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Situated Dancing: Notes from Three Decades in Contact with Phenomenology

Ann Cooper Albright

I began to study philosophy at the same time that I began to study dance, at college in the early 1980s. Both of these choices surprised me at first, as I had originally planned to study politics and become a civil rights lawyer after college. I see now that these two areas of inquiry were routes toward figuring out how to bridge the divides between my academic self and my increasingly explosive physicality. Figuratively as well as literally divided into day and night, my academic experience and the club scene I thrived in were separated by geographic distance and differing class values—a study in the cultural bifurcation produced by the hierarchies of brain and brawn. But these body/mind boundaries were always porous for me, and they became increasingly so as I explored the epistemological origins of the Cartesian split in my survey of Western philosophy course while also taking my first modern dance class. My desire was to become both verbally and physically articulate, and I savored those moments when vague impulses or ideas found the right expressive gesture or crucial wording. By the time I was a senior, I was choreographing a quartet and writing a thesis on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962). Somewhere along the way, philosophy and dance leaned into one another, beginning a duet that would lead to a life spent thinking and moving.

This essay is just that—an attempt to situate and reflect on the various intersections of phenomenology and dance that have captured my curiosity over the past three decades. It maps out both a personal journey and a disciplinary trajectory, for my own career as a dancer and a scholar traces many of the intellectual shifts that have taken place in dance studies over this time. What follows is neither a thorough nor an encyclopedic documentation of these developments, however, but rather an individual (and admittedly quixotic) investigation of the ways in which phenomenology has helped dance scholars to think about dancing bodies beyond the walls of the studio or the arch of the proscenium stage. The structure of my analysis follows my journey from philosophy through feminist theory to performance studies and back to philosophy, albeit with a critical distance. This intellectual pathway intersects with my dance training, as I moved from a BA in philosophy to an MFA in choreography to a PhD in performance studies and then began to teach in a dance department at a liberal arts college, where, for the first time in my academic life, I could teach intellectual analysis and physical training in the space of one class session. Engaging students across the

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traditional mind/body divides of dance studio and academic classroom has, surprisingly, brought me back to philosophy, specifically phenomenology.

Over the course of the last thirty years, phenomenology has replaced aesthetics as the philosophical discourse of choice for dance studies, prodding scholars to think about a broad continuum of moving bodies within the cultures they inhabit. Generally speaking, phenomenology is the study of how the world is perceived, rather than the study of the essence of things as objects or images of our consciousness. It is a way of describing the world as we live in it—a philosophical approach that positions the body as a central aspect of that lived experience. Flipping Descartes's "cogito" ("I think therefore I am") on its (in)famous head, phenomenology, as developed by Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, seeks to account for the structures of our situated "being-in-the-world."[1] This approach focuses on the body-based somatic and perceptual senses (including space and touch), as well as the more verbal and conscious aspects of our existence. I am deeply appreciative of phenomenology's multifaceted analysis—from discussions of posture to issues of ethical behavior—of the ways our bodies both shape and are shaped by our life experiences. Paying attention to how our corporeal engagement with the world creates meaning in our lives, phenomenology revises classical notions of the self as subject and the world as object of our reflections. Of course now when I teach first-year students Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception*, I realize that my approach to this seminal work is enriched by the interpretations and critical interventions provided by scholars whose interests cross many disciplines. Feminist philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Iris Marion Young, Elizabeth Grosz, and Judith Butler have critiqued the universalist approach of this early phenomenology, stretching that philosophical discourse to include a consideration of cultural differences, all the while conserving the original focus on the corporeal as a key element in the constitution of subjectivity.[2]

Merleau-Ponty wrote *The Phenomenology of Perception* in four parts. The first is an introduction that argues against figuring existence as pure consciousness (Decartes's "cogito"), and proposes instead that we try to understand the reality of our existence by recognizing that our perception is interactive with the world. Thus, the table around which my family gathers is not just an inert object made of wood; it means something and calls those meanings forth when I sit down at it. For Merleau-Ponty, it is our bodily experiences that provide the ground for our thoughts and not vice versa. The first part of the book, "The Body," is dedicated to refuting conceptions of the body as an object or a machine directed by our higher consciousness. Here, Merleau-Ponty analyzes in detail how our perceptions—moving through space, touching another person, etc.—create meaning. The next section, "The World as Perceived," includes an intriguing discussion of intersubjectivity ("Self and Other"). His final section, "Being-for-Itself and Being-in-the-World," upends traditional Western ideas of freedom as an exercise of individual will.

