

important to get past that and think about what a body can *do*. Thinking about what a body can do in relation to dance studies, I would invoke Randy's way of talking about mobilization to think about how a body moves through the world. It always has these political ramifications as well and it means something to mobilize a body in excess of what a proper body is supposed to be able to do.

One other category in the list of fields that have emerged in recent years and taken on new force for us in the academy is disability studies. When bodies are doing things that they are ostensibly not supposed to be able to do, obviously there are political ramifications to that as well. If you think about what is supposed to be proper to a body because of its gender, because of its racial categorization, because of its age, because of its relationship between colony

and the state, and then you think about the capacity of the body to move in excess of what is proper to it, all of that is of interest to us. In this respect, my own interests tend to move outward from looking at a particular, culturally specific movement technique toward these larger questions of "bodily propriety." I use that term because it means so many things; it's about cleanliness but it's also about ownership. I'm interested in what's proper to bodies and how they sometimes move beyond what is ostensibly proper to them. I'm also interested in the use of the body as a controlling social metaphor and how dance specifically, or movement, becomes this uncontainable category, which is really ultimately about thinking about our performative capacities, our ability not just to configure social relations but also to change them.

A State of Perpetual Becoming: African Bodies as Texts, Methods, and Archives

Awam Amkpa

Thank you so much for asking me to join this illustrious panel. These are people whose work I reference and I talk and think about. I'm going to be tentative in what I say. For me there are no definite theoretical positions, they're exploratory. I'm going to focus more on the poststructuralist dimension because it resonates with my own idea of decolonization, my own idea of postcolonial readings of the body.

I come from a continent where the body is spoken for. We don't have the luxury of stepping in and out of the textuality of the body. From that very moment when the body is born, that body is immediately named and sometimes mired with all kinds of social crisis. So, the body now finds itself

having to do two things. One is to learn how to textualize the mythologies, the grand truths and moralities, and the other is to learn how to deconstruct them. For people who become politicized through the process, they begin to utilize their body as a way of thinking contrapuntally. So that for them every image, every text that's produced is produced to be deconstructed rather than to be canonized.

Initially I was thinking I would discuss Judith Butler and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), and I actually decided maybe I should think about it as "The Matter of the Body." As you all know, living in the United States, if you attempt to commit suicide and you fail, it's a crime. So you really do not own your

body. Your body is a social text. It is spoken for by the legal infrastructures of society. So the idea that there is this amorphous thing called "the body" that is independent is not even possible. In a highly socialized space, what then happens for the performer is a hyper-consciousness of the textuality of these bodies and a consciousness about breaking down those bodies so that in their fragmented mode, they actually express their opposition to domination.

For me the idea of decolonization manifests itself through an aesthetic of fragmentation. Every truth that you build up, you build it up because you are going to fragment it, and that act of fragmentation is a process of actually deconstructing archetypes and stereotypes. For me, it takes us to a level of what I write about theoretically, which is about training the body of the performer to be aware of this methodology of acquiring a text, situating a text in its moral landscape, and deconstructing the text deliberately so the spectator does not get obsessed with it. The idea for me is for the spectator to leave the arena thinking, if the symbolic text can experience this kind of fragmentation, maybe the social and political text out there can equally experience the same thing. So, that aesthetic of fragmentation becomes the language of engaging with social reality, where everything must be put in its place, but also out of its place. So that fluidity, that liminality, that idea that every truth is ephemeral rather than everlasting, that kind of stuff is what I'm thinking about.

Earlier this morning I got an email from a friend who is making a film in Congo. He sent me an email attachment of a film clip, and it was of a serious performance. These kids were militias going to take out a whole village, and they were doing all

kinds of initiating performances with their Kalashnikov rifles. In that moment I saw a bunch of things. I saw residual, mythological African performance traditions, and on the other hand I saw the appropriation of those traditions to suit the need to go annihilate another set of bodies in another village. Now it looks so far away from you, but the reason why that civil war is happening is in your pockets right now if you own a cell phone: Coltan. The place called Congo produces 64 percent of the world's coltan. The search for spaces where you can mine coltan meant that communities had to organize themselves and compete for that space to explore more minerals, which they can export to the buyers and sellers in European and American industries. So their bodies are spoken for by industrial needs and some of our needs for cell phones and computers. Their bodies are spoken for by that history.

