

# ARTICULATING A MOVEMENT PEDAGOGY IN RETROGRADE: MAPPING AN EMBODIED RESEARCH PROCESS

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This paper discusses an artistic research project that challenges representationalism in South African contemporary dance. The author argues against the use of discursive methodologies that reinforce colonial scripts and instead proposes an alternative approach based on embodied practices. The paper explores the concept of choreography as embodied research and its potential to align with a decolonial praxis. The research project involves tracing embodied practices and creating a digital cartography to capture and explore these practices. The author also discusses the emergence of a movement pedagogy that unfolds in retrograde and disrupts conventional understandings of time and pedagogical continuity.

## Introduction

This paper draws from a recently completed artistic research project<sup>1</sup> that sought to trouble representationalism in South African contemporary dance praxis. In this research, I argued that discursive methodologies risk recrafting colonial scripts and tether contemporary dance practices to a framework that perceives them as responses to the aesthetics of Western theatre dance. I borrowed from Ben Spatz's (2015; 2020) work to propose an alternative logic by shifting the emphasis from representation and spectatorial methodologies to the embodied practices that circulate across the bodies of practitioners in experimentation, performances and workshops. I identified representation and representationalism as frameworks that uphold and perpetuate hegemonic knowledge structures and proposed that when, alternatively, choreography is conceptualised as embodied research, it may align with a decolonial praxis. Acknowledging that decoloniality cannot be reduced to a singular movement (ND-Lovu-Gatsheni 2013, 15), I lean on the broad understanding that a decolonial praxis seeks to destabilise coloniality's hegemonic discourses in search of epistemological alterity (Grosfoguel 2011, n. p.). I suggested that choreography as thinking, probing, researching, opens up possibilities for 'variations in performance' (Noland 2009, 3) or, in a Foucauldian sense, 'instances of resistance' (Noland 2009, 9), or what Gilles Deleuze calls 'the unpredictable and the new' (Noland 2009, 64–65). The research project involved tracing the pathways of my own movement practice and suggested that instances of movement research, embodied practice, or dance-making are epistemic spaces that create possibilities for developing new technique.

Through a process of mapping or tracing, I gathered samples of embodied practice. This resulted in the creation of digital [cartography](#), to which hyperlinks have been provided at various points in this paper. These samples of embodied practice began to suggest an emerging pedagogy, as I re-encountered new technical propositions not only in the making of new work, but also in my teaching practice. Techniques emerging from the research journey thus began to take shape as principles informing both my artistic and pedagogical practice. Pedagogy became a place for the transmission of embodied knowledge, much as Spatz notes (referencing Paul Preciado) how practical workshops are permeated by a micropolitics that serve to 'create and distribute knowledge' (Preciado, qtd. in Spatz 2020, 24). In my research process, I sought to articulate ways in which embodied knowledge is, as Spatz argues, transmitted *before* the intervention of language, before the writing of a thesis or conventional research paper (Spatz 2020, 24). The process was thus concerned with finding ways to avoid fixing embodied insights in language and resisting analysis and the act of capturing itself, which felt akin to making a colonising move on a process that is best described as meandering, sprawling and slippery (Johnstone 2022, 30). This meets George Tebogo Mahashe's call to problematise the way in which colonial praxis (which persists in the South African academy) continues to fix subjects that are conventionally othered within the academy, by making them 'transparent through description and analysis' (Mahashe 2020, 221). Concerned with finding ways to resist the capture or 'fixing' of embodied knowledge, this paper describes a movement pedagogy as a practice that unfolds in retrograde. Seeking to avoid predetermination and the teleological reach conventionally associated with pedagogy or curriculum, I characterise a retrograde movement pedagogy as one that unfolds in step with an embodied research practice, such that its logic is only fully exposed in hindsight.

I begin by offering a brief overview of my understanding of embodied practice as research, which I borrow from the work of Spatz (2015; 2020), followed by a consideration of how the idea of a pedagogy unfolding in retrograde reworks understandings of continuity and discontinuity, and challenges modernist conceptions of time. Then, I explore how the creation of a digital [cartography](#) proposes alternatives to analysis, description and fixing/capturing, through a process of tracing or mapping the em-

bodied research process. The cartography becomes a place to keep re-searching and re-iterating my research questions and thus, underscoring its onto-epistemic nature, plays a role in both articulating and inevitably transforming the unfolding artistic and pedagogical practices. At the end of the paper, I put together a set of principles that begin to take shape through the embodied practice of performance-making and that inform my teaching.

