performativity) because it has to be translated through a body’s experience of moving. Rather than the form of expression being motivated externally, it takes form only from the capacity and occasion to improvise with others in a choreographic repertoire. When located in a dynamic and hybrid context, this experience of dancing is able to produce knowledges, and memories, of how to move with sexualized others, as Bollen suggests, in cultural spaces beyond the dance floor.

As a practice of deconstruction, it seems that this socially affective knowledge differs from that of normative social models of identity because it provides the dancer with a resilient alternative reality from which to negotiate power. In terms of sexual difference, certain work in feminist theory inaugurated the cultural space for writing the feminine in dance, but approaches from phenomenology and queer theory have also established new terms for making the lingering effects of power and gender on the body feel different.

Ethnicity as difference

Within non-Anglo contexts, the investigation of dancing practices has developed from folk studies and sociologies of everyday life. Gillian Bottomley’s *After the Odyssey* (1979) was an early study of the economic, social and cultural patterns of immigration and featured the significance of dance in Greek-Australian diasporic communities. Her *From Another Place* (1992a) also looks at Greek dancing in the post-migration experience and, in a related essay, she argues that dancing provides migrants with powerful identifications that run counter to dominant cultural representations (1992b: 208-223). She found that dance allows people to negotiate the transition between the ‘traditions’ of a home nation and the ‘modernity’ of the new nation. It also provides the immigrant with a sanctioned space for resistance to authority or repression. In localized adaptations of particular dance moves, for instance in the gender switching of ‘folk dancing’, participants enjoy a range of hybrid embodiments in a public setting.

Following Bottomley’s lead, Paul Tabar (2005) provides a nuanced reading of Lebanese dance practices in contemporary Sydney during a time of intense and negative public scrutiny for the
Arabic community. His fieldwork demonstrated that traditional dances are used to rework powerful metonymic structures of community affect in order to manage the sentiments of beleaguered struggle (139-158). Likewise, Ian Maxwell’s (2003) study of hip-hop dance in youth music sub-cultures in Sydney argues for the danced negotiation of complex realities. He argues that this popular dance form is not derivative of American culture of the ‘ghetto’ but rather becomes indigenized by its hip-hop practitioners. They strategically construct a politicized and communal discourse which is characterized by the specific physicalities that show local variants of the dance style. Doing hip-hop does not determine social or individual behaviours in the sense of encouraging antisocial behaviour or insisting on social conformity to the group ethos. Instead, the dancing brings into being, much as the dance floor did, new modes of subjectivity and community for young people: ‘For young multi-ethnic communities in contemporary Australia, hip-hop dancing is a way of negotiating new meanings of ‘self, culture and nation’ by deconstructing and reconstructing the codes, narratives and affects of a global music and culture’ (1994: 15). In these migrant communities, the embodiment of dances that come from beyond the nation facilitates a political awareness of those structures that locate individuals within a wider social formation. The dancing is thus simultaneously an enactment of the translocal, as ethnic difference, and resistance to hierarchies of multicultural difference as determined by the nation-state.

Anthropologist Kalpana Ram argues that this dancing of immigrant communities presents cultural research with an important paradox; the ‘call of dance’ as a social practice can help theorists to ‘move away from or at least muddy a dichotomous understanding of politics and poetics’ (2000: 359). Whether learning or watching the dances of another culture, she suggests, there are strict ‘criteria for virtuosity, appropriate ‘feeling’ and for the experience of a kind of ‘integrity’. In her own study of the young men and women participating in classical Indian dance in suburban Australia, she identifies ‘the coming to presence of all kinds of patterns of existence [or] physiognomies of affect that have been violently interrupted and which lead an underground existence for the most part’ (2000: 361). The experience of dance in an ethnic community is not therefore a failed copy of an original, or the end point of a desire for full presence in dancing, because a young woman imitates the movements of a ‘temple dancer’. Rather the power of dance derives from its capacity to interpret the complexity of its young participants’ experience in the present. In particular, writes Ram, dance can invoke certain primary experiences of the world including those of ‘relationality, coherence, intersubjectivity, embodiment, temporality and a certain ‘givenness’ to the world’ (363).
Unlike formalist research on Bharata Natyam or Odissi that has involved tracing its lineages and arguing for its cultural authority, Ram argues that participation in classical Indian dancing for immigrants from ex-colonies, enacts both a phenomenology and a politics. The postcolonial experience of inhabiting a pattern of existence disrupted by colonial history has an aesthetic quality that is able ‘to bring ancestor spirits and deities to presence’ (361). But rather than attempting to resemble a symbolic unity of form or national fixity of identity, group concerts, seasonal lessons and public displays provide occasions for disordered cultural relations. Indeed although the formal properties of a dance may point towards a privileged social order, a more discontinuous patterning of interlocking realities emerges in the transcendent complexity of learning and performing an Indian dance.