These Africans find themselves in a historical place, and they are continuously looking for spaces within that place. In that process of searching for spaces, it's so conflictual, it's so bloody, and it's so odd. Why do I put this performance that I saw in this talk? These guys were dancing like crazy; they really looked mean. They were dancing to really charge up or possess the desire to go take out another human being. In other words, for their bodies to matter, they must erase other bodies. So performance became the medium for doing that. That takes us to another level where it's no longer the gilded theater form that we know but really a live form where performance is actually participating in mapping a place.

So I decided I'm going to talk about the body in a state of perpetual becoming. Just remember three key words: "being," "belonging," and "becoming." Where the condition of the body, the state of the body,

the state of *being* of the body, really takes you into the phenomenology of the body. *How is this body composed? What makes it tick? How can it transform itself? What kind of mythology or morality informs the body?* And some of what we've talked about refers to the phenomenology of the body, and how performance itself illustrates the phenomenology of the body. Think about *belonging*, and this is where theoretically we talk about structuralism. This body belongs to a place, but places are socially constructed, so by that token the body is socially constructed. So for the performer to produce a symbolic interpretation of that socially constructed place—it's a hyper-consciousness. The idea of belonging takes us into what structuralists obsess about, where the body belongs somewhere: it must be gendered, it must be classed, it must be racialized, it must be x and y. So we name it, and we fix it in a particular kind of cartography: First World, Third World, North, South, and so on. It's

almost like the setting of this play—this grand drama—is fixed, and nothing's going to change it. That kind of description of the world can put everyone in an existential crisis. This is where I begin to depart from the structuralist readings of society and place to begin to shift to another idea of how we live in a state of *becoming* where nothing is really finished. Everything actually is ephemeral and constantly being reconstructed. People loosely call this "poststructuralist thinking." Deleuze and others will talk about all this as symbolic acts where theatrical work produces these affects, these symbolic assets. These symbolic assets are what people will use as the vocabulary of remaking the place they exist in. So that what we produce aesthetically begins to have currency in everyday life.

Let me use some illustrations. I was in Ghana in January 2009 when a new president was elected. People went crazy, so I took a camera and I took a lot of photos.

Photo 1. Crowds congregating at Ghana's Independence Square for the inauguration of the country's new president, Professor Atta Mills. Photo by Awam Amkpa.



As you can see in the first photo, we were in the central park where independence was declared against the British in Ghana. This park was jammed with over twenty thousand people, and they were all performing different kinds of skits. They were singing; they were dancing; they were in costumes. It was carnivalesque. Everyone was a performer and everyone was a spectator simultaneously. If you look at some of the costumes, you will see the insignias and the iconographies of the political party that had just come to power.

But I just want to complicate it further by saying it doesn't feel like these are free bodies moving in free spaces and expressing their desire and celebration. In the same photo you can see authority figures where the state is saying, "We're going to give you a few hours to celebrate, and there's a limit to your celebration. So this is not real freedom, but we're just going to perform it as freedom so you can get out the excesses, go through the catharsis."

So you have the symbols of the state always creating the boundaries of how far the performance is going to go. They are not there, and yet they are there. As you all know, if you go to demonstrations, you must have a police permit. If you are protesting against the state, why do you need a permit from the state to protest? This is how hegemonies work.

