

Embodied Philosophy in Dance: Gaga and Ohad Naharin's Movement Research

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Einav Katan's *Embodied Philosophy in Dance* presents a phenomenological reading of Gaga, the movement practice elaborated by Batsheva Dance Company's artistic director, Ohad Naharin, and employed as a daily training and research practice by Batsheva and many professional and amateur dancers around the world.

Katan's work is praiseworthy for its gesture of layering definitions of Gaga throughout the book. As the title informs, Gaga is first of all an instruction-based method that Naharin utilizes to explore and combine movement (he now defines it as a "toolbox"). Thus, it is a research practice that defines and distinguishes "tonalities of feelings" (50) that dancers experience as a creative "process of growth" (26). This book offers a journey through the somatic, emotional, and cognitive experience of Gaga, especially to those who are not familiar with the transformative and generative force of dance research practice. The first part of the book, "Embodied Philosophy in Dance: Introduction," seeks to affirm the legitimacy of dance as knowledge and thinking, which is a fundamental assumption in dance scholarship. Addressing readers who are more familiar with the Western philosophical tradition of phenomenology and aesthetics than with dance studies literature, Katan sets the stage for a consideration of Gaga as a "body of ideas" that works as "an excellent point of access for reflecting on the cognitive aspects of dancing, and the interaction of body and mind" (18).

Focusing on perception and its interaction with imagination as sources of cognition in dance practice, part 2, "The Sensual Emphasis of Gaga," takes on an idea integral to Naharin's research, namely, the discovery and transmission of the moving body's sensuality. Here, Katan articulates the cognitive responses triggered by the vocabulary utilized by Gaga teachers. Katan explores how the notorious "instructive metaphor," "Float!" (the title of

chapter 5), enhances the dancer's awareness of gravity and energy, generating imagery to which the dancer can refer in order to reactivate sensorial experience. Katan claims that in this process of physical actualization of a verbal metaphor, dancers affirm their individuality. This process, however, is debatable: during Gaga intensives, participants tend to move alike and (inadvertently or otherwise) try to mimic a certain Gaga or Batsheva style. Katan's phenomenological/philosophical inquiry does not attend to this tendency, but rather to the ideational principles of Gaga.

The final chapters of part 2 provide an entry point to Naharin's creative process as a "perceptual work in which sensuality plays a constitutive part" (51). According to Katan, Gaga draws on sensation; thus, Naharin's choreographies can be read as generators of sensation. However, it is difficult to ascertain the specificities of the "phenomenological method of Gaga" (the title of chapter 9) that distinguishes it from other somatic research practices that rely on the dancer's combined sensorial awareness and intentionality.

Part 3, "The Mental Emphasis of Gaga," analyzes Gaga as a strategy to direct moods and addresses the relation between instructor and respondent. Framing her analysis around Heidegger's concepts of *Stimmung* and *Dasein*, Katan explains that the Gaga teacher functions as a "mood instructor" (113). Stimulated by the verbal directions designed to trigger a joint body-mind response, the dancer develops a practice of "self-regulation" meant to enhance the fluidity of movement and energy (91). Katan goes on to elaborate a definition of Gaga as a creative and hermeneutical process for the development of a perceptual, mental, and physical "attunement" within a dancer's control, combining Gadamer's hermeneutical approach and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception. This definition leads to an idea central to Katan's conceptualization of Gaga and of Batsheva's bodies. The stream of instructions requires the dancer to move in "... a state of attentiveness, mental as well as physical. In it, attention is directed to all possible aspects of sensing. The eyes are open and calm; there is no concrete focus of the gaze. However, although the gaze is calm, it is ready to direct its focus immediately following the signal" (124). Katan eventually argues that the Gaga

practitioner exercises individual agency in the attunement process of interpreting instructions and responding intentionally.