As Ram points out, poststructural and postcolonial theory have transformed anthropological discourse so that claims for essentialism or authenticity are usually contested. Her approach however challenges knowledge systems that have become hyper-sensitive to ethnocentric differences between the researcher and the community being studied. She proposes that dance is an ‘embodied form of knowing’ rather than a knowledge extracted in the form of discursive statements, and calls for a revision of the opposition between ‘tradition’ (a poetics based on essences) and ‘politics’ (an instrumentalist practice of power). In her view, the ritual force of dance also has political force. Learning and presenting traditional dances is not necessarily a conservative search for lost authenticity because, as she argues, it can make the past manifest as ‘a certain skilful way in which cultural subjects respond to the novel and unprecedented demands of the present’ (2000: 364). Dancing thus locates Indian-ness as embodied difference alongside the competitive bodily practices of the new home-nation.

These dance ethnographies conducted by Bollen, Maxwell and Ram record localized practices, but they also unsettle dominant norms through a responsive reading of how embodiment constitutes sociality. Where strict codes and distinctive cultural frames enlist normative physical behaviour, dancers are found to flexibly adjust their identities to a heterogenous social reality. The dominant society, it is argued, becomes differentiated and thus less hegemonic, even distanced, through these dance experiences. Immigrant, gay, sub-culture dances however frequently occur in uncontested and relatively ‘protected’ spaces, such as the Mardi Gras, private homes or local community centres. In this sense, the dance discourses of the sexualized, hybrid or multicultural body may articulate social difference only when it does not formally challenge other national narratives.

*Indigeneity as difference*
In a more contested relationship to colonialism, indigenous dance research demands recognition that the difference between indigenous and settler cultures is structured by racialising and territorial violence. Indeed the expansion of political modernity coincides with the European assertion of cultural ownership and scientific knowledge, so that studies of Aboriginal dance are at the heart of the discourses of the human sciences. It is a perverse and inverse logic of colonialism, that Western modernity has depended upon its capacity to subordinate primitive histories, knowledges and cultures to its own ends. By way of example, anthropology students in France and Germany still study Aboriginal dance as an artefact of anthropological discourse far removed from any local or national contextualization of its history of production or reception. And even now, the discourses of anthropology provide legal frameworks in Australia with authoritative structures of knowledge about indigenous communities and their social practices; although in the last decade publications on indigenous dance have emerged from contemporary cultural or performance studies.

In this context, Derrida’s seminal critique of the human sciences speaks directly to the necessity of new ways of theorising Australian indigenous dance. Given structuralism’s emphasis on the natural and cultural, or primitive and civilized, as units of difference, any discussion of indigenous dance must deconstruct the authority of the human sciences to pass judgments based on this distinction. Recent writings on indigenous dance have begun to interrogate the structures of signification, representation and authority in several ways. The first critique, as this paper explores, arises from asking about embodied experience. The second approach requires re-evaluating the politics of indigenous dance as collective representation. And the third, perhaps more complex, challenge is to accept the concept of indigenous dance as writing itself, that is, as an alternative production of modern history written by indigenous people.

