

## When the Landscape Becomes Flesh: An Investigation into Body Boundaries with Special Reference to Tiwi Dance and Western Classical Ballet\*

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### Dance, Bodies, Ethnocentrism

Dance critic Judith Mackrell, in a 2003 review of *Körper* by German choreographer Sasha Waltz, claimed that “dance is always about bodies — how cleverly they function, how variously they move, how mysteriously they embody both solid matter and spirit” (2003: 32). While one may agree with her statement when it is situated within a context of Western theatre dance,<sup>1</sup> as indeed it is in this instance, I would emphasize strongly nevertheless that neither ‘dance’ nor ‘body’ can be accepted as universal concepts since they are both embedded within a typical ‘Western’ way of making sense of the world.

One can concur with medical anthropologists Margaret Lock and Nancy Scheper-Hughes when they said that “we may reasonably assume, that all people share at least some intuitive sense of the embodied self as existing apart from other individual bodies” (1996 [1990]: 45), or agree with sociologist Bryan Turner when he argued that some facts may be “peculiar to certain societies” but “there is a basic logic and theory to the social sciences which cannot be subsumed under a particular ethnic or cultural or historical label” (1994: 8).

This, however, does not preclude investigations into emic<sup>2</sup> conceptualizations of the dancing body. The remark made by anthropologist and ethnomusicologist John Blacking over 20 years ago that “generalisations about ‘dance’, ‘music’, ‘the body’, etc. must be regarded as provisional and be tested against the variety of systems and perceptions that people have invented and cultivated” (1982: 99) still holds true, and the need to investigate different structured movement systems in their specificities remains a current issue. It is only by going through such a process that cross-cultural constants, if they exist, can emerge and the implication for the experience of music/dance performance cross-culturally can be investigated. It is interesting that, from a dance perspective, the ethnocentricity of the body and of bodily actions is often ignored, even today when the basic assumption that there is no such a thing as a natural body given to us by nature, but rather that the body is shaped, constrained and even invented by society is *de rigueur*.<sup>3</sup> Dancers and dance researchers accustomed to working within Western settings somehow rarely question their assumption that they can understand all dancing bodies, even when these are foreign to them. Yet as anthropologist and semasiologist Drid Williams argued:

Where we wouldn't dream of attributing likeness of expression in human languages in the medium of sound to the similarities in human throats and vocal cords, there are

many who still don't hesitate to ascribe mutual understandability in the medium of human movement to superficial physical resemblance among human bodies (Williams 1996: 102).

Even if a posture, gesture or movement visually looks the same, one cannot necessarily assume that they are generated and conceptualized in the same way, or that they 'mean' the same thing. The meaning of dance is a complicated issue and I will not go into it in any depth here. My point is that, as Blacking put it, "dance styles, as symbols systems, do not necessarily have any specific social meanings" (1982: 94), and when individuals do give explicit meanings to gestures, one can never assume that the 'same' movements always mean the same thing in all circumstances. This is true intra-culturally and even more so cross-culturally.

Notions of verticality, for example, have been significant in a number of Western theatre dance genres. Ballet, for instance, is often discussed in terms of its Apollonian verticality because its technique is seen to resist gravity and the dancers' limbs are centred and aligned in such a way as to allow maximum stability and ease of movement, which flow from the body's vertical axis. Because ballet technique grew out of European court dance and developed as a "courtly spectacle to glorify and sanctify absolute monarchical power" (Thomas 2003: 95), it is commonly argued, too, that its training, technique and aesthetic reproduce the values and beliefs of the "owning classes" (cf. Adair 1992: 82-90). Verticality, then, is seen to have a political dimension. Dance scholar Roger Copeland, for example, argued in his discussion of ballet in Cuba that:

...the upright carriage of a ballet dancer's body seems to reflect the sort of pride exuded by a once colonized people now 'standing tall' and exerting an impact on international affairs that seems totally disproportionate to their actual size or military might (1978: 13).

Verticality is also often invoked when dealing with spirituality. The architecture of Christian churches, for example, is frequently interpreted as a reaching by humanity towards heaven. Ruth St Denis, one of the early pioneers of American modern dance, commented on verticality when she wrote, "my own body is the living Temple of all Gods. The God of Truth is in my upright spine" (cited in Desmond 2001: 261).

Verticality therefore is seen as representing both higher orders and control: control over one's own gravity and over other people. This can be seen not only within dance practice but also in everyday life, as for example in the discussion of "the male 'upright gait' of the German *bourgeoisie* in late 18th century" (Falk 1995: 95). This is very much in line with the general belief found through much of the romantic movement in literature, art and ideals, which granted Europeans of noble birth the right to 'stand tall' because they were 'born better'.<sup>4</sup> By extension, then, verticality for some becomes linked to Western hegemony.

While there is no doubt that one can look at verticality in this way, it is important also to remember that it is the result of human beings becoming bi-

pedal, and therefore it could signify humanity in contrast to a non-human state. If humanity is defined in relation to the agency and freedom of human beings, then one could argue that when, in 1983, the revolutionary leader Thomas Sankara, combining two local languages Mooré and Dioula, coined a new name — Burkina Faso, “the land of the upright people” — for the West African state of Upper Volta, erectness indicated democratic freedom.

Verticality, however, could be about something else altogether. The Tiwi of Melville and Bathurst Island, of North Australia, with whom I have been working since 1980, certainly praise a straight spine and a quality of walking, which they label as “walking flash,” but it has nothing to do with power or control. The vertical spine connects the human body to the trees with their clear lines once the grass has been burnt after the rainy season and it is this very clarity of line which is at the heart of Tiwi aesthetics (Grau 2000 and 2003).

