WHY I STILL TALK ABOUT EAST GERMAN DANCE: 34 YEARS AFTER THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL

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The last time I visited Bulgaria was in December 1989, one month after the Fall of the Berlin Wall. Together with three other soloists from the Tanzbühne Leipzig – the dance ensemble of the University Leipzig – we performed two short choreographies at the sixths chamber dance festival in Gorna Oryahovitza near the old royal city Veliko Tarnovo. From what we could see, our East German modernist approach was at odds with the folk material that the other companies performed[1]. This was not surprising to us, given that we developed our modern dance company out of a folkdance ensemble that adhered to Socialist Realist choreographic mandates. Yet, the difference between these approaches was indicative of the changes that were happening in all socialist countries. East Germany would cease to exist ten months later with the so-called reunification of both Germanies on October 3rd, 1990. Bulgaria transitioned to a parliamentary democracy with the election in June 1990. We barely made it through Romania on our way home by train amidst the violent civil unrest and the Ceaușescus were executed on December 25, 1989.

I grew up in a society with a centralized power structure that pretended to be built upon the utopia of decentralized agency. My interest in the political labor of dance stems from the loss of and subsequent restructuring of my native culture after the fall of the Berlin Wall more than thirty years ago, which required, on my part, radical shifts between different institutional and national approaches to dance. Since then, I have come to see agency as strategically and temporarily located, rather than a centralized or decentralized locus of power from which we might act independently or make free choices. Past and recent political and cultural shifts have drawn my interest to the ontological and epistemological potential of "in- between- ness"— the being between political systems (from socialism to global capitalism), between discursive traditions (continental philosophy versus US identitarian politics),

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1 For a discussion of Modernism in a Bulgarian context see, Georgieva, Angelina. Modern Dance in Bulgaria in the 1920s. Margitta Zonewa. Translated by Yoana Stoyanova. In: Homo Ludens 2000–2021. Selected Theatre Essays. Homo Ludens Foundation. Sofiya, 2021.

between different institutional constructions of dance practice and theory (at research institutions, teaching colleges, vocational training institutions, and performances), and between the disciplined social body and its breakdown in moments of instinctual and autonomic physical response. In- between-ness interests me for the co- presence of different positions or a Foucaultian Heterotopia, but most importantly for the impossibility of inhabiting it. In other words, I am mostly interested in the temporariness of a stable position and hence the potential of in- between- ness to destabilize agency as neither decentralized nor centralized. This raises the following questions: When one works against or inside a dominant system and that system collapses, can there really be a momentary opportunity for the reinvention of agency itself? Or does the collapse leave only room for other agents to rush in and occupy the empty space, thus canceling out the potential for a momentary state of in- between- ness? What does agency become after the collapse has yielded change? What is thus the price for evacuating the center or dispelling the myth of the inherent democratic and decolonial value of decentralization? And what is the role of choreography in response to these questions? In my past work, I investigated the first three shifts and the in- between- ness that I named earlier.

One of the main labors of my book *The Body of the People* was the reevaluation of folk material and its utilization for the creation of an East German collective body. The idea of individual genius, so important to Romanticism in Germany and later a formational trope of Modernism, found its collective counterpart in the concept of the original and the instinctive creative capacity of the *Volk*[2]. Folk songs, fairy tales, and legends were established as artistic products in their own right and were specifically freed from the scrutiny of reason. Even though this attention elevated folk into the realm of artistry, it also situated folk outside the realm of critical evaluation. This classification of folk as original, natural, and instinctively creative still defines our modern reception of it. In her interdisciplinary survey of dance and physical culture in Germany in the nineteenth century, Inge Baxmann notes a turn away from individual physicality towards an emphasis on group movements[3]. These collective movements were synchronized through rhythm, and rhythm also

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2 The German word „Volk“ is often translated as „people,“ but it is a much more complex concept that evokes folk, national identification, connection to the land, and locality.

3 Baxmann, Inge. Mythos: Gemeinschaft. München: Fink, 2000, p. 236.

became the focus in collective structuring through dance and movement with the beginning of the twentieth century. National Socialists did not invent the connection between dance and national expression, but they were able to utilize and manipulate existing ideas and an extensive network of physical culture.

