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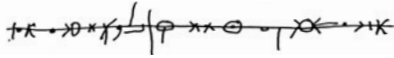
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# Being Carolyn Carlson: An auto-ethnography exploring the body as a site for knowledge transmission



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## ABSTRACT

This article is an auto-ethnographic essay that analyses a one-day workshop on dance transmission delivered by Jean-Christophe Paré. It aims to demonstrate how the body can act as a site capable of sensing and feeling certain dimensions of the past through imagination.

## KEYWORDS

body imagery, embodiment, transmission, movement analysis, kinesthesia, AFCMD, Jean-Christophe Paré, Carolyn Carlson, *Density 21.5*

*”The medium of embodied knowledge is not words but sensations in which are stored intertwined corporeal, emotional and conceptual memories.*

- Sklar 1994, 14

Going back to my early performing days, I can still recall one of my first staged performances. The performance took place at a historical site of an international festival. After six years of learning and rehearsing the company’s dance repertoire, movements were inscribed in my body. There was no need for my mind to recall any movement or step. Even under the effect of stage fright, the simple act of turning on the music was enough to release the set of movements in their proper sequences, without me having to think about it. That night, the enormous auditorium was fully packed; I could see the excited crowd through the temple columns. I was wearing a long white dress made of soft white silk that created a pleasant bodily sensation. As with the dress, I can still recall the desert night breeze awakening my senses.

Once on stage, the sensory elements were enhanced by the music and the width of the dancing space. The music was stimulating my movements and the extremely wide and roofless stage gave me a bodily illusion of unlimited extension. Slowly, I began to lose sight of the other dancers without losing the feel of their presence. I felt that I was blending with the whole environment, including the outreaching sky and the soil under my feet. Two years later, we were performing the same repertoire at the same venue, when one of the male dancers forgot a step, which led to a total block of his body memory. He tried to recall what was to come next through his mind, but was completely incapable. Astonishingly, what happened to him was contagious in the men’s row, steering a complete mess on stage. Consequently, I assumed that the only meaning “embodiment” could signify was this “etching” of movements in the body, independently from the faculties of the mind. I was convinced that the ultimate aim of dancers was to attain the “trance” state, which could only be reached by shutting down some functions of the mind. An ephemeral state generated by an intense sensory experience that can only be



momentary lived, but never transmitted.

I have used this anecdote as an introduction to highlight the difference in perception that occurred after having participated in Jean-Christophe Paré’s workshop on dance transmission. As an auto-ethnographic account, this paper will explore one way through which bodily knowledge can assist in understanding, reviving and transmitting bodily experiences from past to present without losing the kinaesthetic pleasure of dance. Thus, it will recall, describe and attempt to analyse the mode of transmission deployed by Paré during the workshop.



### Introduction to the workshop

Within the framework of Choreomundus<sup>1</sup> MA programme, on Friday 25<sup>th</sup> of January 2013, I attended a one-day workshop on dance transmission, conducted by Jean-Christophe Paré and organized by Georgiana Wierre-Gore, dance anthropologist, professor of anthropology at Blaise Pascal University of Clermont-Ferrand and principal convenor of Choreomundus. Paré is a former Principal Dancer at the Paris Opera, a contemporary dancer, choreographer, and teacher. In addition, Paré has also held the position of Dance Inspector at the French Ministry of Culture and he was later assigned the Direction of The National Dance School of Marseille. The workshop took place at one of the university dance studios, with the participation of twenty students. The day was divided into two sessions: a morning session that included body awakening exercises, followed by exercises aiming to increase bodily awareness in relation to space and time, and ending with dance technique exercises. At the end of the morning session, Paré introduced the “functional analysis of the body in the dancing movement”<sup>2</sup>, a movement analysis system developed in France in the 1990s and

employed by Paré in his work as a dancer and trainer. The AFCMD was initiated by Odile Rouquet and Hubert Godard and, at the time, it was integrated into the national diploma programme for dance teachers, to be later included into dancers’ training programme in several dance schools. The AFCMD is based on notions from the fields of anatomy, physiology, neurophysiology, basic biomechanics, psychology, sociology, phenomenology, and movement observation (Topin, 2001). The afternoon session intended to “transmit” a part of *Density 21.5*, a solo choreographed and performed by Carolyn Carlson in 1973. Carlson is an American dancer and choreographer who has been working and living in France since 1974. She is considered an influential figure in the French contemporary dance scene. Carlson adapted and passed her choreography, *Density 21.5*, to Paré in 1978 to be added to his repertoire. During this session, Paré used three levels of transmission: a verbal theoretical introduction to Carolyn Carlson, positioning her in the lineage of contemporary dance history, a bodily exercise accompanied by verbal description of Carlson’s physical attitude as a person and as a choreographer, while the last level aimed to teach the beginning of Carlson’s choreography.