## Movement of Embodied Research

My understanding of movement practice as research draws from Spatz's notion that embodied research entails continual movement across a technical/epistemic boundary. Spatz describes the research journey as cyclical and reversible (Spatz 2020,7). Research, according to Spatz, moves first in the direction of 'opening,' which is characterised by 'entering, unfolding, delving into, uncovering, expanding, drawing near,' and then in the opposite direction of 'closure,' which is a movement of 'folding up, getting out of, gaining distance' (Spatz 2020, 7). This conceptualisation of research and its continually moving boundary or edge creates for the researcher an ever-expanding field. As Spatz writes: 'Knowledge that recedes from awareness is 'behind' us, while 'in front' of us are new fields of knowing that only become possible because of what has been automatised. As we move forward into these new fields, they too gradually become sedimented and 'deposit' into the known' (Spatz 2020, 2-3).

Crossing through boundaries of known and unknown<sup>2</sup>, either in the direction of opening or closure is, according to Spatz, an essential strategy for 'getting at things in different ways,' for arriving in new fields, and undoing entrenched colonially-informed, epistemological hierarchies (Spatz 2020, 15). In this paper, I reflect on how my movement research process, as part of my larger study, begins to suggest the second-mentioned direction of research, that of closure, which Spatz characterises as 'the direction of *teaching, pedagogy, and mastery*' (Spatz 2020, 7). This approach, which aims to excavate my own embodied practice, also echoes Achille Mbembe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o insofar as decolonisation is concerned with 'questions of writing and teaching – writing oneself, teaching oneself' (Mbembe 2015, n. p.). Emerging from the research project is an unfolding movement practice that begins to offer 'relatively stable, repeatable and transmissible' pathways of technique (Spatz 2015, 32-35). These pathways become sedimented over time and suggest a pedagogy as my choreographic and teaching practices become increasingly entangled in a larger cyclical (and reversible) movement research journey.

## A Movement Pedagogy in Retrograde

I borrow from Spatz (2015, 232) the notion of 'embodied technique' as that which is relatively stable, repeatable and transmissible in embodied practice. The tracing of pathways of embodied technique in my own movement practice does not claim to have invented a new, decolonised technique. Rather, these tracings grapple with ways to think about and name differently what many South African contemporary dance practitioners are already doing. To name experiments not as responses to colonial aesthetics, but for what they are: epistemic endeavours that transform practices and open up possibilities for new techniques, principles, and fields (Spatz 2020). The notion of an unfolding or emerging pedagogy is a way of understanding how choreography circulates across bodies, places and times as practice, rather primarily in terms of a performer-audience relationship. It then becomes possible to imagine that choreographic praxis, as embodied research tracing, functions according to its own logic and operates and circulates according to its own rate of multiplication, as its embodied

techniques begin to sediment as potentially new pedagogies. In this way, my research project responds to the critical question, borrowed from Friedman (2012, 101), whose work on dance we are or should be teaching in the context of seeking transformational practices in South African education, including universities. This critical question relates to broader epistemological concerns regarding the content and methodologies of teaching and learning. Grappling with these questions through performance-making, I noticed the biggest shifts over time in my teaching practice. In seeking to trouble representationalism, the pathways of technique emerging from my experimental practice included embodied ways of engaging with disorientation, witnessing, reactivating the body through touch, 'story-ness'<sup>3</sup> as unfolding suggestions of stories, composition as relational and ecological by way of a disappearing subject, and beginnings as interruptions of narrative flow (Johnstone 2022, 147). These emergent techniques have become part of the lexicon of my teaching practice, and have become ways to invite students into movement research.