Throughout his project, Merleau-Ponty grounds human consciousness in everyday experiences of the world. His language, replete with gerunds, emphasizes the verbs—it is the acting (not the action), the perceiving (not the perception), the sensing (not the sensation)—that can provide us with insights into the nature of our existence. In addition to the great pleasure of discovering a subgenre of philosophy that takes bodily knowledge seriously, I was particularly interested in the ways in which Merleau-Ponty contradicts many earlier philosophers' pronouncements on selfhood, individual will, and freedom. For instance, in the last chapter of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty discusses freedom not in terms of having abundant choices (of career, say), but rather as a kind of urgency—a necessity that ironically gives one the freedom to claim a career that does not always fit within culturally sanctioned expectations. I certainly experienced this rush of liberation when, as a twenty year old, I decided that my life would have to include dancing as my main focus and not just as an extracurricular activity or a hobby.

My entrée into dance was unusual for a young woman of my generation, in that I had no previous technical foundation in dance when I came to college. In fact, the first dance course I signed up for

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was dance composition. Due to the fortuitous combination of small classes (dance was offered for physical education credit back then), my own ebullient enthusiasm, and the deeply generous spirit of my early teachers, I was allowed to continue with the course, provided that I joined the advanced technique class held right before. So there I was, an oddly energized but spastic presence in the back row, trying desperately to figure out which limb to move where. The majority of the other students (with some memorable exceptions) were high school ballerinas who were having just as hard a time undoing the technical rigidity of their training as I was having trying to instill some in my body. In college, I was engaged in making dances, taking technique classes, reading my way through the GV 1700s, and writing about the dances I saw in theaters and on video. Thus, I came to dance as a holistic enterprise, an intellectual as well as a physical discipline. I quickly recognized, however, that dance (unlike the visual arts) was not seen as a legitimate academic major at Bryn Mawr College. The dance classes at my college were taught by women, many of whom had graduate degrees, but who nonetheless still held adjunct status. During my second year, I took a course on French women writers (from Mme. de Stael to Hélène Cixous) and one on political theory, all the while making connections with my dance experiences. My growing feminist consciousness made me realize the cultural urgency of bringing marginalized experiences and bodies into the academy.

The early 1980s were a formative time, not just for me personally, but also for gender and women's studies, as well as dance studies. These areas were not yet generally regarded as legitimate disciplines, but they were increasingly the sites of my intellectual curiosity. I read *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir (1953), whose famous line, "One is not born a woman, one becomes one" (1973, 301), inspired so many early feminist analyses of the socialization of women's bodies. Because phenomenology focuses attention on the circumstances of this active "becoming," it serves as a model for many studies on the complicated dynamics of bodies conforming to and resisting cultural norms. In 1990, feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young analyzed women's embodiment in her groundbreaking essay "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality." This seminal piece of feminist scholarship is a brilliant example of a phenomenological movement analysis that articulates how women literally incorporate their social positioning. By describing how girls are taught *not* to take up space, *not* to use their whole bodies, and *not* to believe they can accomplish challenging physical tasks, Young provides a new framework for thinking about the interconnections between women's bodies and their sense of selfhood and social power.

Thirty years after its initial publication, "Throwing Like a Girl" is still extremely relevant for anyone exploring issues of gender in movement. Writing for a collection of essays dedicated to Young after her untimely death in 2006, dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster comments on Young's contributions, not only to feminist philosophy, but also to dance studies: "In that essay, Young offers an innovative approach to the analysis of bodily motion, one that integrates movement patterns with psychological orientations and social roles" (2009, 69). Young grounds her insights with references to her own physical upbringing, acknowledging that while her observations are situated in a particular experience, they will likely resonate with many other women. Although general physical styles have changed for women, and more girls are playing sports these days, the "inhibited intentionality" that Young identified is still very present in the adolescent bodies I work with.

For the past seven years, I have directed an afterschool program in the local middle school called "Girls in Motion." This program, which uses college students trained by me to teach, seeks to address on an embodied level what Peggy Orenstein and others have described as "the confidence gap."[3] By teaching movement forms (including capoeira, yoga, hip hop, and some Contact-based skills) that give girls an experience of mobilizing their own weight, not to mention taking up space, we hope to guide them into a heightened sense of their own physical power. Young's classic essay is required reading for all the college mentors who work with Girls in Motion. If contact improvisation provided me with the physical foundation for this program, it is the work of feminist

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phenomenologists such as Young that gave me the critical framework to articulate what I have always felt in my bones—that how we move in the world can make a difference.