### Dance Actions and the Embodiment of Worldviews

My theoretical and methodological approaches have grown out of the dance anthropology and anthropology of the body perspectives developed by John Blacking and his colleagues at the Queen’s University of Belfast in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>5</sup> In this perspective, dance is seen as a social fact, which exists and has meaning only through human interactions. Thus it reflects, at least in parts, ideologies and world-views. On the other hand, dance can also be used to explore and manipulate the social reality. As such it can influence people’s decision-making in other social contexts and occasionally be forerunner to political or other kinds of social actions. In this dual vision, dance is a door into a cultural framework and dance practices are “conceptualised as world views” to borrow dance ethnologist’s Allegra Fuller Snyder’s expression (1972: 222).

When discussing the female initiation schools of *vusha* and *domba* among the Venda of South Africa, for example, Blacking argued that:

The contrasting styles of dance movements in *vusha* and *domba* expressed precisely the symbolic content and educational intentions of the initiations schools (Blacking 1969). The individual dance movements of *vusha* were physically difficult to do, and so emphasised the new complexity of the nubile body, whilst the corporate movements of *domba* were physically easy to do but difficult to co-ordinate with others, emphasising the complexity of social life (1982: 95).

In a similar vein, my doctoral dissertation in 1983 and various subsequent publications (e.g. Grau 1993b, 1995, 1998) discussed in detail a group of 10 dances which can be labelled the kinship dances, a term first used by Jane Goodale (1971), because they show a specific kinship relationship between the dancer and the person for whom the dance is performed.<sup>6</sup> For the Tiwi, particular kinds of kin are linked to specific body parts and these are generally emphasized in the kinship dances: dancers, for example, may hold one or both legs with one or both hands, establishing that they are dancing for a matrilineal sibling, reinforcing thus through their movement a kinship relationship known to everyone, or indeed occasionally invoking one rarely acknowledged in everyday life.

Based on long-term ethnography<sup>7</sup> and analyses of over 200 dance events, I have interpreted these dances as kinship-in-action in the sense that their role within kinship practices was threefold: (1) they taught a very complex system to the youngsters by encoding it into their bodies; (2) they allowed people to remember not only contemporary but also past kinship relationships between individuals; and (3) they sanctioned the exploration and elaboration of kinship theories as new types of relationships could be investigated on the dance floor. Kinship ideology could be observed in other social actions, such as hunting or in daily interaction, which, for example made people sit together or, on the contrary, avoid each other, but through the kinship dances its articulation was at its most explicit and the dances can be described as a special language, a set of non-verbal communications about kinship.

### **Cross-cultural Comparisons: Tiwi Dance and Western Classical Ballet**

My intention in this article is to explore diverse understandings of the body and contrast different emic conceptualizations. The article will focus on the Tiwi, but will also refer to ballet, a Western theatre dance form I have been involved in for most of my life. I do realize that putting in parallel dancing bodies of such disparate people has to be done with caution, and I concur with anthropologist Michael Lambek when he argues that:

...in making cross-cultural comparisons we ought not to be comparing embodied practice in one society with concepts or theories in another, but practice with practice and thought with thought, or moving up a level of abstraction, their suitably historicized mutual constitution and interrelationships in the societies in question (1998: 105).

I will try to follow this advice by comparing two 21st-century people with vastly different histories, basing the comparison on observations, participations and discussions carried out over many decades. I think the confrontation between the two genres can raise interesting questions and open up new avenues for our understanding of dancing bodies.

Ballet is a theatre form with a documented history of about 350 years. It appeared at a specific historical moment in France, between 1661, when Louis XIV founded the Académie Royale de Danse, and 1674, by which time the system developed by Charles-Louis-Pierre de Beauchamps, the academy's first ballet master, was fully codified (Bourcier 1978: 115). Alternatively one could chose 1667 for the second bracket, the year Louis XIV signed a royal edict forbidding public representation of folk/regional dances (Adolphe, cited in Duroux 1993: 291) and thus gave ballet the hegemonic position that it still holds today. Ballet technique developed over the centuries to such an extent that only a few individuals with the right kind of bodies, stamina, mental strength, as well as artistic flair excel in it today. Through history, ballet dancers came to look upon their bodies as tools that can be stretched, bent, starved or whatever in order to push the boundaries of the technique so that today many ballet dancers think of what they can do to their bodies as though they were objects.<sup>8</sup> Dance studios are generally lined with mirrors, and, looking at themselves in the mirrors, dancers often only

see a visual image, a 'thing' that never conforms to the ideal, no matter how wonderful and famous the dancer is, because the ideal is unattainable.

Through its specialization and professionalization, ballet turned into an 'art form' somewhat separated from its context. When asked about ballet one does not immediately think: the Sun King, Versailles, 17th-century France, despotic aristocratic system, etc. Rather, the first images that come to mind are likely to be tutu, pointe shoes, turn-out and elongated lines. The form moved away from its historical heritage and has come to be perceived by most of its audience as having a quasi a-cultural reality,<sup>9</sup> as somewhat existing within a neutral, transnational space.<sup>10</sup>

Although as a social anthropologist I would generally argue that dance can only be fully understood in its varied socio-cultural contexts, I nevertheless also acknowledge that some dances are context-rich, while others are context-poor.<sup>11</sup> Many people who attend ballet performances, for example, do not have an in-depth understanding of the background, history and detailed aesthetics of the genre, and only a few will have any knowledge of the dancers' individual back-grounds and careers. Indeed, it this ability to have an existence removed from its context of creation and representation that allows people to think of ballet as 'art', as belonging to the 'great tradition' of Western society.

It is interesting to note that while dancers are certainly involved in current discussions relating to technique, they are much less concerned about ballet's heritage, tradition and social history. Indeed, sometimes they can seem quite ignorant. This may not necessarily be the result of a lack of interest on their part, however. They may be responding to a social environment that did not see an intellectual engagement as being the preserve of dancers. It is the art establishment — made up of critics, teachers, dance historians and other scholars — that has controlled what has been written about ballet, and until recently there was little interest in hearing what the majority of dancers had to say. Ballet history, like most other histories, was the history of 'the great and the good'.<sup>12</sup>

Tiwi dance, in contrast is context-rich. Its privileged context of performance is the elaborate mortuary ritual complex for which the Tiwi are famous. These rituals were, and still are, at the core of Tiwi cultural life (cf. Venbrux 1998: 105). I cannot go into detail as to what they entail, but some description of their forms and contexts is necessary.

