

Dean Schomburg

DANCE AS RESISTANCE

*“NOW THE TIME HAS COME FOR YOU TO GET UP
THE REST HAD YOU FED UP BUT YO, I WON’T LET UP
ON THE RHYTHM AND THE RHYME THAT’S DESIGNED TO
MAKE YOUR BEHIND MOVE TO WHAT I’M INCLINED TO
PURE HIP HOP, NO SELL-OUT
IF YOU AIN’T IN IT TO WIN IT, THEN GET THE HELL OUT
I COMMAND YOU TO DANCE, I WANNA SEE MOTIVATION
C’MON NOW, FEEL THE VIBRATION.”*

That command issued by Markey Mark (c Metroleap Media Inc.) in his song Good Vibrations, and the extraordinary numbers of willing adherents to his call to the dance floor bear witness to the power of that message. Dance has, over the ages, been used to express a wide variety of human emotions, encompassing the entire affective range from joy to sadness. I will that argue that contemporary society has much to learn from many prior examples of dance as resistance/rebellion, and that the history of dance goes far beyond the cheek-to-cheek variety such as when you and your significant other absorbed Barry White’s deep baritone crooning about love and understanding. It’s my position that despite the technological tsunami currently being experienced in terms of our ability to communicate with each other, on both personal, cultural and societal levels, the embodiment of communication through dance has taken a back seat in favor of the digital. I will also argue that through dance there are some affective contagions that are possible which the digital world can

initiate ,but in the final analysis must be subsumed in deference to the demand for an overwhelming corporeal presence in pursuit of the goal of resistance to some of the ravages wrought by corporate globalization, which has developed as the handmaiden of capitalism, which still keeps 75-percent of humanity in extreme poverty (Society of Control, DeLeuze) and has as its driving force the neoliberal mandate of re-regulation (more commonly called deregulation) , free market, a laissez-faire approach by government to corporate affairs, and privatization.

I will broaden the pallet considerably to address dance on a much larger scale, with the pronounced and understood goal of inducing the participants and observers to gather and combine their energies in pursuit of a goal which is directed toward the redress of perceived injustices or imbalances of power and/or resources which redounds to the disadvantage of the multitude. Dance has the ability to employ the notion of transmission of affect to enlist the emotional and physical energies of the observers to its cause. I will also argue that dance as resistance/rebellion can be the embodiment of such disaffection and the impetus that can result in gatherings of the multitude, masses, crowd, or even rioters. Such gatherings can result in the transmission of affect, which can manifest through a variety of sensory experiences, including vibrations (music), olfactory excitation (pheromones), and sympathetic kinesthesia, meaning bodies moving similarly and in close proximity. In this regard I include the decidedly peripheral, but nonetheless categorically similar activity of a military parade or a marching band, albeit in those instances the embodiment of affect is at the opposite end of the emotional spectrum, which is to say joy (pride) is the affective outcome. The notion of affective contagion coming into its full potential and realization through embodiment is exemplified by multitudes in Egypt, who communicated with each other their disaffection with the incumbent regime through various modes of

digital communication, which transmogrified into the gatherings at Tahrir Square in Cairo involving corporeal proximity and contact that resulted in the achievement of the ultimate goal, which was the regime change . Embodied communication was the phenomenon that the digital communication summoned and which led to the ultimate success of that resistance movement. The final result was what Lisa Blackman calls the development circle, which connects the group members such that they might experience a flow of energy within that particular setting. This allows for a shared experience, described as inter-corporeal rather than singular experiences. In other words the link between affect and life often is made through the concept of movement...such as dance (Blackman *Body & Society*)