During my second year of college, I was struggling with my own issues surrounding the socialization of female bodies, for I had recently hit the wall with the gender ideologies embedded in modern dance and I was finding it difficult to fit my punk body into the flowing skirts of our Graham-inspired dance club recitals. Indeed, I might have left dance altogether if I had not stumbled across a contact improvisation class. In was the summer of 1980, I was twenty years old, and I knew immediately that I had found a dance form that fed my rambunctious physicality and my intellectual energy. Contact's task-based focus relieved my self-consciousness, and I liked that this improvisational form provided the space for an individual expressivity as well as my need for group interaction. I treasured the possibilities that Contact offered of moving from fiercely combative to luxuriously sensuous in a split second. Over the next thirty years, Contact would become a movement form that continuously nurtured both my intellectual and physical curiosities.

It was also the summer that I was rereading *The Phenomenology of Perception* in preparation for writing my senior thesis. In retrospect, I realize that the movement form I was beginning to incorporate as an essential part of my physical identity helped me to make sense of Merleau-Ponty's analyses of spatiality, motility, and intersubjectivity. For instance, in a section in the book called "The Phenomenal Field," Merleau-Ponty describes the experience of running through the woods and having one's body automatically move between the trees. Our bodies know that the tree is solid (not a figment of our imagination), not because they deduced it, or we remember a time when we hit the tree and thought, "let's not do that again," but because our bodies can perceive and react to things faster than our conscious thought can. Similarly, Contact classes often begin with an exercise where everyone starts walking through the space, shifting directions and moving into the spaces between other people. It is always a fascinating experience because, just like navigating midtown Manhattan at rush hour, if you second-guess yourself or someone else, you tend to bump into people. But if you trust your instincts and keeping moving, nine times out of ten, you will slide through just as the hole disappears. One of the keys to "getting" contact improvisation is learning to dial down your conscious verbal commentary in order to let your kinesthetic intelligence have a freer rein. I began to see the experience of meeting someone else at the point of contact as a physical metaphor for the way Merleau-Ponty describes the interconnected relationship of being-in-the-world.

Having graduated with a degree in philosophy (there was no dance major), I was keen to make up for lost time and dance all day, every day. Eventually, I ended up pursuing an M.F.A. in choreography at Temple University. While there, I felt my body gradually incorporating a deep physical responsiveness, as I took lots of technique, improvisation, and somatic classes, along with the rigorous composition sequence. I was inspired by my modern-based teachers and learned how to see and create choreographic structures and subtle variations in qualities of movement. I felt strong, but not smart, for there was little room in the program for much theoretical engagement with dance. This was a historical moment when most dance writing was focused on descriptive criticism. As an alternative to the power toting, make-it-or-break-it kind of evaluative dance coverage, descriptive criticism set an important precedent in dance studies. Critics such as Deborah Jowitt and Marcia Siegel were instrumental in schooling a whole generation of dance writers in how to see and describe the movement priorities in modern and postmodern dance.[4] This was also the time when Michael Kirby proposed the possibility of an "objective" criticism that focused on recording events without any critical interpretation.[5] With a nod to ethnography, some dance writers were attempting to document the total dance-making process—from rehearsal to performance and its aftermath, but there seemed to be little interest at the time in a sustained analysis that probed the existing structures of cultural power, or investigated how dance reflected social identities or aesthetic ideologies.

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In school, the influence of a Laban-based movement analysis combined with a focus on structural alignment in our technique classes stripped much of the dancing we did of its cultural moorings and kept us in a haze of the eternal present. We were training, rehearsing, and performing without much discussion of what it all meant or where we were going. Bodies were treated as neutral forms to be organized (sometimes manipulated) by the choreographer's vision. It was a moment when the Cunningham ethos ranked supreme, and everyone seemed satisfied with a universal relativism that let each person find his or her own meaning in the material. I remember sitting in composition class and hearing elaborate analyses of the uses of lateral space, change in level, and rhythmic variation. When I pointed out the fact that the dance we were discussing included nine women dressed in black slips and red stiletto heels, and that those choices might carry a certain amount of cultural capital, I was politely told that that was my own interpretation, which I was welcome to, but that I should not assume anyone else would notice!