After people die, a number of rites have to be performed and all of them include some dancing. *Pukumani*, originally the label given to describe the special status of bereaved relatives, is often used by the Tiwi as a generic term to encompass all the activities linked to the mortuary rituals: from the commissioning and production of mortuary posts, bark baskets and other ritual paraphernalia; to the interconnected ceremonies performed for each individual; to the bereaved's avoidance practices.

First the body is buried, in the Catholic cemetery in most instances, but, in

the case of influential and charismatic individuals, in their own country,<sup>13</sup> and relatives dance towards the grave. Some time later — occasionally on the same day, but usually a few days later — the home and belongings of the deceased are ritually ‘cleansed’ by smoke to help the ghost leave the world of the Tiwi.<sup>14</sup> From the time of the death onward, some of the relatives of the deceased have to act in a certain way — some may not be allowed to touch food or drink and thus need to be fed, for example, or they have to wear specific body paraphernalia.

About a year later, a number of preliminary ceremonies, generically referred to as *ilanea*, are held. They take place over a number of weeks and culminate in a final ceremony, referred to as *iloti*, when the *pukumani* status is lifted. During the *ilanea* individuals are commissioned to carve and paint mortuary posts; to create new songs and new dances; and to ensure that the space where the dancing is taking place is looked after, physically and spiritually. At different stages of the rituals different dances are performed.

The Tiwi dance repertoire is composed of a number of different types of dance, each comprising many dances. One such a group, the kinship dances was mentioned earlier,<sup>15</sup> another comprises the dances of the Dreaming<sup>16</sup> linking individuals with their individual dreamings: the spirits of animals, such as *Crocodile*, *Dingo* or *Shark*; natural phenomena, such as *Rainbow*; or geographical features, such as certain rock formations. All Tiwi thus manifest as representations of these things. When they dance *Shark*, *Crocodile* or whatever, they are therefore not mimicking the animals, as is often believed, rather they are showing another facet of their personalities (Grau 1992).

Dreamings are directly derived from the land and the Tiwi are linked to the land both patrilineally through the country they inherit from their fathers, and matrilineally through their descent groups (*imunga*) into which they are born and in which they assume right of membership through their mothers. The situation is more complex, however, than a simple dualist framework where fathers transmit countries and mothers *imunga*. Tiwi also ‘come out’ of an *imunga* through their father and use the term *irumwa* to refer to it. Thus individuals would say ‘I belong to the people of X’, naming their mother’s *imunga*, ‘and come out of the people of Y’, naming their father’s. The species, geographical features and places connected with the *irumwa* encapsulate the essence of the place, and individuals refer to them as their dreamings as it is through enacting them that the Tiwi bodily engage with the Dreaming.

Both *imunga* and *irumwa* emphasize matriline. The former emphasizes the mother’s matrilineage, which has given birth to the physical body, while the latter emphasizes the father’s matrilineage, which adds to the physical body by giving direct links to the land. As we have seen earlier, however, links to the land are also established patrilineally through receiving a ‘country’ from one’s father, and Tiwi are responsible for the maintenance of that land both ecologically and spiritually. Through their performance Tiwi dancers thus create a physical manifestation of both their father’s father’s and

father's mother's lands, thus creating complex webs of relationships between land and lineages.

From the above discussion it is evident that Tiwi dance is the preserve of the many rather than the few, since dancing at mortuary rituals is part of an individual's social duty. More recent contexts, such as celebrations for birthdays, marriage or other events, have been modelled on the mortuary ceremonies and all dances are in part a way of reinforcing social ties and responsibilities.

Ceremonial performances thus allow participants to bring together different strands of experience, creating a space where cultural coherence, ambiguities and contradictions can be played out. They often reinforce ties between individuals and the group, creating a sense of *communitas*, the invigorating feeling of belonging shared by those taking part, discussed by the anthropologist Victor Turner (1969). Simultaneously, they can also provide an arena where different agendas can be put forward and conflicts expressed, and sometimes resolved publicly.

Tiwi dance is thus produced and consumed by the same people, who change roles according to the specific contexts they are involved with, in contrast to ballet which is performed by a restricted number of people and is performed to another restricted set of people. Because of this, it would be easy to assume that the former is deeply rooted in its society, while the other is not. Indeed, when discussing their attachment to their traditional culture, for example, Tiwi people often say "we will never give up our dancing" or other similar statements (cf. Osborne 1974: 80, 89), equating dancing with their way of life. Because of this one could easily deduce that Tiwi dance has stronger links to 'tradition' than to 'modernity'. Yet a key point of the 'just a song' dances mentioned earlier, is that they have always allowed Tiwi people to investigate alien elements brought into their culture. In the 19th century what was new was, for example, the dug-out canoes brought from the mainland, or the arrival of the British with their large ships. In the 20th century, during my investigation, new dances were made about alcohol, prison, electricity or the 'big house of the Queen of England', as well as about *Shooting Star* or *Rainbow*.

In contrast, ballet is seen as not being anchored in society, even though its main themes seem to be love, betrayal and jealousy, all very much part of the life experience of many individuals. Because of its links with fairy tales, its kings and queens and mythical creatures, ballet is seen to have little to do with the everyday life of ordinary people. I would argue, however, that this is not necessarily the case, that indeed this vision has been created by ballet writers who somehow gave precedence in their writings to ballets with 'appropriate' ballet themes considered to be in 'good taste'.