### The workshop

Before proceeding with movements’ teaching of *Density 21.5*, Paré asked us to try Carlson’s way of moving in space. “She looks forward while she walks, as if she wants to perceive something above her height level”, he said. In my attempt to imitate his description, I felt my neck stretching slightly and extending horizontally. One can argue that he could have simply said: “Extend your necks horizontally.” Thus, I decided to try both options in front of a mirror. Two main differences were visually

1) Choreomundus is an Erasmus Mundus International Master Programme in Dance, Knowledge, Practice and Heritage.

2) Analyse fonctionnelle du corps dans le mouvement dansé.

perceptible: with the first instruction, I slightly raised my chin, something that I was not able to physically sense or feel, but I was able to visually see, which gave the movement a certain attitude; with the second instruction, however, the intent of “looking higher” was missing, which made the movement seem mechanical and empty of significance. Therefore, if he had adopted the second instruction the result would have lacked “attitude” and “intention”, hence, remained technical. Paré followed his first instruction by adding the “movement initiator” of Carlson’s walk: “Her walk is initiated by her forehead.” The assignment intrigued me as I noticed that I don’t actually know what body part initiates my own walk. So, I started by walking normally to make sure that my walk was not initiated by my forehead. Trying to execute his instruction, I was tempted to rush at first. Apparently, I was not the only one in the studio to be rushing since Paré asked us to maintain the same pace. Combining both the look and the forehead instructions created in my body a sense of sovereignty that, implicitly, included a sense of autonomy and a feeling of confidence. Once more, I reversed the formula assuming that he had simply said: “walk confidently.” In this case, I could have thought: “I think I am confident; my walk should be a confident walk” and, thus, could have maintained my own bodily habits of walking. Although those movement descriptions and bodily sensations could be viewed as personal or subjective, nevertheless, the relevance of this exercise is that I was forced to step out of my bodily habits and attempt to move in someone else’s manner.

Paré called Carlson’s embodied way of being in the world “the corporal imagery.” The experience of travelling towards another person’s “corporal imagery” can be seen as an experience of meeting the absent “other” through the body and the imagination. Paré went further by offering an improvisation exercise that aimed to introduce us to Carlson’s “choreographic

imagery”, in addition to her everyday “corporal imagery.” While we were improvising, Paré asked us to choose a random moment when we decide to make a sudden change of direction, creating a sharp geometrical figure in the space. Again, we were forced to abandon the patterns our “body and mind” were accustomed to, by stepping into Carlson’s way of conceiving movements. Paré said: “create a rounded figure with your arms as if you are holding a huge balloon.” I felt distance being created between my dorsal scapulae. Paré confirmed my sensations when he prompted: “A circle created by Carlson does not involve a torso contraction, but rather a back expansion.” In this process Paré had attempted to separate us temporarily from our bodily habits, in order to create – through imagination – a bodily space that can accommodate Carlson’s embodiment. My lived bodily experience in this process included both technical and emotional dimensions, meeting anthropologist Deidre Sklar’s assertion that “different ways of moving generate different kinds of feeling experiences that are not only somatic, but affective” (1994, 11).

Prior to this stage, Paré had provided us with a brief historical background of Carlson’s position in the contemporary dance lineage. She danced with Alwin Nikolais, an American contemporary choreographer and musician, a disciple of Hanye Holm. At the beginning of the 1970s, she moved to France where she still currently works and resides. *Density 21.5* was her first solo creation. In a way, and in Paré’s terms, the piece can be viewed as the first break with Nikolais’s style, though it still carries the graphical aspect (geometrical shapes) of Nikolais’s work. Even if we weren’t familiar with Nikolais’s style, we could have still drawn a vague picture of Carlson’s persona by referring to the given geographical and historical characteristics of the era. In the United States and in Western Europe, the sixties and seventies included a major counterculture, where the