My frustration with this situation paralleled that of many feminist phenomenologists who were questioning the generic undercurrents of earlier discussions of the (presumably neutral) body in their field. Given what Elizabeth Grosz (1994) describes as the prevailing somatophobia of the Western philosophical tradition, bringing the body into this rarified discourse was an important first step (for which phenomenology deserves much of the credit), but it also clearly mattered whose bodies were being discussed. Although I did not articulate it in precisely these terms at the time, I began to feel uneasy with a rigidly composition-based approach to choreography. The language about dance that I encountered felt very insular. I found myself wanting to talk about dance and the cultural meaning embedded in the bodies that were dancing, but I knew I needed more analytic tools to work with. Thus I emerged from the stagnant air and fluorescent lights of the dance studios where I had spent the last three years sweating profusely, and began to train in a different kind of technique—feminist theory.

Eventually (each "eventually" in this text is code for "nine months of waiting tables and teaching hundreds of aerobics classes to fund my next step"), I moved to New York City to dance and study. My movement curiosities took me to studios and lofts all over the city. My more scholarly endeavors were located at Movement Research, Inc., where I worked briefly as director of the Studies Project (a series of roundtable discussions between choreographers and critics), and at New York University, where I took classes in the Performance Studies department. There I was fortunate enough to be part of a cohort of graduate students who were also intrigued by the insights that academic theory had to offer dance studies. At first we eagerly embraced these new critical theories, particularly feminist film theory. It was exciting to trace the interconnections between moving images and moving bodies. Nonetheless, I was frustrated by the lack of awareness that the female body could be both a site of resistance as well as a site of cultural disempowerment.

I remember reading works such as Teresa de Lauretis's *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984). In this work, de Lauretis tries to build a bridge from her discussions of narrative and desire in representation over to experience and subjectivity. Leading off with the famous passage from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1931), where Woolf's female character is chided by a male academic for walking across the lawn where women are not allowed, de Lauretis redefines Woolf's use of instinct as cultural knowledge or habit. Instinct, for de Lauretis, has "too strong a connotation of automatic, brute, mindless response" (158). She prefers experience: "The notion of experience seems to me to be crucially important to feminist theory in that it bears directly on the major issues that have emerged from the women's movement—subjectivity, sexuality, the body, and feminist political practice" (159). However, once de Lauretis evokes the political relevancy of experience, she steers clear of the theoretical murkiness of material lived bodies. Yet it was precisely the messiness of bodies and ideas that I found so compelling in both the choreography and improvisational performances I was seeing all around me.

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For instance, while I appreciated de Lauretis' articulation of experience as interactive process, I found her too quick to leave aspects of experience, particularly physical experience, that are not so easily categorized. Sure, this experience of Woolf's character—the "I" of the story—is a prime example of the social positioning of women. But suppose, for a moment, that de Lauretis had started to quote Woolf earlier in her essay:

> Thought [. . .] had let its line down into the stream. It swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds, letting the water lift it and sink it, until—you know the little tug—the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line [. . .] But however small it was, it had, nevertheless, the mysterious property of its kind—put back into the mind, it became at once very exciting, and important; and as it darted and sank, and flashed hither and thither, set up such a wash and tumult of ideas that *it was impossible to sit still*. It was thus that I found myself walking with extreme rapidity across a grass plot. (1931, 7, emphasis added)

This wonderful stream of consciousness description by Woolf evokes a certain affective quality of physical experience that gets dropped out of many scholarly discussions of embodiment. It is the energizing engagement with her thoughts that brings Woolf's character to her feet, propelling her across the grass and smack into that black-robed keeper of those awesome patriarchal lawns. Mediated through a series of lived events in which the narrator excitedly and literally follows the thread of an idea right up to the threshold of a (male) academic institution, this section of *A Room of One's Own* represented for me the interaction between somatic experience and social definitions that constitutes the ongoing process of subjectivity. I would argue that the "I" of this passage does not evaporate as she confronts the robed male professor who puts her back in her place. Indeed, it was not the thoughts per se, but the somatic attitude of her body that was transgressive, not simply the geographic fact of her (mis)placement, but its energized concentration. At the same time that Woolf's character gets put in her place as a woman, she still has the experience of refusing that place—the experience of not being able to "sit still."

I am elaborating on this example because it is indicative of what I considered at the time to be a prevalent myopia in feminist theory about what constituted meaningful experiences. Too often these theorists addressed the body only in terms of its cultural constructions. This constructed body is seen as a sort of material blank page onto which society etches its own image. But dance, especially the contemporary dance I was surrounded by in New York City in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was increasingly political, and focused on the (sometimes contradictory) identities of the dancers' bodies, demanding different ways of seeing from the audience. My peers and I all began to realize that the more didactic theories of representation based on two-dimensional images could not do justice to the complex experience of watching live bodies move onstage. The critical essays we were reading were often brilliant and erudite, yet I often left my graduate seminars feeling rather depressed and strangely claustrophobic. I started to wonder if academic theory was not just as repressive at times as the cultural ideologies it was deconstructing. Whether pegged by academic theory or portrayed by artists, at the end of the day, women's bodies were often represented as overly determined, and always already written over.