The idea of an unfolding pedagogy, I suggest, reworks understandings of continuity and discontinuity and disrupts conventional understandings of curriculum as a linear and scaffolded organisation of concepts. South African dancer-psychologist Nobonke van Tonder<sup>4</sup> proposes that this entails a practice of ontology, working with 'what is' and challenging the teleological reach of the material, its idea of progress. This idea has much in common with the experience of learning improvisation and learning as improvisation, which Simon Rose describes as 'ongoing, and continuously changing through its processes,' rather than 'a fixed object of study' (Rose 2017, 162). Or, as William E. Doll writes from the perspective of postmodern education, a transformative curriculum needs 'the 'right amount' of *indeterminacy, anomaly, inefficiency, chaos, disequilibrium, dissipation, lived experience*' (Doll 1993, 176 [emphasis in original]). These understandings of becoming and ongoing continuous change offer a powerful antithesis to dominant, Western and modernist conceptions of time as 'uniform succession, as infinite, constant and irreversible' (Critchley 2016, 19). Simon Critchley adds that time in this modernist conception is figured as an arrow 'pointing towards the future; it is future-oriented, progressivist, indeed revolutionary' (2016, 19). An alternative politics of time, according to Critchley, proposes a 'pluriform, finite, intermittent idea of time' or *times*, that 'do not come in quick succession: the future is no later than the past and the present is something inherently unstable. Times are happening at the same time' (Critchley 2016, 21). Decolonial thinkers, in their unpacking of the entanglement of modernity with coloniality, take up the critique of the universality of time. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2017) explains, linear time as a basic assumption of Western epistemology (Santos 2017, 159–160) is questioned and replaced by the understanding that there is no universal simultaneity, or absolute time and space (Santos 2017, 35). Vázquez argues that chronology and 'chronological narratives are at the heart of the modernity/coloniality systems of oppression' (Vázquez 2006, 2). He writes that 'the critique of modern time shows that modernity is the time that rejects the past, affirms the present as the site of the real, and construes the future in the semblance of a teleology' (Vázquez 2006, 4).

The idea of a retrograde logic of practice endorses this critique of a linear and teleological attitude towards time in order to suggest how choreography and movement research as a decolonial praxis may foreground the emergence of techniques and story-ness. Attending to emergence or unfolding of embodied techniques disrupts the linearity of preconceived stories and ideas and unsettles colonial scripts of dancing bodies and predetermined, colonially-informed pedagogies. Time, as described by Merleau-Ponty in 1945, is 'that which one inevitably encounters on the path to subjectivity' (qtd. in Mbembe 2017, 120). Mbembe links time to subjectivity, noting of time, memory and remembrance that 'each fundamentally constitutes a form of the presence of the past (and of its traces, remains, and fragments) within consciousness' (2017,

121). He writes that ‘time is experienced by attending to the senses (seeing, hearing, touching, feeling, tasting)’<sup>5</sup> (Mbembe 2017, 120).

Yet the understanding of subjectivity that emerges from these accounts and in my tracings of embodied techniques, does not privilege the individual human agent who is, in Erin Manning’s words, volitional and intentional (Manning 2016, 140). Rather, Manning – who views subjectivity from an autistic (neurodiverse) perspective – argues that ‘subjectivity is in the making, in the field. Subjectivity is not felt as predetermining: it is connected to the field of experience as it in-forms it’ (2016, 140). Subjectivity is thus predicated on processual concepts of time and becoming. Manning argues that reading the subject not as activator but as emergent in the act or event (an idea she takes up from Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy), places the emphasis not on the ‘continuity of becoming’ so much as the ‘becoming of continuity’ (2016, 135). My understanding of an unfolding practice and pedagogy is informed by Manning’s claim that ‘to see the potential of worlds in the making ... involves becoming more attuned to event-time, the nonlinear lived duration of experience in the making’ (2016, 15).

The ‘becoming of continuity,’ or the disruption of a linear approach to time, can function as an embodied technique to rethink the forward flow of narrative and, in this case, a scaffolded and predetermined movement pedagogy. Positioning learning spaces as instances of embodied research foregrounds the unfolding, emergent nature of artistic practice and draws attention to the body and embodiment as places of inquiry. I concede that an unfolding movement pedagogy is a necessarily tenuous construct, its logic held together by ‘slender threads:’<sup>6</sup> ‘Everything functions according to a principle of incompleteness. As a result, there is no ordered continuity between the present, the past, and the future. And there is no genealogy – only an unfurling of temporal series that are practically disjointed, linked by a multiplicity of slender threads’ (Mbembe 2017, 148).

