TanzΔrchiv Berlin

"I danced out all my anger at unknown things and at myself for trying to know them"[1]

Anna Chwialkowska

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Introduction

This essay is a distillation of a deeper inquiry into Katherine Dunham (1909-2006), Pear Primus (1919-1994) and Cynthia Novack (1947-1996), who, besides being performers, dancers, choreographers and artists, have produced an astonishing amount of written work in the field of anthropology. This work is barely known to either dance researchers or anthropologists alike. Their written oeuvre, as I intend to claim here, presents alternative and valuable ways to narrate dance history: namely through the method of autoethnographic writing.

I will begin with a contextualization of their writings against the backdrop of the history of ethnography. In a second step, I attempt to briefly outline their own situatedness that led to those texts. Finally, I will argue how their narrative strategies are of value to the contemporary historiography of dance.

Meeting Dunham

I first stumbled upon Katherine Dunham while writing my master's thesis in 2018. I was browsing through the short but dense and comprehensive *Introduction on the Anthropology of Dance* by Neveau Kringelbach and Skinner (2012). In a section about the history of this genre they mentioned that:

"…it was only when dancers became anthropologists in their own right that dance took on new life as a topic of study in anthropology. One of the under-acknowledged pioneers was African American dancer Katherine Dunham (...). Dance, she thought, was the ultimate form of embodied ethnography." (5)

Though it might seem completely obvious to us now that dancers are the adequate people to be researching dance (anthropology), however, it wasn't that common in the history of anthropology. I started to delve into dancers-anthropologists' work and luckily found many women I have never heard of during my undergraduate or graduate studies of anthropology.

Introduction, part II

Katherine Dunham studied Anthropology in the 1930s at the University of Chicago, being one of the fewer African Americans that were allowed to do so. She did an extensive field research in the 1930s, first along the Maroons in Jamaica and later in Haiti about voudun dances. Latter led to her most known book, *Island Possessed*, published in 1969, which beside her research on dances comprises a vast reflection on Haitian politics at that time. She founded the first all-black dance company (The

[1] Dunham 1969: 234

Negro Dance Group) in 1933 that was successfully touring throughout the world, and she eventually decided to give up her academic career for the sake of dancing.

Pearl Primus obtained her formal dance education in 1941 with the New Dance Group in New York and began to study educational sociology at Columbia University soon after in 1946. She did her first field research for two months as a cotton crop picker in the Southern States, which shook her up and mobilized her political activism. In 1949, she got a scholarship to undertake research on dances in Liberia, Nigeria and Belgian Congo. After her return, she performed, taught and established a format that she called “lecture demonstrations” – a format that might be known today as lecture performance – on African dances. She received her PhD in Anthropology from New York University in 1978.

Cynthia Cohen Bull (aka Novack) is known to dance researchers through her acclaimed monography *Sharing the Dance* (1990). The book does not only represent a comprehensive analysis on Contact Improvisation, but is, at the same time, writing dance history. She received her PhD in Anthropology from Columbia University in 1986. Novack showed us that there are, over time, ‘cultural trends in movement styles’ that what moves us as dancers and audience has its source in the webs of connection in which we move. Yet, she illustrates most provocatively that the discourse surrounding dance in terms such as "natural" is as culturally and historically specific as the dancing itself (Sklar 1997: 111). She has danced in the company of her husband Richard Bull since 1978.

Autoethnography

In their vivid writing and field work, which reaches back as far as the 1930s (especially Dunham’s), I would sometimes witness their struggles in the field so close to my own and sometimes far away from that. Dancers who are also doing field work are confronted with serious insider-outsider tensions, as they find themselves in the predicament of playing the role of the protagonist within their own study, their own story. Like the choreographer who simultaneously creates and interprets her own work (Davida 2012: 2).

This is why some of their works vary from autobiographical to cross-genre, to multi-perspectival, blurring the lines between ethnographies and choreographies – and have been at best labeled "experimental" and discredited at worst by the scholarly canon (Richter 2010). This exclusionary dynamic shows parallels to the treatment of progressive female ethnographies in the past (Behar/Gordon 1995). A style that can definitely be designated to their writings is autoethnography, departing from their personal experiences during field research. Being dancers researching about dance, their own bodies have been intricately involved in the process as instrument in ethnographic research.

Autoethnography is a method of reflexive writing in ethnography that involves the experiences and thoughts of the author, especially during field research. According to Adams et. al (2014), “Autoethnographic stories are artistic and analytic demonstrations of how we come to know, name and interpret personal and cultural experience. (…) In doing autoethnography, we confront ‘the tension between insider and outsider perspectives, between social practice and social constraint.’” (1). It is only through the exchange with other participants of social situations that the knowledge process can become thicker. (Davies 2007: 228).

However, personal accounts have been long dismissed in ethnographic writing for the sake of maintaining a scientific objectivity. Traditionally, in ethnographic writing “[t]he worst sin was to be

'too personal'". (Behar 1996: 12-13). It wasn't until the Writing Culture debate in the 1980s that this lack of situatedness of the author has been widely questioned.[2]

Therefore, reading Kathrine Dunham's and Pearl Primus' texts has been intriguing, as they have been published well before the Writing Culture Debate. This is also why I find it relevant to highlight the work of these women who set methodological milestones by exploring dance (auto)ethnographically and thus writing dance history with both their bodies and their writings.

Some of the written accounts of Dunham, Primus and Novack express private emotions (like the quote in the title, which stems from Dunham's frustration when failing at performing a voudun dance ritual), are highly empathetic towards others in the field (Novack's approach to interviews, e. g. around the topic of sensuality in contact improv). They furthermore acknowledge and mention their own personal relationships they build and retain with their informants (Dunham even exposes her several romantic relationships). This, consequently, made them more sensitive towards political power and authorities (Novack describes sexism in ballet through her own autoethnographic insides), as well as to the issues that arose in the field that relate to their gender (Primus was acknowledged as a man by the Watusi people of Ruanda in order to learn the dances forbidden to women).

In a larger context of telling the history of dance, I would like to argue how their accounts can be used as methodological tools for this, departing from a single individual that participates and observes a specific form of dance, or a movement practice in a specific social constellation:

1) By including both insider and outsider perspectives, which enables the understanding of dance within a context comprising social relationships, authorities, power and gender dynamics.
2) It allows the readers to be close to a body that undergoes a learning experience, the steps it has to take to acquire knowledge and all the entailing elements to be "knowledgeable" in a certain dance ritual, technique or movement practice. We accompany a process of embodied knowledge in the making.
3) As the research is done with and through the body the situatedness of the researcher becomes visceral (or "carnal" as Wacquant would say (2007)).
4) The own disclosure and honesty about emotions that the researcher expresses reveal the production process of field research and writing as we become aware what kind of individual creates ideas about the dance and makes their situatedness transparent.
5) Acknowledging dance as a mode of research itself (Buckland 1999), ethnography is being revolutionized through the means of a body that reveals a social context through dancing / moving.

Bibliography:

[2] As in other social sciences in that era, the Writing Culture debate (named after a publication by Clifford/Marcus 1986) was influenced by postmodernist, postcolonial and feminist critique of that time. This volume collected contributions from a variety of authors that criticized ethnographic writing as another literary genre that functioned therefore through literary styles and methods. However important, the same Writing Culture discourse was criticized by feminist scholars as it seemed to ignore work that has been done reflexively already for decades by female writers and researchers who were themselves part of the social field they observed (Abu-Lughod 1991).

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