Interestingly enough, while dance scholars were investigating the theoretical usefulness of feminist theory, feminist and cultural studies were beginning to engage with performance theory. The result was an interesting hybrid of performance studies and phenomenology. One of the most influential examples of this was Judith Butler's work in *Gender Trouble* (1990). This short book offers a stunning analysis of the interdependent constructions of sex, gender, and identity. In it, Butler conjures performance (via Simone de Beauvoir's notion of "becoming" a woman) as a process or a "becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end" (33). The "becoming" of women, then, is an enactment, and as such resists both a biological teleology and a cultural ontology. Although Butler first defines gender as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated

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acts within a highly rigid regulating frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (33), she recognizes the existential limits of performance and the ways in which "repeated acts" undermine the stability of the very gender they are said to express. Performances (whether theatrical events or framed moments in everyday life) are physicalized within a specific time and space, often (although not always) with a live audience, and therefore can never be *exactly* repeated.

This ephemeral nature of performance makes for a very intriguing slippage of identity in which the "natural" habits are recognized as "performed." Once the ideological "naturalness" of those conventions is deconstructed, however, their physical remnants are not so automatically displaced. Pulled away from its overdetermined psychic (and psychoanalytic) relationship to the body, gender is often figured by Butler as a place of resistance without accounting for the bodily echoes of those physically ingrained cultural patterns. While reading *Gender Trouble*, I kept wondering what this destabilized body actually looked like? A lot of feminist theory becomes pretty confusing when one insists on keeping the physical reality of material bodies within the conceptual framework. Butler's theory of gender as performance marks gender and sexual identity as a shifting category (one that is consciously "played" out), but it never accounts for how the body receives, produces, and interacts with that very potent psychic instability. Fortunately while in graduate school, I was still dancing, and the kinetic experience of making work and seeing work refreshed my spirits and made me realize that contemporary dance could reinvigorate feminist discussions of bodily experience. I was inspired to try and articulate the particular phenomenology of late twentieth-century dance. My desire was not to dismiss critical theory per se, but to try and uncover the theories implicit in the work I was witnessing.

The result, many years later, was *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (1997). This book (and the various articles that led up to it) is situated at the intersection of theory and practice, dancing and writing. It was equally informed by my academic graduate studies and by my years training in contemporary dance, attending rehearsals, and watching performances. The arguments I make about the double moment of dancing in front of an audience in which the dancer negotiates between seeing and being seen, as well as my discussion of the slippage between somatic identity (the experience of one's physicality) and cultural identity (how one's body—skin, gender, ability, age, etc.—renders meaning in society) came out of my willingness to be corporeally saturated by the dancing I was analyzing. At the time, I encountered some resistance to this kind of scholarly engagement. I sensed a fear that this bodily connectedness would somehow sully my critical distance. I was told (more than once) that I could either write about someone's work, or dance with someone, but I could not effectively do both. In retrospect, I realize that many of the insights in that book came from a desire to engage with kinesthetic, visual, somatic, and aesthetic experiences and to put those insights in dialogue with textual theories. As a dancer as well as an emerging scholar, I was unwilling to treat the dancing I witnessed as simply the "raw material" for my academic pontificating. I wanted to give the experience of dancing its own intellectual credibility.

I was not alone. Dance scholars throughout the mid-1980s and 1990s were producing interesting hybrids of feminist theory and cultural and performance studies. Many of these works were influenced by a phenomenological approach to the study of moving bodies. For instance, Deidre Sklar worked on a movement ethnography of a religious fiesta in Las Cruces, New Mexico. In articulating her particular methodology for this study, Sklar developed a series of "essential theoretical parameters for considering movement or dance in cultural context" (2001, 30). Premise number five reads: "Movement is always an immediate corporeal experience" (31). In her explanation, Sklar argues against treating the body as a text to be read. Instead she suggests that the physical knowing in movement must be explored through the body as well as observation and interviews. Sklar proposes a process of "empathic kinesthetic perception":

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> Emphatic kinesthetic perception suggests a combination of mimesis and empathy. Paradoxically, it implies that one has to close one's eyes to look at movement, ignoring its visual effects and concentrating instead on feeling oneself to be in the other's body moving. Whereas visual perception implies an "object" to be perceived from a distance with the eyes alone, empathic kinesthetic perception implies a bridging between subjectivities. This kind of "connected knowing" produces a very intimate kind of knowledge, a taste of those ineffable movement experiences that can't be easily put into words. Paradoxically, as feminist psychologist Judith Jordan points out, the kind of temporary joining that occurs in empathy produces not a blurry merger but an articulated perception of differences. (32)

What Sklar describes as "emphatic kinesthetic perception" underlies a number of dance studies that mix ethnography and cultural studies with a decidedly phenomenological twist, such as Barbara Browning's *Samba: Resistance in Motion* (1995) and Cynthia Novack's *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (1990).