Cause and effect are not approached as parts of a predetermined story; rather, I try to imagine how movement research might offer a place and a practice that allows new, not-predetermined meanings and techniques to emerge.

## Mapping an Embodied Research Process: A Cartography

In my search for appropriate tools and sources for an indeterminate movement research process, I explored the notion of mapping or tracing, in an effort to avoid capturing or ‘fixing.’ The act of tracing resulted in the creation of a digital [cartography](#), which assembled various writings and other research documents (photo, video, audio) in order to keep track of and tune into what my practice was doing. By tracing the pathways of technique in my own unfolding practice, my aim was not to create a representation or even an archive of the work, but rather to expose some of the deep structure<sup>7</sup> and non-linearity of embodied practice and research. Through this process of tracing, I found that the greatest shifts took place in my teaching practice when it was treated as a place that provided opportunities for techniques to be repeated, to be clarified or to be used to pose further research questions for embodied practice. The practice of assembling research documents, which was a collaborative process with dance artist and web designer Julia de Rosenwerth, created a thinking place that then informed the writing of a thesis that was completed alongside the cartography at the same time that it continued to shape and transform my unfolding pedagogical practice. Mignolo cautions that the practice of cartography, the drawing of maps and borders, has often been linked to colonial practices, and specifically the colonisation of space (Mignolo 2018, 362). I borrow the term cartography here, however, from philosopher Rosi Braidotti who describes cartography as ‘a theoretically-based and politically informed account of the present that aims at tracking the production of



knowledge and subjectivity and to expose power both as entrapment (potestas) and as empowerment (potential)' (Braidotti 2019, 33). Mapping emerged as a metaphor for keeping track of the unfolding research journey, as well as recording the cyclical, deeply layered and non-linear nature of this journey. The cartography functions as a map that charts instances of embodied practice that were part of the research journey over time, and also reveals how each new project or dance work repeatedly returns to the same and similar questions. This resonates with Susan Melrose, Stephanie Sachsenmaier and Rosemary Butcher's insight that new work, new writing, or in this case each new instance of working with the research documents offers its maker(s) 'something [un]-resolved in her own mind' (Lyotard 1991, 53, qtd. in Melrose et al. 2015, 92). Making new work or assembling research materials feels akin to making the same work over and over again. The cartography offers momentary stabilisations<sup>8</sup> that I think of as landmarks in an emerging logic, while realising that alternative configurations of the research documents, and thus alternative narratives and logics, remain possible and viable. The cartography reveals the collaborative character of this research and the intricate networks of practice that run through it and reveal its micropolitics. This is in line with Braidotti's notion that 'knowledge production is multiple and collective' (2019, 33). The work of embodied practice, which I extend here to the unfolding of a movement pedagogy, involves thinking and doing alongside and with others. Each page of the online cartography re-visits and re-iterates one of the dance works or projects that formed part of my artistic research process as it searches for its own choreographic logic. The techniques emerging from the artistic work (disorientation, witnessing, story-ness, interruptions of narrative logic, touch as reactivation, and the disappearance of the subject in an ecological and relational composition) are re-visited in the assembling of research documents.

As an example, two of the projects that were part of this process are *New Dance Lab* (NDL) and *Any Body Dance Lab* (ABDL). Both projects centred on the question of how to create space for dance to happen and be presented, and aimed to form networks of practitioners. Both projects exposed some of the practices that circulate around and through my own movement and choreographic practice. For NDL, practitioners were invited to present five minutes of their most recent movement research. The project included public performance, but also sharing and feedback moments among the group of artists. ABDL consisted of six weekends of workshops followed by public performances of works created during these sessions. Both projects explore how embodied knowledge is shared and transmitted among practitioners and recognise that there are multiple fields in which the knowledge associated with these outcomes circulates, such as pedagogical practice, choreography and performance. Both projects also gravitated towards the term 'laboratory,' which can be defined as a place 'where the researcher actively modifies society by directly and literally altering the landscape of possibilities for action' (Latour 1983, qtd. in Spatz 2015, 164). Our call for NDL in April 2017 read as follows: 'The platform seeks to attract progressive and experimental new dance works and invites choreographers and artists working with dance to propose short new dance works that engage with risk, immediacy, experimentation and new research' (NDL, Call for Proposals).