One cannot ignore, for example that in 1793 an opera-ballet entitled *La Liberté des nègres* was staged in Paris (Lee 2002). Considering that, on the 28<sup>th</sup> March 1792, the free black people in Guadeloupe in the French Caribbean were given French citizenship and that Toussaint L'Ouverture led a rebellion



in Haiti that led to the Convention to Abolish Slavery on the 4<sup>th</sup> February 1794 (Régent 2005), demonstrates that some ballet, at least in the 18th century, had a political dimension. The same is true in the 19th century: the *Ballet of the Nuns* (1831) by Filippo Taglioni, for example, portrayed the “ghosts of nuns who had violated their vows of chastity and were evidently still very sexy in the afterlife” (Mackrell 2005); Luigi Manzotti’s *Excelsior* (1881) celebrated progress and depicted the steam engine and electricity as well as the opening of the Suez canal and the Mount Cenis tunnel (Poesio 2005). In the 20th century, autoeroticism, AIDS and rape have been ballet subjects. Although ballet has been largely constructed as a remote art form dealing with ethereal unattainable beauty, throughout its history it has also been down to earth and connected to the social issues of the times. Ballet is not just about beauty, just as Tiwi dance is not just about myths and social functions.

Like ballet, Tiwi dance is underpinned by an aesthetic system, by a philosophy of dance, so to speak. This aesthetic, however, is constructed in different ways. Ballet can belong to an ‘art-for-art’s-sake’ movement, but Tiwi dance would have a harder time situating itself in this way. Nonetheless, aesthetic considerations are important for the Tiwi, who certainly appreciate the craft singers, sculptors and dancers bring to the mortuary rituals, as the success of the latter depend very much on the quality of the former. Working on Tiwi material for the last 25 years, however, made me realize that if one wants to make sense of what makes dance special for the Tiwi, one needs to look beyond the dancer’s body, its immediate space and its musical accompaniment, and take into account kinship, conceptualization of gender, the structure of the Tiwi language and the landscape of the island as well, as all are interconnected.

Tiwi aesthetics may seem at first slightly contradictory. On the one hand clarity and ‘cleanness’ of lines are greatly appreciated. When Tiwi paint, either themselves or objects, they generally start by using charcoal. Painters talk about highlighting clear lines and patterns. In my experience, few Tiwi, if any, like fuzzy edges and half tints. In dance too, gestures have to be clear. They are often simple-reversal, that is, limbs use the same path moving away and returning to the body. They have to be directly in time with the beat. Good dancers are said, for example, to “punch the ground properly,” while mediocre ones with unclear gestures are said to “dance like a baby,” because their movements have the uncoordinated look associated with toddlers. Similarly, song texts have to be “lined up” in the head before being sung, and the voice of a good singer must be clear so that the complex poetry can be understood. In performance, when they face specific locations, dancers often call out either the place’s name, and/or the names of the people or of the dreamings associated with them. The quality of the voice, the clarity and rhythm of the calls, are important and often commented upon.

At another level, however, the Tiwi also delight in metaphors and lateral thinking. Men, for example are forbidden to name their mother-in-law, yet they have to sing about her during some ceremonial performances. Using the body connections mentioned earlier, representing her as the shoulder, a man



may sing about a plane with a broken wing (shoulder). This plane may fall into a tree, this image linking it to a sea eagle making its nest, a bird connected to the mother-in-law. The plane may additionally have propellers turning round, referring to the arm movements of the deceased's widow/er in the dance performed at mortuary rituals.

Similarly dancers may perform that their faces look like the rocks of Pungalo, a sacred site, home of one of the daughters of Pukwi, on the northern coast of Bathurst Island; and that their cheeks are full of holes. Yet what they are referring to is that one of their paternal siblings descended from this particular ancestress has died, the cheeks representing siblings who are related through their fathers or father's fathers. Having a cheek full of holes calls attention to the deceased's patriline, many of whom are attending the event. By additionally referring to Pungalo, the dancer points to the dead person's matriline, therefore "talking to" a greater number of individuals who are also descended from that particular ancestress. Being able to evoke both lineages, as well as connecting with the land, is greatly appreciated as it shows the skills of an accomplished artist.

Tiwi dancers, like ballet dancers, also see their dance in historical terms, but this history is twofold, depending on two kinds of memories, which can be labelled 'cosmic' and 'historical' for lack of better expressions. The beginning of their dance history is traced back to Purukupali. The mythical hero taught the dances to be performed at the funeral ceremonies held for his son Tjinani, the first Tiwi to die. Part of the contemporary Tiwi repertoire goes back to this mythical time. On the other hand there are other dances which have known creators. Since successful dances are transmitted patrilineally, Tiwi experts occasionally discuss dancers' lineage and are able to trace dances back to their creation.<sup>17</sup>

Although Tiwi dance, unlike ballet, does not require a specific body type, the Tiwi nevertheless also make a distinction when talking about dance between what is innate/biological and what is learned/social. Their distinction, however, is not the same as that found in Western classical ballet, where what is seen as innate is related to bodily attributes such as an arched foot, a slender neck, loose hip joints or a full turn-out. In contrast, the Tiwi see part of the dance repertoire — the dreaming dances mentioned earlier — as being innate to the dancers. The Tiwi never talked about copying or miming but always of marking their dreamings when discussing what they were doing. This was made even more explicit to me when we were discussing the learning process and the acquisition of the dance repertoire.

The Tiwi admitted that they learned most of their dances, just as ballet dancers learn theirs (though the style of learning was different in the sense that it was always done in performance, rather than in class or in rehearsal). When we discussed the dreaming dances, however, I discovered that they were not perceived as being taught or learned. The knowledge of their steps was said to always exist in the dancers' bodies. The Tiwi compared this knowledge to the potential for breathing and walking. It was interesting to

note, for example, that people who were usually indulgent towards children's dancing, correcting their mistakes with good humour, would become quite impatient if a dreaming dance was not performed properly. "How come you cannot do it?," they would ask, as if it was something that defied comprehension.

Interesting contrasts can also be observed when looking at the respective conceptions of space. For ballet dancers, and indeed for most Western theatre dancers, space is perceived primarily in relation to their bodies. The spatial language of left/right, front/back would be typical examples of this egocentric perception: planes through the dancers' bodies are used in order to make sense of their spatial world.