To begin, one would have to accept the notion that there is in fact such a phenomenon as the transmission of affect. That could be a contentious supposition. Teresa Brennan (The Transmission of Affect, 2004) gives as an example of affect "any evaluative (positive or negative) orientation toward an object. By transmission of affect she means that the emotions or affects of one person, and the enhancing or depressing energies these affects entail, can enter into another (being); there is no secure distinction between the individual and the environment. Julian Henriques (Body & Society. 2010) makes the point (A Night Out in Kingston at the Jamaican dancehall) that there is a broad agreement on *what* affect does – it initiates an emotion. What is more open to question is *how* it spreads between people. In short, our entire relationship with our environment is kinetic. We not only feel moved *by* something, but also are moved *to do* something – to take an action and move others (Sheets-Johnstone, 1994, 2009). The idea of an “atmosphere” in a room tells us that the transmission of affect does not only work between two persons....the concept is potentially relevant to understanding the behavior of groups and gatherings, despite the way the emotionality of groups has been associated largely with discredited ideas of the “ crowd.” (Brennan 2004). And like sound itself, there is no

stopping affect. It is notoriously volatile and promiscuous. Rhythms are infectious. Affect revolves around repetition. Repetition can cause affective attachment. If you have ever witnessed the Sunday morning services at a Baptist or Pentecostal church (I was brought up as a Baptist, and so spent many, many Sundays at the Salem Missionary Baptist Church in Brooklyn, pastored by the Rev. Dr. Thomas J. Boyd, now 93 years old and retired), you will see affect in action. Both Pentecostal and Baptist churches make music an integral element of their services because they understand the power of affect. When the choir begins to sing, especially up-tempo hymns, the congregation is impelled to respond with bodily movements and since dancing is prohibited the next best activity is singing along, clapping hands and swinging and swaying to the music while standing at your pew. The music and the feeling it embodies is infectious, joyful and cathartic. When the choir finishes its selection, the pastor will wait for the congregation to settle down while the organist continues to play the same selection softly in the background. But many times the pastor will signal that he wants a repetition of the selection just completed, and the choir and organist will begin another chorus of the selection as they return to full volume and the congregation is taken again to an intense level of spirituality which is the hallmark of Baptist religiosity.

Historically there is every reason for the western world to dance to God, even as the East has continued to do. Thousands of years ago our remote ancestors danced and sang and prayed to their gods. The words and the music and the movement were used to communicate with a god who was warm and close to his people, and who was aware of all that was done in his name. As the millennia rolled on this god became remote and withdrawn; direct communication was lost, and ritual continued (Lischner, Rose1958)

During the 16th century the church launched a virulent campaign against the condemned abuses of dance. In the Post-Renaissance period the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches eliminated the sacred dance in the oratory, interpretation of

hymns and psalms in services and allegorical ballets. The Reformation generally succeeded in suppressing church dance.

Humans have discovered that certain activities affect feelings. Dancing, for example, can lead to an altered state of consciousness. Brainwave frequencies, adrenalin and blood sugar in the body change. Intense, vigorous dancing provides a fatigue which abates rage or alleviates depression. Rapid motion may induce catharsis. Turning or spinning leads to a state of vertigo. *Masses of people in movement change into a charged electric body* (my emphasis). Anthropologists and sociologists recognized that aesthetic phenomena express shared values which excite sentiments that bind people together (Hanna 1983).

The notion of dance as resistance was approached by Nietzsche in Zarathustra, where he summons us in Part 1 to ...come, let us kill the spirit of gravity...by which Nietzsche was referring to the spirit of gravity as symbolizing “all the burdens of life”, in other words, the devil. (Zarathustra 304). He wanted us to kill this spirit of gravity in all of its many different forms; but every form is to be combated by some form or other of dance.

There is a wide array of dance, including ritual, therapeutic, theater, ballet, exhortative, communicational (or courtship), social, tap, and break dancing, to mention a few. (Johnstone, 1984) Dance has typically functioned in some pre-literate cultures as the written word, as part of a broad spectrum of uses, including transmission of myths, folklore and fables. Ethnic groups frequently used dances symbolic of themselves as a means of self-valorization as well as dissent. The Sardana dance for example, became the symbol of the Catalan people in their rebellion against Spain(Comstock 1974) . How important can dance be as a channel for the communication of resistance and rebellion? One example is the African nation of Ivory Coast, where the government

banned all public gatherings involving traditional music and dance during a recent election campaign. There are about 60 ethnic groups in Ivory Coast and the government recognized that the arts provoke and intensify heated sentiments.