Given the appropriation and abuse of German folk tradition under the Nazi regime, any employment of folk after World War II in the Soviet Occupation Zone and subsequently in East Germany seems surprising[4]. But artistic developments in East Germany were determined by the Soviet Union, and it had already promoted folk as the most important cultural expression of the Soviet people[5]. East German officials focused on folk material not only for its preservationist or traditional value but also for its potential to manufacture

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4 With its connotation of a rural setting and nature, folk was easily positioned into the Nazi ideology of 'blood and soil' and thus became an integral part of Nazi propaganda. Lilian Karian and Marion Kant establish that folk dance was incorporated into dance during the Nazi era but note that it was not the focus of the invention for a truly German stage dance (Karina, L., M. Kant. Hitler's Dancers. Berghahn Books, 2003, p. 87). Still, folk dances were performed regularly and extensively outside theatrical institutions and at the annual harvest festival at the Bückeberg, which had up to one million participants and was the largest recurring festival in Nazi Germany.

5 The Soviet Union undertook its own re-evaluation of art—and dance—after the October Revolution in 1917. Russian formalism was repeatedly attacked—beginning with Leon Trotsky's infamous essay 'Literature and Revolution' in 1924—and socialist realism was sanctioned as the official method for all artistic expression in the wake of the first Congress of the Soviet Writers' Union in 1934. Putting art into the ideological service of the complex nation-state of the Soviet Union led to an increasing focus on the folk tradition of its many republics. Igor Moiseyev's dance company became the template for all state folk dance companies in the world. Founded in 1937, it was most famous for its reinterpretation of songs and dances by the Don Cossacks, for its Red Army dance, and for its choir ensemble, later named the Alexandrov Ensemble, which started to perform folk songs and dances as early as 1928 and famously in August 1948 in East Berlin. For an analysis of the company's specific choreographic style and function, see: Shay, Anthony. Choreographic Politics. State Folk Dance Companies, Representation and Power. Shay also provides the first overview of a variety of state-sponsored dance companies from different countries. He rightly points out that these companies merge folk and ballet vocabulary for the stage rather than simply restage existing folk dances.

localized and national community identifications. East Germany, constructing itself out of the war-torn German nation, depended on the creative powers of folk culture. Whereas the beginning of the socialist state saw a direct employment of East German folk vocabulary and dances, during subsequent years folk became a source for the development of new dances through the borrowing of already-abstracted folk vocabularies and principles from transnational folk. Fredric Jameson's assurance that 'all class consciousness of whatever type is Utopian insofar as it expresses the unity of a collective,' and that 'such collectivities are themselves figures for the ultimate concrete collective life of an achieved Utopian or classless society'[6] reflects the East German government's official shift of emphasis from a national to a global utopia at the end of the 1980s. This shift was intended to move East Germany closer to its communist goal; however, as it turned out, it foreshadowed the end of the socialist state and the loss of that utopia. From the exclusive utilization of folk during the early years of its existence to the abstract use of transnational folk at the end, East German officials endeavored to restructure society through choreography. Yet the intrinsic nature of folk was at bottom incongruent with East Germany's Marxist-Leninist ideology, because folk emphasized the regional or national and differentiated people into clearly gendered individuals. Marxism-Leninism, on the other hand, imagined universal social structures and equal subjects in a classless society. Throughout its existence, East Germany struggled with this contradiction, and in the end, this contradiction became one more factor in the fall of the socialist state.

Let me shift with this brief historical evaluation to Randy Martin's notion of the mobilization of multicultural bodies, which he developed in the 1990s partly in response to the loss of the communist utopia with the downfall of the socialist block. In his seminal publication *Critical Moves*, Randy Martin provides us with a definition of what he called 25 years ago 'multicultural bodies' and we would probably refer to as 'diverse bodies' today. He sees such bodies as 'composite, instanced by immediate and mediated associations, and not amalgamations of fixed identities within stable group memberships. Although what theses bodies produce is subject to appropriation and commodification, bodies' specific forms of mutual interdependence generate a social surplus that leaves its mark in the configurations of space and time in which we live. It is toward the elaboration of society itself and against the

6 Jameson, Fredric. The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981, p. 291.

subordination of social life to domination and exploitation that these differences make a difference or create a politics.'[7]