Linguists have shown that many languages do not use the planes through the body to derive spatial coordinates.<sup>18</sup> The Western scientific argument that space is "a system of axes invariably bound to the body" (Poincaré 1946: 57), therefore, is one ethnic perception among others, rather than a universal, since individuals in other parts of the world may perceive space primarily topographically and geocentrically more than egocentrically.<sup>19</sup>

Looking at the Tiwi environment, three different kinds of spaces and places are seen as important: countries, inherited patrilineally, where Tiwi (human beings) exploit the resources, and to which *Moporrui* (ghosts) return after death; sacred sites where *Pitapitawi* (spirits of unborn children) are found; and home/camp where one lives and one can daydream. Countries and sacred sites can thus be seen to incarnate the Tiwi cosmology, and especially the world of the dead and the unborn. In dance, Tiwi often situate their bodies in space in terms of facing sacred places and countries that may be miles away. Unlike ballet dancers, who need to develop a spatial awareness limited to their immediate performing space, Tiwi dancers have to learn to be physically aware of their whole geographical environment in order to respond appropriately when the need arises. In this way, not only do their physical bodies incarnate the land, but they also link the world of living to those of the dead and unborn.

### Bodies as Conceptual Domains

Like many words of our vocabulary, the noun 'body' may have a variety of meanings according to context. As social anthropologist Francis Huxley argued:

As its relation to 'butt' and 'bottle' implies, its basic meaning is that of a container, and as such it is often used to designate the whole physical organism. It can also be used in a narrower sense to designate the trunk, as does the similar term 'chest', so that we can differentiate body from limbs, from tail, and, of course, from head. On another level it can refer to matter or substance, in contradistinction to such terms as mind, life, soul and spirit, and so on. Such usages tell us that the word is to be understood in terms of a chimerical whole that is composed of different categorical realities — a difference sometimes expressed in the distinction between having a body and being one (Huxley 1977: 29).

In an often-cited anecdote (e.g. Csordas 1994: 6; Sawday 1995: 1; Telban 1998: 62), the French anthropologist and missionary Maurice Leenhardt, who worked among the Kanaks of New Caledonia between 1902 and 1926, recalled a discussion he had with Boesoou, an aged indigenous philosopher. They had been talking about the impact of Christianity on the Kanak world, and Leenhardt had argued that the notion of 'spirit' was alien to the indigenous way of thinking and that it was foreigners who had introduced it. "We have always acted in accord with the spirit," his friend replied, "what you've brought us is the body" (Leenhardt 1979 [1948]: 164). In the indigenous world-view, the person was not individuated, but rather was diffused with other persons and things in a unitary socio-mythic domain.

Similarly, the anthropologist Borut Telban discussed how, among the Ambonwari of Papua New Guinea with whom he works, there is no term

...for any kind of physical body removed from the totality of human existence. Terms are given to individual organs, bones, bodily fluids and so forth with considerable anatomical accuracy. People refer to the 'body' in its active, behavioural state by *kay* [being, habit, way, manner] and by *arim* (skin). Thus, it may be said, that 'body' has meaning for Ambonwari people only through the external appearance of skin and the way it is observed to act (1998: 62).

Likewise, among the Tiwi, it is interesting to note that, although there is an extensive vocabulary to discuss different body parts, with special words to refer, for example, to the side of the buttocks (*pokerepari*), or the back of the hips (*jamperimala*), as well as a whole vocabulary for hair depending on where it is located on the body — on the head (*murula*), in the armpit (*kulitjima*), on the pubis (*jurulinga*), the chest (*marripilima*), the back (*mumutilima*), upper or lower parts of the arm (*kerumutilima*, *jerepitolima*) or leg (*jingkilima*, *jipitolima*), thus creating a comprehensive semantic domain for 'pilosity'; yet, as far as I have been able to find out, there does not seem to be a word for body, as a self-contained entity.<sup>20</sup> Charles Osborne's Tiwi dictionary (1974) gives a word for a dead body (*mapi-*) but not for a live one. It is death that brings boundaries to physical bodies, as ghosts dissociate from their bodies to roam their ancestral land and bodies are buried in the earth. Life, on the other hand, expands the body into the world, both natural and social, and this is done primarily through the dancing body.

For many Tiwi there is no real separation between the body and the self, between persons and their environment, between the past and the present. Indeed bodily, social, ecological, historical and spiritual worlds are seen as being inter-connected and part of a fluid universe: the Dreaming, a space-time more real than reality itself.

It may be useful here to give a brief exegesis of Tiwi cosmological history.<sup>21</sup> At the beginning of time *Pukwi/Imunga*, the sun-woman, came down to earth, which then was an undifferentiated mass. She transformed herself into a turtle and walked the land. Through the movements of her body the Tiwi islands were created as water emerged behind her. Being attacked by hunters she peed in fright and turned the seawater salty. As she travelled she left her daughters along the way. They are still sitting there today and all

Tiwi see themselves as linked to one of these women through their matriline. The location of their homes is generally close to a watery place inhabited by the unborn. One can thus see these sacred sites as conception sites, 'pouring out' the spirit of unborn children into their mothers' bodies, and relate this to the physical birth of children when the water breaks and physical children are 'poured out' of their mothers' bodies. Again, landscape and human bodies are unavoidably tied together.

It is when death appeared among the Tiwi, that their universe became divided into the three parallel worlds of the unborn, the living and the dead, mentioned earlier. The three worlds are very similar to each other in nature, but Tiwi people are adamant that in everyday life they should remain distinct, that the unborn and dead, for example, should not interfere with their daily life. Nevertheless many also acknowledge that the spiritual beings are always present: fathers — sometimes with the help of their own father — have to find the spirits of their children in their dreams before conception can take place, and some individuals are known to see ghosts and other elemental beings, for example. Furthermore, it is important that during ceremonial performances the three worlds come together, recreating somehow the unity of the time of creation. In these events one could say that the Tiwi dance their way through the three worlds, and as a result are able not only to keep in touch with the power inherent in the Dreaming, but also somehow to recreate the Dreaming. It is in this way that one can say that the dancers' bodies manifest as representations of the Tiwi cosmology.