youth was rebelling against war, societies of consumption, racism and was calling for women's rights, individual liberty and sexual freedom. Growing up in the sixties, "a period of great social upheaval and unrest among American youth, the social and cultural climate to which Carlson was exposed made her very much part of what was later to be called *the sixties generation*" (Turnbull 1999, 71). Consequently, both *Density 21.5* as a "solo" choreography and the artist could have carried some of the ideals of that period. From this perspective, what I felt in terms of confidence and autonomy resonates with the spirit of the epoch Carlson's choreography belongs to. Moreover, in the process of choreographic creation, Carlson uses "improvisation as a way towards self-understanding and expression in movement" (Turnbull 1999, 70), thus, that could be why improvisation has also been used by Paré in the process of transmission. Paré took us through some aspects of Carlson's "body imaginary" as a person and choreographer before approaching the choreography itself. In other words, he transmitted an invisible layer of the dance as the fundamental ground that carries most of the meaning. Afterwards, the transmission of the dance movements could have taken any form, from imitating an instructor, copying from a recorded video performance, to reading a dance notation. The infrastructure was ready to carry out the choreography. Nevertheless, it might be important to note that by conveying Carlson's "corporeal imagery", Paré did not intend to reproduce a conformed copy of Carlson's interpretation of *Density 21.5*, but he aimed rather to give depth to our performance by creating a meeting space with its creator.



### The Method

The method deployed in the transmission of *Density 21.5* is based on a functional analysis of Carlson's dancing movements

and carried out by a reconstruction, through imagination, of "what the eye cannot capture: invisible internal movements, intentions, projects of moving" (Schulmann, 2008), while giving an overview of her sociocultural and professional history. Interestingly, this method shares a lot of similarities with a method composed by dance ethnographer and anthropologist Deidre Sklar, in the process of "feeling" her way into the movement's invisible layer of the *Danzante* performance during the *Torugas Fiesta* in New Mexico. Sklar refers to the "corporeal imagery" or the invisible layer of movement as the "abstract symbols embodied in movement, [which] are not necessarily evident in the movement itself" (1994, 13), while using the term "embodied schema" to designate "the full range of sensory modalities through which we apprehend and represent the world" (2006, 119). Drawing on a basic concept that knowledge can be gained equally through body and mind, Sklar proposes "a methodology for working with corporeal expressions that relies on qualitative movement analysis in conjunction with a technique [she] would call kinaesthetic empathy" (1994, 14). Sklar's qualitative movement analysis indicates a system conceptualized by Rudolf Laban and developed by Irmgard Bartineff as "effort-shape" analysis system that "focuses on eight core qualities: light or strong use of weight, quick or sustained time, direct or indirect use of space, and bound or free movement flow" (2006, 103). She suggests that distinguishing those qualities which "give clues to another's *felt* experience" (1999, 18) is a matter of training in observation. What she means by kinaesthetic empathy is "the capacity to participate with another's movement or another's sensory experience of movement, [...] a corporeal/conceptual skill that calls for the development of specific bodily techniques that will further our ability to both perceive and think sensorially" (1994, 16). Paré introduced concepts of time, space, weight, flow and

shape during his transmission process. He also “fabricated, through words and other media, [Carlson’s] sensory worlds and disembodied” (Sklar 1994, 14) us from some of our bodily habits, allowing our bodies to access Carlson’s sensorial sphere through imagination. Without analysing, comprehending and translating into words the abstract dimension of *Density 21.5*, Paré would not have been able to transmit what lies underneath the choreography itself; therefore, we would not have been able to get a sense of Carlson’s choreographic world. Correspondingly, without “moving from distanced visual observation to close corporeal imitation” and “turning awareness inward to feel [her] body as a continuum of kinetic sensations” (2006, 100), Deidre Sklar would not have been able to identify and “appreciate the meaning of the *Danzante* performance and the quality of the dancers’ experience” (1991: 8).

Apparently, both methods were based on the same concepts, but motivated by different aims. The conceptual framework of these methods proves to be very useful for ethnographic dance research and study, as well as for dance training, teaching, and expanding bodily creativity in the process of dance creation. Additionally, it could be very useful for the preservation of bodily practices as a dynamic historical representation.



## Conclusion

Thereafter, in the dance field, “embodiment” is a quality that can be thought about, analysed, preserved and transmitted. Moreover, one of the purposes of a museum is to give its visitors a glance at lives distant in either time or place, through a classic exhibit, or an interactive display of historical, cultural and artistic artefacts. The explored method in this paper could be

seen as a guide to the activation of human body as a space that can sense and feel other people’s bodily experiences and corporal expressions, even when they are distant in time and / or place. Thus, it would be very significant to dance, as an intangible heritage, not to restrict its exhibition to the visual display alone, but to also open the way for an interested public to live and sense the “psychosomatic, non-verbalized state” (Giurchescu 1973, 176) of its bearers.

\* All translations from French in this article have been made by the author.

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