

The commensurability of bodies across cultural borders

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Abstract. The following proposal is for a paper that will explore issues pertaining to perception, embodiment, behavioral patterns and enculturation in relation to performer training that cross cultural borders. I am interested in the moment of embodiment and the construction of embodied knowledge in relation to performer training, particularly in an intercultural context.

Alphonzo Lingis says in *Foreign Bodies* [1] that in essence our bodies seek equivalence, a postural schema that is constructed through recognition and adaptability to a local environment. He says:

“In the contagion of schemas of posture and movement, corporeality becomes one, common; each of us is for himself or herself and for others a variant on sentient corporeality”, (ibid. pp.12).

However, what is incorporated by such an understanding of a living, physical body changes across time and space and, while we might seek commonality this may be at the cost of condensing unfamiliar aspects of behaviour into that which is recognisable and in some way knowable.

The paper will explore whether we make assumptions about how bodies acculturate and embody cultural practices that are other than our bodies think and physically engage with the world in similar ways; certainly the term embodiment appears to have become a homogenized concept, whereas I intend to argue that the term requires careful usage and a distinction between that which is collective and that which is subjectively experienced.

The paper will draw specifically on my fieldwork in Bali, most recently in 2012. On this trip I interviewed dance/theatre performers who also teach non-Balinese (as well as Balinese) students, to discuss their observations and experiences of working with different cultural bodies. The research challenge for a participant observer, such as myself, is to construct a workable methodology that bridges what Crowther (1993) calls the abyss between embodied experience and textualising experience in critical terms.

Using my own experience of learning Topeng dance drama in Bali, I will examine the relationship between my acculturated learning - a knowing how - to notions of creating an embodied knowledge - a knowing that - and what this means in terms of performance that is ritually embedded within a culture. Topeng dance drama is a ritual form performed in both sacred and secular contexts in Bali but for the form to be ritually efficacious the performer needs to embody *taksu* - a spiritual energy given by the gods.

Key questions that I intend to examine in the paper are:

- Can a Western performer embody *taksu*?
- As a Western performer if I am unable to embody *taksu* - can I embody the Topeng form or is there a commensurable fictive body that I can inhabit (Lingis, 1994)?

- How do I textualise my knowing into a form of embodied knowledge?
- What are the cultural and philosophical implications of the process of knowing that I, as a Western performer, experientially explore?

REFERENCES

- [1] Alphonzo Lingis, *Foreign bodies*, Routledge, 1994.

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