### **Bodies and Bodily Secretions**

Generally in the West, when we think of bodies, we think of entities somewhat bounded by their skin. Even though we are aware that skin is permeable and that all sorts of fluids leak out of the body through its many orifices — menstrual blood, vaginal discharge, seminal fluid, sweat, tears, breast milk, spit and so on — these are not domains that are generally talked about. As Bryan Turner recently argued:

Fluids flowing from the inside of the body to the outside are regarded as socially dangerous and contaminating, because these fluids on the outside of the body directly challenge our sense of order and orderliness (Turner 2003: 1).

We fear involuntary bodily secretions of any sort because they demonstrate a lack of control over bodily functions, and this lack of control is linked either to early childhood or to degeneration, old age and ultimately death. In everyday situations, bodily secretions cause embarrassment, and we have developed anti-perspirants, panty-liners, breast pads and so on, as a way of dealing with them. It is worth noting that female bodily fluids are somewhat worse than male ones and more paraphernalia has been invented to control them.

Sweat, for example, is good when used in a controlled setting like the gym, the sauna or the sweat lodge, but it is unpleasant in other situations. For many Australian Aborigines, however, sweat does not have the negative

connotations associated with it in the West. Indeed, in parts of Arnhem Land, a gesture of hospitality when strangers enter one's land is to rub them with one's sweat. Through the sharing of sweat they are invited into and enter the body of the land. Sweat is also left behind when bathing, leaving part of one's bodily substance in the water. For many Aborigines throughout the continent, waterholes and the sea have special significance because they are often linked to spiritual beings who dwell there, and ritual bathing is a common practice. Through this shedding of sweat, so to speak, ties between persons and between persons and land are reinforced. Furthermore, sweat travels through water, connecting bodies and geography further afield. So sweat is seen as a very positive rather than an unpleasant element as it allows bodies and land to blend into each other. We saw earlier that other bodily fluids, urine and amniotic fluid, are also seen in a positive manner, since it is Pukwi's urine that turned the sea salty and allowed a different environment to develop, and the waters during childbirth are linked to the watery home of the spirit children.

Thus, once again, I would warn against the risk of ethnocentrism. In a number of societies, bodily fluids are indeed often dangerous — there is quite a literature on menstruation and pollution, for example. Though it is worth pointing here that, as Pamela Stewart (2003), an anthropologist working in New Guinea has argued, the words that had been translated as 'pollution' to discuss menstruation in New Guinea had connotations of power and the danger associated with it but were not the words used today, for example, to discuss environmental pollution. We may well have here another Western manifestation of embarrassment and disgust towards menstruation, as was recently discussed for example by Olivier Séguret in *Libération* (2004) after the screening of Catherine Breillat's film *Anatomie de l'enfer* (2004).<sup>22</sup> What is important to stress here is that views of bodily functions vary around the globe and one must never assume universality. As Lock and Scheper-Hughes argue:

Our epistemology is but one among many systems of knowledge regarding the relations held to obtain among mind, body, culture, nature, and society, [and that] some non Western civilizations have developed alternative epistemologies (1996 [1990]: 49).

### **Bounded and Unbounded Bodies**

Exploring fully different world-views, different indigenization of knowledge so-to-speak, is about expanding on what the world might be and offering new possibilities. It is evident, for example, that within the English-speaking world, researchers working on the body — whether they come from anthropology, dance, sociology, philosophy or performance studies — have had difficulties in finding appropriate words in English to deal with the complexities one encounters when approaching the body, and when trying to understand how individuals make sense of their embodiment. Most, if not all, want to emphasize that all experiences are made up of both body-aspects and mind-aspects, and one finds expressions such as the compound "bodymind" (Shaner 1985), "body-self" (Zarilli 2000 [1998]), "lived body" (Fraleigh 1987) or "body-in-life" (Hastrup 1995), to cite a few.

Other Western languages have different distinctions, and many researchers, from Maurice Merleau-Ponty to Bryan Turner, have used the German terms *Körper*, referring to the body as representation, and *Leib*, referring to the lived experience of the body, for example. It is clear that by studying — to use Blacking's words — “cross-culturally the somatic states involved in human behaviour and action, we may be able to describe better the latent repertoire of the human body from which cultural transformations are ultimately derived” (1977: 20). In so doing we will expand our vision by including the philosophical conversations, explicit and implicit, of other societies. In studying other human beings one can relate to other people's ways of thinking and expand our own.

When looking at the body and dance theatre practices within Western society, it is evident that we are dealing with different realms of bodily activities that can be broadly divided into what theatre practitioner Eugenio Barba (1985 and 1995) has referred to as daily and extra-daily experiences, and that both types of activities are what the sociologist Marcel Mauss (1935) referred to as “techniques of the body.” In performance scholar Phillip Zarilli's terms:

Everyday practices include such habitualized and routinized activities as walking, driving, hygienic practices etc. extra-daily practices are those practices such as rituals, dances, theatre performances, the recitation of oral narratives, meditation and/or religious practices, martial arts etc., which require the practitioners to undergo specialized bodily training in order to become accomplished in attaining a certain specialized state of consciousness, body, agency, power, and so on (Zarilli 2000 [1998]: 5).

Undoubtedly ballet dancers are involved in extra-daily practices. A great deal of resources, both financial and in terms of physical energy, time and emotion, are invested in order to create the extra ordinary beings that they are. Dancers belong to a distinct social group, separated from the rest of society because of the demands of their profession. They see themselves and are seen by others<sup>23</sup> as being different: “we have different bodily structures than most humans,” said New York City Ballet dancer Tony Bentley (1982: 16). Describing her colleague, Suzanne Farrell she said, “She is from God's world — a direct disciple. He has sent her down to brighten our lives and teach us of higher things” (1982: 30).