Martin warns against a reading of social movements that separates the goal from the action that achieves it or as he puts it 'a concept of politics that separates agency and history, two moments of any political activity that are, in practice, irreducibly interconnected'[8]. He explains that such separation would take the movement out of ideas. 'If, for example, through pronouncement of the collapse of socialism the most comprehensive efforts to date to counter capitalism are seen as coming to naught, then the unambiguity of the past renders the present flatly negative, a blank slate without the means to write on it.' In order to overcome this stagnant position, Martin suggests rethinking activism and theory by imagining 'politics from within mobilization, instead of considering power as an external force that seeks to move people… This orientation shifts a key theoretical and political question from how to mobilize people to how to **recognize** what any given instance of mobilization could produce.'[9] At the same time, he warns to only recognize resistive moves because they 'assume the perspective of that which blocks an offensive movement, it already cedes much to the forces of social control. Control rather than change becomes the principal problematic of society'[10]. This foreshadows a necessary critique of popular notions of politics exclusively tied to resistive movements that have been influencing popular discourses in dance and art.

Martin suggests that 'dance can contribute to the larger political discussion… [because] both choreography and dancing remain practices that present their own amalgamation of structure and agency'[11]. Martin refers here to an engagement with a choreographic structure and the dancers' collective or individual agencies. And for Martin 'critical dance studies can develop an account of their interpenetration of structure and agency that makes palpable the radical contingency of these two analytic terms, without losing sight of the appropriation of surplus that necessitates a critique of domination'[12].

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7 Martin, Randy. Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics. Durham & London: Duke University Press Books,1998, p. 212.

8 Ibidem, p. 11.

9 Ibidem, p. 12.

10 Ibidem, p. 13.

11 Ibidem, p. 213.

12 Ibidem, p. 216.

As Franko states in the special issue of Dance Research Journal on Randy Martin's impact on our field, he sees such understanding of dance and choreography in Martin's work as a thinking 'about movement outside social systematicity, and, to a certain degree, even outside aesthetics. In place of the aesthetic [Martin's] work ultimately posited the kinestheme, a relative of Foucault's episteme. That is, dance itself, in [Martin's] terms, is the working theory of practice where movement and the social intertwine or interweave, which practice exists in a sphere of analysis that is shown to have been lacking its own terms all along'[13]. Both scholars thus emphasize the possibility of knowledge and social change through dancing and dance theorization.

And even after the financial crisis of 2008, Martin asserts this stance with his reorganization of the concept of the derivative, which allows him to expand on concepts of movement, mobility, and collectivity, but also on institutionalization, ephemerality and utopia[14]. Martin reorganizes the concept of the derivative, which as a financial instrument provides a risk insurance or hedging against future financial speculations or market shifts by bundling disparate financial entities, such as interest rates, assets, or currencies and which can be traded independently of the actual value of its bundled entities. Martin sees a similar bundling of seemingly disparate entities in other areas outside of economy, for instance in the way that so-called identity is a bundling of personal, cultural, and political entities, where then aspects of that identity can be valued and circulated beyond the actual individual[15]. Explained by a brief discourse into classical, modernist, postmodern, and contemporary dance history, Martin then sees some dance – such as postmodern dance, hip hop, and movement originating in boarding culture – also practicing derivative logic in their decentered, post-colonial social kinesthetic and lateral mobility. 'The underlying sources of pedestrian, slave, and indigenous bodily practices are decolonized from their initial terms and settings to refigure those who by tradition would be assigned to the populations at risk into crafting corporal economies where risk counts as its own reward. A risky move is granted immediate value by the creative ensemble, it need not await final

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13 Franko, Mark. Dance and the Political: States of Exception. – Dance Research Journal 38, 1/2 (Summer-Winter 2006), 3-18.

14 See: Siegmund, Gerald, Stefan Hölscher, eds. Dance, Politics & Co-Immunity. Zürich: Diaphanes, 2013.

15 Martin, Randy. Op. cit., p. 211.

delivery precisely in the manner that a derivative affords a price on a good or service that has not yet been made or come due'[16]. Re-appropriating the damaging financial instrument of the derivative as a constructive force – a 'generative derivativeness'[17] – in dance allows Martin to powerfully demystify the 'trap of ephemerality and location' that has haunted the study of dance for centuries. 'Performances are, after all, derived from many other times, of rehearsal, of training, of touring; and they gather together movements from myriad locales, experiences, sources and recalibrate and recompose them for a given intervention. Seen from this expanded field, dance is already everywhere.'[18] This omnipresence of dance speaks to a certain understanding of mobilization as a concept that returned to reassert social energies lurking within the derivative.