In contrast with objectifiying knowledges, the notion of embodiment that I have been tracing in the work of other scholars introduces a bodily, therefore immanent and non-collectable, materiality to the conditions under which indigenous dance might be investigated. Anthropologist Franca Tamisari’s research with the Yolgnu people in Arnhem land adopted, for instance, a phenomenological approach in order ‘to explore how the body speaks of our being-in-the-world and being-with-others’ (2000: 274). An experiential knowledge of dancing the ‘Yolngu way’ made her confront the power relations evident in different kinds of dancing directly, since dancing was tied less to individual expression than it was to identification with the reality of ancestors. Through participation in their dancing she also became more conscious of how their encounter with the white observer was managed, by establishing patterns for acceptable
movement, as a field of play between community and other. The Yolngu dancing was therefore simultaneously ordinary (rather than sacred and special), and political, knowledge made active through participation. Dance, she writes, is learnt ‘as an intercorporeal exchange with others [through which] participation becomes a ‘technique’, that is a mode of knowing’ within their system (275, fn.4). This intersubjective relationship includes compliments and curses that produce obligations designed to locate the white other within a choreography of power and meaning. Managed by traditional Aboriginal communities, these corporeal practices of dancing together ensures that the supplement contained within dance knowledge affirms the symbolic belonging of indigenous peoples to land or ‘country’.

In addition to the authority that accrues from traditional dance, anthropologist Fiona Magowan has written about the politic negotiations at stake in several high profile indigenous dance events. National political space, was contested in 1977 by Gladys Tybingoompa when she danced outside the Australian High Court after an historic decision for the Wik people admitted indigenous property rights over pastoral leasehold land. On this occasion, the dancing was more than ‘celebratory’ because it was integrally related to the strong feeling of indigenous elders ‘that the spirits of Wik ancestors who had fought for their lands and their culture were with her’ during the legal representation (Martin, 1997). According to Magowan, the insistence on embodiment in indigenous negotiations with political structures points to a difference in which ‘indigenous dance should be examined as an expressive, active and ongoing performative dialogue with the nation’ (2000: 12). The appearance of dance as a collective representation of difference is a mode of inhabiting space and this dancing argues for the co-existence of ‘a corporeal site in which competing ideologies resonate behind Dreamtime wonder’ (12). To admit this powerful assertion of a resilient order of communal meaning in dance undoes a structuring violence in the discourses of those nations that have been founded on unjust property claims or the inadmissible evidence of Aboriginal bodies.

In the third space of critical deconstruction, contemporary indigenous artists imaginatively refuse to separate the experience of dancing as choreography from their political rights to sovereignty and identity. Today, indigenous dancers and choreographers reclaim lost histories, including those recorded in the discourses of anthropology, by reassembling localized dance practices and rewriting their history in the present. The dance theatre production, Rations (2002), choreographed by Frances Rings for Bangarra Dance Theatre, for instance, turned the distribution of poisoned flour bags to Aboriginal people during the colonial period into choreographic material - white flags, marked sacks and banners. The embodied writing of
indigenous dance inside old structures - the traditional, the legal-political, and the artistic - affirms an indigenous difference that resists the ongoing recuperation of Aboriginal culture to European knowledge. In so doing, respect for the embodiment of urban indigenous dancers helps to deconstruct the anthropological frames in which concepts of bricolage or symbolic ritual contribute to ‘reducing history’ for the indigenous other (Derrida, 1978: 291).

When the concept of embodiment is admitted to history, then dancing provides ample evidence of how subjective, collective and participatory experience becomes a supplement which alters knowledge. In the work of Australian scholars, the social relations of dancing, as I’m suggesting, include this complex knowledge of movements, repertoires and historical or ancestral belongings that belong in multiple realities, like and unlike each other. According to Venn:

The grounding’ of these relations ‘in narrative and in a phenomenological, lived materiality – because of the intersubjectivity of communicative action and the standpoint of embodiment – has further implications for rethinking the question of the becoming of the subject after modernity (2002: 76).