When we think of dancers' bodies, we often see them as bounded and bonded entities. Dance training is undoubtedly a ‘technology of the self’ in Foucault's sense;<sup>24</sup> that is, we are dealing with practices which allow the people involved in them to:

...effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain amount of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Foucault 1988: 18).

Dance training is also very much about control, and in this way it can also be seen as a ‘technology of power’, which “determines the conduct of

individuals and submits them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject" (Foucault, 1988: 18).

Undoubtedly there is lot of evidence showing the disciplinary nature of Western theatre dance training, especially ballet training — and a lot has been written about it taking, what I would call, 'the ballerina-as-victim' perspective (cf. Daly 1987 or Foster 1996 for insightful examples of such an approach). One should not forget, however, that ultimately training is also about giving the tools to expand and empower the body. Furthermore, to ignore or downplay the sense of agency that many ballet dancers feel they have is both patronizing and poor scholarship.

Most Aboriginal people, on the other hand, do not see their bodies as bounded. Bodies are specific sites for making sense of the world in a way that, as far as I am aware, is much more explicit than anything found in Western societies. It is interesting how, for example, gender is represented within Tiwi bodies.

Linguistically, Tiwi nouns are divided along gender lines. Inanimate objects are given their gender in terms of physical shape and size. In general, things that can be described as 'small, straight and thin' are masculine, while those that are 'large, round and ample' are feminine (Osborne, 1974: 51). Body parts follow the gender of the body that owns them, with one notable exception: genital organs are invariably of the opposite gender to the possessor. This follows a pattern found throughout the society, where, for example, women traditionally exploited the resources found in the ground, which is a masculine domain, while men exploited the resources found in the sea and the air, which are both feminine domains and where men are mothers of their sisters' children as women are fathers to their brothers' children. In this way one could argue that, for the Tiwi, in some instances, both practically and conceptually, genders are interchangeable (Grau 1993b) and this is explicitly articulated through the dancing body.

Similarly, as we saw earlier, it is through their bodies that Tiwi give the most elaborate account of their kinship system. Through the performance of certain dances, the kinship relationships between the performers and the persons for whom the dance is being performed are marked, emphasized or even, in some instances, challenged. One could argue that these kinship dances offer not only a model *of* kinship practices, but also that they can equally be seen as a model *for* kinship practices. Through these dances, bodily exploration and theorizing of kinship possibilities can take place.

### A Landscape Turned into Flesh

Recalling Tiwi cosmic history, one can also see that it is not just the religious and social worlds that are sited in the body, but also the geographical one. The Tiwi claim, when discussing their relationship to the land, that they are not just looking after it but that they *are* the land, and it is through ritual activities such as dance that they feel they express it best. What many



Westerners fail to understand is that this is not a poetic or metaphoric statement. For them the land is a living entity. Landscapes were created through the movements of the ancestors and, since they are descendents of these beings, the land links them together.

As mentioned earlier, contemporary Tiwi dancers in their performance often situate their bodies in space in terms of facing sacred places that may be miles away. Their spatial intelligence is thus highly developed as they are physically aware not only of their immediate space but of their whole geographical environment. Through their movements, they are 'carving' up space and creating a link between their spatio-temporal situation and the sacred sites. Similarly, through their calling out the sites' names they are making the air vibrate and thus creating a sound path between themselves and the sites. Performances in this way establish a web of physical links throughout the land, between dancers, Pukwi, her daughters and the other ancestors, just as ritual bathing and the penetration of the land by the dancers' sweat create links between land and human beings.

Similarly, trees and dancers are conceptually linked through their connection with mortuary posts. Bodies, mortuary pots and trees receive the same treatment, to be transcended into an aesthetic experience: bodies and posts are blackened using charcoal before being painted, and passed through smoke at different times, while trees are torched by fire when the land is cleaned and regenerated. In this way a continuum exists linking humans to land and vice versa. Through the aesthetic transformation, dancers and land become one, and life is sustained and the land revitalized.

The Tiwi, like most Aboriginal people, did not have a name for the whole land, for the two islands that are their home, as bounded geographical spaces. What they had, and have, are many individual names for specific locations and areas to which they are related through their ancestors. Yet this does not mean they think of the land as an accumulation of specific sacred sites. Indeed, like other Aborigines, they have a sense of a 'larger, overall expanse of country' (Berndt 1989: 13), but they hold it in their mind as "an image of the whole, of the integrated body" (Bell 1998: 264). Specific sites within the land can be seen as body parts, which can be vulnerable and therefore need nurturing and protection. In a way one can think of a parallel between the unnamed physical body with a multitude of named body parts, and an unnamed land with many named sites and countries.

Tiwi talk about their countries and sacred sites as human beings and looking after one's country is important, being practical in ecological terms, as it is through this management that resources are renewed, but also spiritual and psychological in that it establishes emotional links between individuals, their physical world and their cosmology. Therefore the Tiwi body generally and, more specifically, the dancer's body, can be seen as medium of 'emplacement', if one can use the expression. In this way the space human beings reside in is personified and the landscape is made flesh. This personification is more than a symbolic use of the human body, or a

metaphorical extension of the body into the natural, social and supernatural realms. This is why the Tiwi can say they *are* the land.

#### Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> While dance is certainly about bodies, one must keep in mind, however, that *dance* or any other movement action, while constrained by the physical nature of the human body, is not *determined* by the biological or even the kinesiological bodies of the dancers. If humanity is seen "as a self-defining, self-regulating species who create cultures in which they exist" (Williams 2004: 151), then it is dancers as human agents who *determine* dance.

<sup>2</sup> 'Emic' and 'etic', terms originally coined by the linguist Kenneth Pike (1967), are derived from the linguistic terms 'phonemic' and 'phonetic', referring respectively to sound differences that are consciously perceived by speakers/listeners as belonging to the language, and to physical sound differences that that can be measured by a listener but are not necessarily part of the language's sound repertoire. In anthropology they have been used to contrast between indigenous explications, i.e. the insiders' perspective, in contrast to descriptions according to the observer's criteria, i.e. the analyst/ outsider's perspective.