Music and dance have always been a central facet of African and African Diaspora culture, simultaneously a site of creative fusions of cultural forms from different parts of West and Central Africa, and between African and European traditions; also an arena of contestation and conflict with racist power structures. This dynamic cultural fusion and conflict began during the infamous “Middle Passage” of slave trafficking from Africa and continued in the slave communities throughout the Americas where dance and music were fundamental to slave resistance. For Europeans, music, dance and related cultural forms were not only a threatening reminder of the unknowable “otherness” of African slaves and their resistance and rebellion to being designated dehumanized chattels, but also the potential threat slaves posed to Eurocentric security through ritual and encoded practices embedded in the slave communities. (Bush 2007).

Conflicting cultural expectations about dance led to tragic consequences in what has been described as the “last Indian war”. During the 19th century the westward pressure of white settlers, backed by the U.S. army, swept aside the armed resistance of various Plains tribes and decimated the herds of buffalo on which the tribes depended for many necessities of their lives. Thus in the late 1880’s the Ghost Dance was included in tribal ceremonies, based on the prophecy of a coming earthquake which would convulse the earth and bring back the prairie grasses and the herds of buffalo. All non-believers would be swallowed up in the transformation. The U.S. authorities, mindful of the power of dance to focus discontent among the Plains tribes, banned all dance ceremonies. (Jonas, 1992)

There are other examples of resistance by indigenous people through their dance to dominant cultural restraints against them. The Maori tribespeople of New Zealand and Australia and the Capoeira dances of

some Brazilian populations which mimic the martial arts come to mind, along with the war dances of native North America.

Also consider the absurdity of a New York City cabaret law which had essentially made it illegal since 1926 for 3 or more people to dance (move in “synchronized motion”) in Manhattan if the bar, nightclub or music hall lacked the appropriate cabaret license. (Jackson 2004)

Attempts at such control imply the recognition that dancing is a creative, potent, individual and communal activity that can effectively mobilize people and as such needs to be contained and/or harnessed in some manner, whether through law or brute force. Anything which, because of its nature, prompts people to ban it must be potent indeed (Royce 1977).

New theories of embodiment show that we do not have to be slaves to existing or pre-existing discourse, always dancing to some else’s tune. Knowledge about ephemeral embodied agency can inform how dance can be enlisted in the cause of social change. Rights activists might protest the wide conceptual gap between equal rights and any kind of dancing cannot bridged with a mambo or a waltz. These activists are surely thinking that something as lightweight as dancing is not going to cure such serious social ills as torture, mass murder, denial of access to education or work according to gender or race, and so on. No matter how powerful its clenched fists, or how moving its mournfulness, or how earnest its yearning, they cannot imagine how a little dance is likely to convince anyone to battle these huge ills. What dance can do is show how embodied action ensures that the ephemeral does not become the erased(Franko 2002).Complex global societies have put their faith in the power of archives, monuments and documents, devaluing the embodied forms of repertoire, performance and dance. But a better understanding of the human endeavors that are preserved, experimented, expressed and transferred in embodied forms such as dance would enhance human rights. If we accept that what moving bodies accomplish does not really matter, we permit abusive cultural and social behaviors. Chantal Mouffe envisions a kind of interaction where ephemeral does not mean disappearing, but instead the foundation of a radical democracy, “one in

which citizens agree not on an abstract set of rights of which they are passive recipients, but instead on an active identification with the *res publica* (public matter) protocols that enable and preserve liberty and equality.

Indifference to dance in contemporary society is connected to dance artists' general tendency toward apathy in regard to contemporary social issues, and ignorance about how those issues affect society. Dancing can enact the complexity of who we are as human beings because in dancing moments, individual agency meets discourse, both for dancer and spectator. The dancer and the viewer feel the enormous power of the body's actions unfolding moment by moment. This power that is seemingly only momentary embeds itself into behavior and also transmutes into memory, where it ferments, creating new ideas and new actions. Both in feeling this power of action and remembering this embodied power, individuals can envision and ultimately enact previously unimagined ideas. (Jackson 2004)

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