In different disciplinary knowledge systems, being embodied may be understood as a process of identifying who you are at a given time and place. Dancing, I have been suggesting, changes those modes of being in the world to forms of experience that can involve historical, inter-sexual and trans-cultural understandings of difference. In this way, choreography becomes a means to negotiate social and political realities both within and beyond the moment of dancing itself. These dances of modernity that admit to the varieties of knowledge can write themselves into culture when we examine how these dance forms interact with colonial or hegemonic power structures.

Conclusion: towards a decolonizing of dance

One of my aims in this paper has been to rethink the ways in which the place of dance within the humanities contributes to decolonization. In order to do so I have wanted to mobilize a deconstructive methodology that would question what is left out of existing discourses and to identify where, when and how scholars have found new ways to examine and explore the gaps within dance discourses. The concept of embodiment has emerged as the supplement to models of analysis that have been predicated on writing as a limited (juridical) form of knowledge and authority. In my overview of recent work by Australian scholars, I see an attentive and detailed
registering of modes of embodiment that constitute movement in dance as more than identity. They approach the powerful experiences of sociality and intersubjectivity in dance as claims made upon the self by participation in a world of others. Within dance studies, these gestures and steps of place and displacement, of improvisation and learned respect, negotiate the affective and political meaning of belonging, tradition, identity and difference in the postcolonial nation.

Mindful of the ways in which the social sciences, scientific objectivity and government policy engage with dance’s potential to mediate, function and symbolize, I want to assert that dance’s contribution to decolonisation is moreover of importance to the disciplinary rethinking of the humanities. Dance events are always situated in the context of struggles over ownership, bodies and representation and thus have a contested history. In a postcolonial society, it is however tantalizing that dance practices can be politically ambivalent in relation to notions of sovereignty, power and knowledge. In recent dance scholarship and research, beyond those in this essay, the embodied effects of dance frequently show their ambivalence towards power and knowledge by articulating intersubjectivity, collective identity and symbolic agency in the forms of their emergent, often localized, politics. If we are to value these corporeal relations in the narratives or spaces of nation, we will have to argue against the political structures and constituting knowledges that exclude some dance and dancers from history. Perhaps more now than a decade ago, to locate the signification of choreography in historical processes is a way to take dance ‘as writing’ back from the powerful.

Works Cited


Given the limited range of publishing outlets for dance materials in Australia compared to the UK or US, it was at the time conceivable to undertake such a mapping exercise.

The bracketed references are only an indicative sample of the recent publications in each field.

In the Western tradition, most localised citations of dance authority iterate structures of significance traced either to the court ballets of Louis XIV or to modern dance in Germany.

Writings on Dance was established in 1990 by a collective of four women in order to publish original reflections on dance experience. The intermittent series is still maintained by editors Elizabeth Dempster and Sally Gardner.

6 See also Foster (1992).

7 As Maxwell writes: ‘These cultural formations take on a facticity, a ‘reality’ that has all the effect of an ‘original’ reality. It is a matter of fact that there are people in Sydney, Australia in 1993 who say ‘Yo!’ to each other, who spray-paint trains, wear beanies and whose everyday practices are generated within the kinds of narratives of the social’ that hip-hop provides’ (1994: 15).

8 Another variation includes semiotic approaches such as Adam Kendon on indigenous sign language and Gaynor Macdonald on the fighting that takes place in urbanized Aboriginal culture, see Farnell (1995).

9 The euphoria over this Court decision was short-lived as a conservative government overturned the legislation by adding stringent requirements of proof for indigenous claimants and further protecting pastoralist tenure.

10 The indigenous-organised, annual Garma Festival in the Northern Territory includes dance and performance workshops alongside forums that debates pressing health, political and cultural issues for Aboriginal communities.

11 For some recent publications on Bangarra Dance Theatre, see Burridge 2002; Weiss 2002; Miller 2004.