In this particular space I saw a bit of that, but I also saw these fascinating people, ordinary people from villages, from towns far from Accra, coming into the city. And they were performing all kinds of skits, sketches of residual, mythological African performance. For some of those early ethnographers who "invented" Africa, for those

folks, if they had been there, they would be salivating! They would say "Oh my god, the authentic Africans are out here! They're really doing these performances!" But what I was fascinated by was the power of appropriation where these people are saying: "There are mythologies, but those mythologies exist to be used, and they exist to be used deliberately." So that in the performance you can see them actually deliberately subverting the sanctity of the mythologies. Some of the performances that were happening in that space don't belong to that space, they belong somewhere else. But they were brought in there to really participate in this political celebration of a change of government. For example, the performance in photograph 2 is actually a traditional burial ritual. In this ritual people don't talk about the dead, the women do a wailing thing, and it's a huge performance. They brought it to this arena, and they were there to mourn the death of the last government. There was this orgy of people digging into the past to produce something new. These people used their bodies to produce a text—not to *illustrate* a text but to actually *textualize the space* with mythologies, with known signifiers. They brought those things out

Photo 2. Women's group from the Volta region of Ghana perform an installation ritual. Photo by Awam Amkpa.





Photo 3. Performance of a ritual for installing chiefs in Ghana. Photo by Awam Amkpa.

to do what I would call “texting the space through performance.”

I particularly like photograph 3 because this guy is wearing a secondhand Dolce and Gabbana T-shirt and this is actually a funeral rite performed in this space. You can see the flag of Ghana in the background, which is kind of a postcolonial reading of the body.

In photograph 4 you can see a performer who painted himself with the insignia of the political party and just stood still in different

Photo 4. A party stalwart adorns his body with the colors of the newly elected political party amidst a carnivalesque performance. Photo by Awam Amkpa.



poses. The body became a site for actually texting the space. The body became a performance venue. The body was not just something that belonged to the custodians. You are the custodians of your body but you don't actually own it. The custodians are actually doing things with their bodies to tell a story.

This is my idea of how the images must not stay in focus. The ideas, symbolisms must always be in a state of shifting. We will appropriate them because we want to retell our stories; we want to

recharge our cultural and political identities with these symbolic interpretations of reality. As an act of perpetual becoming, I really am talking about where performance, and the body in it, exists in a perpetual state of contrapuntalism. It's always, constantly saying, “When I perform, I perform first to show you as it might have been, but I also want to show you how I really want it to be.” So that the performance and the body in it becomes an act of subjectivity. To do that, for people in Africa especially, who do not have access to most of these resources, they've

got to do it by pidginizing. In other words, corrupting the formal rules of language or convention, and also by creolizing, or inventing something new. So in order for these stories to continue to be useful, they will dig into the archives, but they'll bring the text and corrupt those laws that made those texts sacrosanct in the past, to produce something new. And when they produce it, they will create for me this exercise of deliberative living. These are a bunch of people saying, “We live in an oppressive place.

We're carving spaces within that place, and we're using our bodies as sites for exercising that desire. We're using performances and symbolisms as vehicles for actually owning the place—Africa, in this case.”

I will conclude by suggesting we look at the body as “texts” that are historically determined, but to stress that such texts exist to be constantly reconfigured in order to destabilize hegemonic archetypes and stereotypes. I also want to suggest we see the body as a methodology—a process through which we read history and desire history's alternative readings. Finally, I want to suggest the body is an archive—a repository imbued with polysemiotic possibilities, hence its status of always being in performance.

Works Cited

Browning, Barbara. 1995. *Samba: Resistance in Motion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter*. New York: Routledge.
- Carson, Rachel. 1962. *Silent Spring*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1992. *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*. New York: Zone Books.
- Douglas, Mary. 1966/2002. *Purity and Danger*. New York: Routledge.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1968. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Jameson, Frederic. 1984. “Periodizing the Sixties.” *The Sixties without Apology*, edited by Sohnya Sayres et al., 178–209. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Martin, Randy. 1990. *Performance as Political Act: The Embodied Self*. New York: Bergin and Garvey.
- Mauss, Marcel. 1936/1973. “Techniques of the Body.” *Economy and Society* 2:70–88.
- Zarrilli, Phillip. 2008. *Psychophysical Acting*. London: Routledge.