For most of the 1990s, I participated in an interdisciplinary feminist study group called the Flaming Bitches (ah, yes, that punk sensibility strikes again). On one occasion, I invited the group to meet in the dance studio where we did some bodywork and a few beginning Contact exercises. Once I had gotten over my amusement at seeing these very capable and smart ladies freak out in an open space with nowhere to hide, I was astonished when someone asked why I did not write about contact improvisation, since it so clearly informed my thinking in many ways. It was true—I had not engaged with Contact much in my scholarly work. This was odd, I realized, since I was always arguing about the importance of bodily knowing within this group, and yet I had not articulated much about a dance form that arguably defined much of my social, aesthetic, and political sensibilities, not to mention my physical body. As Janet O'Shea suggests in her introduction to the second edition of the *Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, "[Methodological] approaches accrue strategic force at different historical moments and in different social and political contexts" (2010, 3). It took the experience and aftermath of 9/11, which brought with it its own political urgency, to pull me into addressing my practice of teaching and dancing contact improvisation. I wrote "Dwelling in Possibility" as an epilogue for *Taken by Surprise* (2003), a collection of essays on improvisation that I co-edited with David Gere. This piece uses the improvisational score I created for the Oberlin community the day after 9/11 as a stepping off point for a meditation on the ways in which improvisation can help us to imagine a personal and communal response to a global crisis. I began to think about contact improvisation not only as a movement form, but also as methodology—an approach to dance studies that used my body as a way of knowing.

Invigorated by new graduate programs across the United States and abroad, dance studies gained a clear theoretical momentum by the end of the twentieth century. Indeed, the July 2000 conference, "Dancing in the Millennium" (co-facilitated by Dance Critics Association, Congress on Research in Dance, Society of Dance History Scholars, and the National Dance Alliance), presented a rich array of approaches to dance, not the least of which was a growing interest in "embodied research." This (admittedly slippery) term has gained considerable currency in the first decade of the twenty-first century, particularly in the areas of the cognitive sciences (which are now, interestingly enough, taking embodiment seriously), as well as performance and dance studies. Loosely defined, embodied research is a blend of phenomenology, anthropology (with its long tradition of field studies and the participant/observer dynamic), ethnography, and cultural studies. In dance programs, particularly in England and Europe, embodied research is one way to gain institutional recognition for choreographic production. For instance, at the 2004 Ethics and Politics conference at the Theater Academy in Helsinki, Finland, the dance department was celebrating a new PhD program, whose goal was to give dancers and choreographers the scholarly foundations (with a strong emphasis on phenomenology) to reflect on their own artistic work. This program has produced some of the best examples of embodied research that I have had the opportunity to read.

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In the U.S., "embodied research" has started to gain currency as more dancers are involved in writing about their own kinesthetic practices. This is much harder than it sounds. More than just taking dance classes while doing scholarly work, embodied research, to my mind, at least, requires that one engage seriously with the ambiguity that results from trying to conceptualize bodily experiences that can be quite elusive. It requires patience with the partiality of physical knowing as well as a curiosity about how theoretical paradigms will shift in the midst of that bodily experience. Thus, my next scholarly project intentionally positioned my dancing as a central aspect of the research, even in the midst of a project on early twentieth-century dance.

Traces of Light: Absence and Presence in the Work of Loie Fuller (2007) started with a somatic hunch. After reading one critic and historian after another dismiss Fuller's dancing prowess, I rebelled. A series of black and white images of Fuller shot in natural light by Eugène Druet convinced me, in a deeply physical manner, that there was something else going on. These images spoke to me with a force that spilled over the traditional boundaries of historical research and inspired me to engage my somatic as well as my analytic faculties. I decided to make a dance with every chapter I was writing, to explore through my body the ideas I was working with theoretically. This was not historical reconstruction, but rather creative interpretation with an awareness that I might touch some truths about her work that were not immediately visible at first. In an essay on this physically engaged process, I wrote:

> Dancing amidst clouds of fabric in elaborate lighting effects, I try to understand something of Fuller's experience from the inside out. I also dance with words, moving with my writing to see how ideas resonate in my body. Then too, as I weave my way through archival materials and historical accounts of cultural milieus, I practice staying attentive to what I have learned through that dancing experience. This research process challenges traditional separations between academic scholarship and artistic creation, between criticism and autobiography—in short between dancing and writing. More than just another layer of historical excavation, my dancing creates a strand of physical thinking that weaves back and forth between the presence of historical artifacts (posters, reviews, photos, memoirs, and paintings) and the absence of Fuller's physical motion. (Albright 2004, 12)

Drawing on the possibility of a "connected knowing" through my dancing, I thought of my approach to historical research as a kind of Contact duet, focusing on the artistic and intellectual reciprocity of touching and being touched. Ironically, it was through the writings of another French philosopher, Jean-Luc Nancy, that I conceptualized this relationship between moving and writing, contact and text. In his essay "Corpus," Nancy writes:

> In all writing, a body is traced, is the tracing and the trace—is the letter, yet never the letter, a literality or rather a lettericity that is no longer legible. A body is what cannot be read in a writing.
> (Or one has to understand reading as something other than decipherment.) Rather, as touching, as being touched. Writing, reading: matters of tact. (1994, 24)

Despite its linguistic unwieldiness (an effect, no doubt, of the difficulties of translation), this quotation signaled what was for me a profound difference in my approach to historical work. Following Nancy's move from traces to tracing allowed me to incorporate the tactile, and thereby refuse the traditional separation of object from subject. Reaching across time and space to touch Fuller's dancing meant that I allow myself, in turn, to be touched, for it is impossible to touch anything in a way that does not also implicate one's own body. As I touched Fuller's dancing through my historical research, both textual and physical, I was touched in return. (Interestingly, a similar point is made by Merleau-Ponty in his discussion of intersubjectivity in *The Phenomenology of Perception*.) Given the focus of the present essay, I might recharacterize my approach in that earlier project as

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phenomenological with a dash of creative license. Recently, literary and cultural studies (with their renewed focus on "affect") have begun to consider the experience of embodiment as more central to interpretation. In these disciplinary fields as well, phenomenology is receiving renewed interest as a methodology.

Sarah Ahmed begins her book *Queer Phenomenology* with a question: "What does it mean to be oriented?" (2006, 1). Playing across the phenomenological fields of spatial orientation and its implications for thinking about sexual orientation, Ahmed follows Merleau-Ponty's analysis of spatiality and sedimented habits to argue that spatial orientations are not simply a matter of choice. Rather they are called forth by the world around us. We turn towards certain things and directions, and away from others. Over time and with repetition, that turning becomes obscured and we end up seeing simply what is in front of us. As Iris Marion Young and others have pointed out, the social positioning of gender, class, race, age, and ability affect how we inhabit space. For Ahmed, we make sense of space by following certain pathways, often those that are "well-trodden" by others coming before us. These paths constitute lines of direction that point us towards certain ways of thinking and being in the world. Directions, Ahmed points out, are not only about the "where" we are going, but also tell us "how" we are to get there. She writes:

> It is not, then, that bodies simply have a direction, or that they follow directions, in moving this way or that. Rather, in moving this way rather than that, and moving in this way again and again, the surfaces of bodies *in turn* acquire their shape. Bodies are "directed" and they take the shape of this direction. (2006, 15–16)

In her book, Ahmed wants to think about life experiences that disorient us, that teach us to turn around and reorient toward what may have been part of a background or what felt initially like it was out of our reach. She says, "By bringing what is "behind" to the front, we might queer phenomenology by creating a new angle . . . To queer phenomenology is to offer a different 'slant' to the conception of orientation itself" (2006, 4). Ahmed claims that these moments of disorientation, while frequently disturbing at first, can also become "vital." Indeed, being lost can open up new directions and sensibilities that otherwise would escape our attention.

I too am interested in spatial disorientation, in experiences that "slant" our habitual perceptions and therefore open up other experiences of proximity and exchange. In this sense, my current project shares many of Ahmed's concerns, and I find myself pulled toward her discussions of moments that "throw" the body from its perceptual ground. As both Merleau-Ponty and Ahmed point out, we only begin to understand our orientations when we experience disorientation. Contact improvisation embraces moments of disorientation, both the physical experiences of being off balance and the psychic experience of not knowing what comes next. I find that the experience of teaching people to explore new directions can tell us a lot about our habitual orientations. As we all know too well, American culture focuses almost exclusively on what is ahead of us. Politicians, governments, and various other institutions claim to be "forward thinking," and we are encouraged to leave the past (with its mounds of garbage and last year's fashions) behind us. When my college students enter the studio, I can see the strain in their eyes from spending so much time in front of the various screens that rule their lives. Often I send them moving briskly through the space, shifting directions and facings to try and shake up their habitual orientations. Another way to do this is to replace the sense of sight with attention to other tactile and proprioceptive sensations. Sometimes I ask people to fall backwards, or move in a direction where they can no longer rely on their sight to navigate their descent to the floor.