Confirming a doubt that emerges at the end of part 1, this latter claim is often contradicted by the homogeneity of movement quality and energy in Gaga classes. Katan strategically addresses this issue in part 4, “Gaga: Physical Practice of Intelligence.” Attentiveness connects the inner world of imagination to external reality. Thus, the process of attunement is also attunement to the environment. In order to “play with concrete present energies” and dynamics, dancers challenge instructions and individual inquiry in order to attune to the general mood of the class (144). This explains the idea of collective “groove” in Naharin’s works.

The dancers of the *Batsheva Dance Company* become one with the rhythm of their movements since rhythm is the capacity to feel, follow, and direct movements. ... The flow of body-mind synchronization and the constant attunement between concrete information and detached representation make the work of dance effortless. Concentrating on the feeling of movement, and following its rhythm, dancers do not have to overwork the dance. (155)

According to Katan, this process of attunement is what makes Batsheva’s virtuosity more than a mode of “mere ‘show-off’” (163) and instead a practice of knowledge. This topic becomes the focus of the final section, “The Moving Forms of Dancing Gaga.” Referring to Naharin’s work, *Three*, Katan identifies virtuosity within the attentiveness cultivated through Gaga and specifies that “the audience has to be attentive as well” because “the dancers’ movements do not have a point of reference by which they can be easily interpreted. For that reason, choreographies that are based on Gaga have a broader philosophy” (175). This raises a series of problems. Can Gaga be considered only from a phenomenological perspective? Is movement in Gaga “a semblance of meaning” (176) because—besides being comprised of an

uncodified vocabulary—its ultimate goal is to “realize the arousal of a feeling as belonging to the movement, rather to personal integration within the world” (189)? If so, is the political removed from the practice of Gaga? Is intentionality only a hermeneutical praxis? Does a choreography exhaust itself in the bodily design and transmission of a feeling?

Likely meant to introduce the form as a philosophical practice to non-dance scholars, *Embodied Philosophy in Dance* presents Gaga through generalizations or universalized concepts rather than through specific, historically and culturally situated principles. For instance, the scene of the Batsheva Dance Company dancers (whom Katan has followed closely for years) starting their practice in the morning resonates with training in somatic techniques or improvisation by other companies.

During practice ... their beings change modes. They stand up and are ready to move. Ohad Naharin, the teacher of the class, gives an instruction to float—immediately, the vertebrae move away from one another, the arms are lifted slightly, and their entire skeleton seems to hold itself and to elevate flesh gently. Due to a delicate change of physical attitude, the inner organs find an internal feeling of easiness; the limbs seem to be independent, the space in the joints becomes noticed. (43)

For future investigations, it would be productive to historicize Gaga in relation to the tradition of somatics and movements that emphasize the “discovery of feelings,” such as early twentieth-century modern dance. Some other questions left open in Katan’s book concern her argument about Gaga as an access to dance as “embodied philosophy,” universal and generalizable: how do the global status of Gaga and its system of certification for students and teachers (namely, its franchise) affect the practice and the reception of Gaga-based choreographies? How do the “global” bodies of the practitioners affect it as an “embodied philosophy”? A recent PhD study that addresses this and related

questions is Meghan Quinlan's (2016) "Gaga as Politics: A Case Study of Contemporary Dance Training"; it engages with Gaga as a practice situated in the Israeli context and in a neoliberal economy that trains student-practitioners to be competitive in the global dance market. Quinlan's framework convincingly addresses the homogeneity among practitioners in Gaga classes, which is not acknowledged in Katan's study. The goal of providing general principles of a "dance philosophy" cannot but conceal the absence of difference in their result.

Although numerous articles have been written on Gaga in magazines and on websites, Katan's work offers the first book-length publication on the topic, integrating Debora Friedes Galili's 2016 article "Gaga: Moving beyond Technique with Ohad Naharin in the Twenty-First Century," which provided insights into the genesis, in-class practice, and vocabulary of Gaga. While the book could have benefited from a more direct conversation

with dance scholarship, Katan's *Embodied Philosophy in Dance* is a useful guide for dancers from all disciplines who want to increase their awareness in the studio. Moreover, this book is a recommended introductory reading for those who still underestimate the legitimacy of dance as a source of knowledge.

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Works Cited

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