The framing of this invitation indicates a desire to demarcate an epistemological project and an epistemic space, a space for embodied research that resists the teleological reach of a predetermined plan. The notion of immediacy here relates to the idea mentioned earlier that embodied knowledge is transmitted *before* the intervention of language (Spatz 2020, xvii). Spatz argues that embodied practices contain an 'epistemic impulse,' which suggests that even when these practices take place outside academic spaces and without academic support, the research 'is already in circulation among artists and practitioners' (Spatz 2015, 224).

## Conclusion

Through the tracing of embodied practice in the form of cartography, the notion of 'mapping' offers a way to track, write and re-write danced narratives and instances of practice shared among a community of practitioners, of which I have offered an example above. Following Manning (2016), artistic research, or what Manning herself calls 'research-creation' can be seen as working 'against method' (Manning 2016, 26). Yet, I also found that artistic research can be radically *for* methodology insofar as it challenges normative research approaches. The online cartography emerged in the search for a space that could both hold the artistic works that were part of the research and act reflexively to track an emerging logic of practice, an unfolding pedagogy. Assembling various forms of writing, photos and videography, I found that the intra-action proposed by these research documents begin to propose, in Manning's words, 'concrete assemblages for rethinking the very question of what is at stake in pedagogy, in practice, and in collective experimentation' (2016, 27). This 'creates an opening for what Moten and Harney conceptualise as the undercommons: it creates conditions for new ways of encountering study – forms and forces of intellectuality that cut across normative accounts of what it means to know' (Manning 2016, 27). The methodological shifts proposed by the process of mapping an embodied practice, in this case through the cartography, thus offers political interventions within normative academic and praxis paradigms, and as I suggest here, disrupts the idea of a predetermined and linearly conceived curriculum.

I concluded the cartography with *From here...*, an artistic statement where I begin to group the various instances of embodied practice into techniques revolving around the exercise of agency, relationality, story-ness, discontinuity and disorientation. These reveal how the embodied techniques traced in the research begin to take shape as principles that inform my artistic and pedagogical practice. The cartography, like the research process, moves in two directions, to recall Spatz once more: first in the direction of opening up, and then in the direction of closing as an emerging pedagogy begins to take shape and unfold its logic in retrograde.

*From here... an emerging pedagogy*

Yes to undoing technique

Yes to remaking and reclaiming technique

Yes to stating a research question

Yes to risk

Yes to immediacy

Yes to discontinuity and slender threads of logic

Yes to beginning over and over again

Yes to witnessing and being witnessed

Yes to disorientation

Yes to disappearing from the composition

No to using my body as a surface for inscription

Yes to re-initiating motion

Yes to indeterminacy<sup>9</sup>



## List of weblinks

Cartography homepage:

<https://kristinajohnstone.com/>

*New Dance Lab:*

<https://kristinajohnstone.com/new-dance-lab/>

*Any Body Dance Lab:*

<https://kristinajohnstone.com/any-body-dance-lab/>

*From here:*

<https://kristinajohnstone.com/from-here/>

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## Notes

- 1 This doctoral research project was completed at Wits School of Arts and received support from the National Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences in collaboration with the South African Humanities Deans Association.
- 2 Important in Spatz's concept is the continual movement of and across the research edge. This concept challenges 'binary models of the research edge as the place where the known meets the unknown' (Spatz 2020, 2).
- 3 I borrow the term story-ness from improvisation teacher Julen Hamilton.
- 4 I draw from conversations held during the embodied research processes shared with collaborators. All such conversations that were included in my final PhD thesis adhered to the University's ethical guidelines for research.
- 5 The senses could be further distinguished by taking into account additional senses such as pain, temperature, kinesthesia and proprioception.
- 6 Mbembe attributes 'slender threads' of logic to the 'ghostly paradigm' in black novelistic writing, which he describes as an intertwining of the living and the dead.
- 7 The term deep structure is borrowed from the field of machine learning. See for example, Ian Goodfellow et al. (2016)
- 8 The notion of momentary stabilisations is borrowed from Karen Barad (2003; 2011), who reworks conventional understanding of cause and effect through the concept of the agential cut.
- 9 From here... is written in the form of a manifesto following Yvonne Rainer's 1964 No Manifesto