<sup>3</sup> Though it is worth noting that, for many, it is primarily the so-called 'civilized' bodies that are situated historically, and a mythical archetypal a-historical 'primitive' body still pervades much writing on the body.

<sup>4</sup> I thank Drid Williams for pointing this out to me.

<sup>5</sup> See Grau (1993a and 1995) for a fuller discussion of the development of dance anthropology in the UK and of Blacking's vision.

<sup>6</sup> Among the Tiwi, most dance performances are dedicated to someone, dead in the context of mortuary rituals, alive in the modern contexts of celebrations for weddings, birthdays or graduations.

<sup>7</sup> Between 1980 and 1984, I carried out almost two years of fieldwork lasting respectively 14 months, 6 months and 3 weeks. I undertook a further period of six weeks' fieldwork in 1998.

<sup>8</sup> This objectification of the dancer's body can be seen in the kind of language ballet and other Western theatre dancers use, e.g. expressions such as the body as an *instrument* or being choreographed *on*.

<sup>9</sup> This is so despite the fact that the ethnicity of ballet has been demonstrated since the 1960s (Keali'inohomoku, 1969/70), if not earlier. So far, 35 years of dance scholarship has not yet been able to change attitudes.

<sup>10</sup> One could argue that ballet, from its very beginning, has been transnational as ballet masters and famous dancers criss-crossed Europe, and that the situation is only different today in that corps de ballet dancers have become transnational too.

<sup>11</sup> The American anthropologist Edward Hall proposed these concepts in his book *Beyond Culture* (1976) and saw them as the two ends of a communicative continuum. The idea is: how much context does one need to know in order to make sense of a situation? If we think of different dance genres, there is no doubt that, although context will always be significant and add to any comprehension of dance in some cases, it is also true, however, that one can enjoy dance performances removed from their contexts.

<sup>12</sup> There are notable exceptions such as Turner and Wainwright (2003), but these are still few and far between.

<sup>13</sup> Aboriginal people throughout the continent use the English expression 'country' to refer to land to which they are spiritually linked. Briefly, countries are stretches of land with boundaries that can shift over time, which for the Tiwi are 'owned' by patriline. Owners are entitled to the resources of the land and are bound to care for it. Countries tend to be associated with specific characteristics: in one place there may be a lot of dingoes, or jungle fowls, or a deposit of ochre, and these are seen to encapsulate the essence of the place.

<sup>14</sup> The Tiwi conceptualize the world as a threefold order made up of the *Tiwi* (the living human beings), the *Pitapitawi* (the unborn) and the *Moporruiwi* (the dead).

<sup>15</sup> These labels are not truly indigenous classifications, but rather are derived from the Tiwi conceptualization of dance. The Tiwi do not think of dances primarily in terms of movement vocabulary but in terms of ownership and choreographers, i.e. whether the dances are owned by everyone or by specific patriline, and whether they have been choreographed by human beings or by mythical beings. The taxonomy I developed with Tiwi analysts to discuss the repertoire, employing the everyday expressions used by the Tiwi themselves, is as follows: dances that are 'my property' and dances that are 'not my property'. The former group comprises the 'just a song dances' — dances choreographed for specific moments of the *ilanea*, which then become part of the choreographers and their patrilineal descendants' repertoire; the latter group comprises the dances used in the *ilanea* to commission the workers for the specific tasks they are asked to perform, as well as dances that mark points of junction; the kinship dances, which have been choreographed by the mythical being/ancestor Purukupali, and the dreaming dances which are not choreographed but exist in individuals in a way comparable to the ability to walk. Dances that are 'not my property' are performed by all Tiwi when the situation arises, in contrast to the 'my property' dances that are 'copyrighted' by patriline.

<sup>16</sup> The Dreaming is a pan-Australian Aboriginal phenomenon but its interpretation varies from one people to another. Briefly, it refers both to the past when the world was created, as well as a parallel world, which nurtures human beings and to which they connect primarily through the 'arts', singing, dancing, painting and carving. In this article it should be understood that my use of the term, unless qualified, refers only to Tiwi understanding, as it is important not to make unsubstantiated generalizations. There is not one but many Aboriginal peoples, with distinct languages and cultural specificities. When they do not use the English term, 'Dreaming', the Tiwi generally use *palingari*, an everyday word that refers to any kind of past. Through this usage they emphasize the common, everyday quality of the deep spiritual and transcendental nature of their cosmology.

<sup>17</sup> Twentieth-century anthropologists, myself included, have been able to trace the *Shark* dance to the early 19th century in this way.

<sup>18</sup> Dancers in Bali, for example, do not use left/right, front/back in dance, but instead talk about 'towards the mountain', 'towards the sea', 'towards sunrise' and 'towards sunset'.

<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that Western theatre dancers occasionally perceive space topocentrically too, when they talk about being 'downstage' or 'upstage', for example, but the egocentric perception has greater prominence. Geocentric terms exist in English too, for example 'uphill' and 'downhill', or the cardinal points.

<sup>20</sup> Anthropologist Jane Goodale, who has worked among the Tiwi since the 1950s, and Eric Venbrux, who started his Tiwi investigation in the late 1980s, confirmed this when I consulted them.

<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that, throughout my different periods of fieldwork, I never collected a 'full story' in the Western understanding of the term of a constructed narrative with a beginning, middle and end. Tiwi stories are closer to a *nouveau roman* kind of narrative. They exist out there and are revealed to human consciousness in bits and pieces that can be alluded to in songs and dances.

<sup>22</sup> See also the discussions by Clouzot (2004) and Vasse (2004).

<sup>23</sup> It is telling that the introduction of *Ballet for Dummies*, for example, states 'ballet — where women in tutus and men in tights leap across the stage, doing some very unusual things to their own bodies' (Speck and Cisneros 2003: 1).

<sup>24</sup> Foucault argued that there are four major types of these 'technologies': technologies of production, technologies of sign systems, technologies of power and technologies of the self (1988: 18).

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