And as Franko states, in Martin's understanding, dance can even touch utopia[19], because dance can creatively mobilize and bundle elements out of these vastly different experiences, localities, times – even if they had a negative impact on our bodies. 'Valuing the ways in which we are linked together without being one, that we share certain sensibilities of moving together without needing to model or imitate someone opens conceptions of sovereignty as self-production that just might serve as a momentary realization of the future in the present'.[20] Martin's persistent and determined investigation of the codependent relationship between the choreographic and the social thus provides a constantly evolving and affirmative model for social mobilization. What Martin proposes is not a system defined by categories but by relations, or what I have called 'in- between- ness' and this is why dance and choreography with their **structuring** and **theorizing** of embodiment are so important.

I started my book *The Body of the People: East German Dance since 1945* with a description of archival work at the Sportsmuseum in Leipzig, where

16 Ibidem, p. 222.

17 Martin, Randy. A Precarious Dance, a Derivative Sociality. – TDR. The Drama Review 56 (4), 2012, p. 72.

18 Ibidem, p. 77.

19 'Performance,' he wrote, 'is utopian precisely in its intimation of an entirely different world that flashes through this one'. See: Martin, Randy. Critical Moves, p. 106. See also the section of his essay 'Toward a Narrative of Context in Dance' entitled 'A Utopia of the Real', pp. 95-103.

20 Martin, Randy. A Precarious Dance, a Derivative Sociality, p. 78.

I was researching socialist mass dance events. Although the museum had been struggling to survive since 1990 when East Germany became part of a united Germany, it was finally undergoing renovations. Thus, I was placed by the archivist at a wobbly table in a drafty hallway, where he deposited a pile of binders in front of me. I sat surrounded by official memos and unofficial correspondences relating to the bygone era of the German Democratic Republic, while a construction worker opened the door repeatedly, pushing a wheelbarrow in and out to dump old bricks. Each time the door opened, I flung my arms over the flimsy Thermofax and carbon copies to prevent them from flying away, physically protecting the dingy remnants of my expired country of origin. I felt I was not only saving them from the January gusts. I was protecting these papers from time, from the waning institution of the archive that stored them, from public neglect, erasure, and nostalgia, and from my own conflicted academic and personal stance toward them. The more I lay atop those papers, involuntarily pressing my body against their cushiony, fading surfaces, the more I felt doubt about having to engage with these banal relics of the country in which I grew up.

I am reminded of this physical response to institutional, national, and professional memories because it was the first time I consciously attempted to disentangle all the layering of memorization and to understand their choreographic structuring. This disentanglement has never just been a study of a distant or faded past. Rather, the repression of memory, the erasure, the neglect, the devaluation of this past is as much part of the remembering as the discovery, remembrance, archivization, and restaging. These contradictions make the labor of historicizing possible and valuable; to move beyond preservation towards a future imagination and manifestation. These contradictions also give space to conversations and choreographies with radically different memories that seem to compete against each other, or what Michael Rothberg calls *Multidirectional Memory* (2009) and Layla Zami *PerforMemory* (2020). It is important to find these connections and gaps between different memories, to move beyond comparisons of different memories into imaginations. Because physicalized imaginations are the only way that new generations will relate their experiences, joys, struggles, and traumata to histories that they didn't experience personally, enabling them to create what Marianne Hirsch labels *Postmemory*[21]. Generations who are

[21] Hirsch, Marianne. The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust. Columbia University Press, 2012.

removed from specific histories, such as the Cold War, the Holocaust, and socialism, can relate their contemporary struggles towards indigenous and minority rights, anti-racism and decolonization to more distant histories. New generations and we will instigate 'negotiations between communal and individual experiences, past and present, and […] maintain the relevance of history in light of urgent contemporary unfoldings'[22]. Me remembering my body on top of the papers at the archive, confronting my country's physicality in a global context, and now writing about these memories towards new work are part of these negotiations.

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[22] Oksman, Tahneer. Postmemory and the 'Fragments of a History We Cannot Take In'. – WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly, Volume 48, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring/Summer 2020, p. 134.