One of the fundamental skills in Contact is learning how to give and support weight through one's back. This fairly simple task requires that we first cultivate an awareness of our backs, including the back of our skulls. Attending to what we cannot see, but can only feel, is not a "natural" or even comfortable situation for many people. Twenty-first century postindustrial Western culture has so

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prioritized the visual and fetishized the textual that other ways of being now take considerably longer to develop than they did when I first started teaching twenty years ago. On the other hand, the slightest shift in attention from front to back can lead to extraordinary results. When I ask a group of people, be they adolescent girls, college students, or teachers at a public institution for special needs kids (all of whom I taught this past semester), to lie down on the floor and feel their backs release into gravity, their experiences can border on the euphoric. Awaking layers of sensation with touch and weight can be remarkably reassuring. Moving through our back space, that is moving without seeing where we are going, however, can be scary, especially at first. There is a certain satisfaction in becoming aware of one's "backspace," not only because it opens up new experiences of perception, but also because attending to the presence of what we feel behind us can produce a useful perspective on what is in front of us. The clarity of our future directions depends a lot on recognizing the footprints of our past. In fact, this essay, with its focus on the evolution of dance studies and its relationship with the development of phenomenology over the past thirty years, has done just that for me.

This is a particularly salient moment for me to reflect on that relationship. Thirty years after my first brush with Merleau-Ponty, I find myself looking at contemporary embodiment through a lens much indebted to his work. My interest in backspace is part of *Gravity Matters*, a new project that looks at contemporary embodiment after 9/11, focusing on the corporeal dynamic embedded in a pervasive cultural rhetoric of falling at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Over the past several years I have found myself thinking more deeply about gravity—both the phenomenological experience of one's weight because of the earth's pull, and also the theoretical implications of being grounded in the midst of all the physical and psychic turmoil at the beginning of the twenty-first century. I am intrigued by how gravity is connected to falling, disability, and even death (having the same etymological root as "grave"), as well as a sense of profundity, rootedness, and an inherent connection to the earth. I am also aware of how many younger people (who grew up in the wake of 9/11) feel a bizarre sense of dislocation as their lives become increasingly implicated in the weightless exchanges on the Internet.

Influenced by my thirty years in contact with phenomenology, this new work is based on a conviction that there is a connection between how we think about the world and how we move through it. I draw from my experiences in teaching and training bodies across many identity categories (including race, gender, age, class, and ability) and my sense that something is going on in these bodies (in a way that crosses over differences but does not homogenize them) that I want to explore. My research began with the following questions: (1) How are our bodies affected by images of falling buildings, falling bodies, falling economies, and falling governments? and (2) What are the physical implications of repeated evocations of stock markets "diving" or in "free fall," businesses "failing," or the housing market "plunging"? I ask these questions both in order to underline the importance of embodied experience in constructing theories of cultural meaning and because I want to think seriously about the somatic practices that might help us survive and revise these cultural metaphors of failure and doom. *Gravity Matters* is situated in a field of inquiry that I would call "engaged corporeal phenomenology," for it is both grounded in the interconnections between individual responsiveness and communal resonance, and mobilized by thinking deeply about other people's bodies through the intermediary of my own.

Notes

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1. See Martin Heidegger's writings, especially *Being and Time*, as well as his essays in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971). See Edmund Husserl's *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), as well as the collection *Husserl*

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at the Limits of Phenomenology, edited by Leonard Lawlor and Bettina Bergo (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002).

2. See the Works Cited below for examples of their work.

3. See Peggy Orenstein's *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

4. See for instance, Marcia Siegel's collection *At the Vanishing Point: A Critic Looks at Dance* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1973), and Deborah Jowitt's *Dance Beat: Selected Views and Reviews, 1967–1976* (New York: M. Dekker. 1977) and *The Dance in Mind: Profiles and Reviews 1977–83* (with photographs by Lois Greenfield; Boston: D.R. Godine, 1985).

5. See Michael Kirby' collection *New Theatre: Performance Documentation* (New York: New York University Press, 1974).

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