

In the intimacy of the dancing body: an anthropology in feeling, moving, touching

1. Research question

Intimacy

The notion of intimacy is so commonly used in “ordinary language” (Das 2007), that its signification seems to be obvious. Social scientists L. Register and T. Henley acknowledge that although intimacy lays at the core of a numerous academic researches and popular literature, critical reflections on the notion have been neglected. The authors list around twenty different definitions, stressing on the polysemy of its significations (Register and Henley 1992: 467-468). For example, intimacy refers to different domains like sexual activity, friendships, family relationships (Register and Henley 1992: 467), female lingerie or scenic performances (Marar 2014). Nevertheless, social scientist Z. Marar emphasizes on the ambiguity of the notion. She writes that its meaning is thought to be known, but in fact, remains unclear (Marar 2014: 17-18).

This proposed investigation draws on the hypothesis that intimacy, rather than exclusively referring to individuality, also has to do with the collective dimension of life. Social scientists M. Gauthier and É. Mercier have noted the double signification of intimacy: the interrelation with others and the relation to oneself (Gauthier and Mercier 2017: §1). On one hand, intimacy is used to qualify the quality of a relation between two persons who have a close link. In that case, we say to have an intimate relationship with somebody. On the other hand, intimacy is used to indicate the most “private sphere” of the individual. For instance, we talk about the violation of the “private sphere”. It is to this second conception that the etymology of the term *intime* refers to. *Intimus* is the superlative of *intus* and *inter*, which means “inside” (Marar 2014: 20). Here, intimacy indicates the most hidden part of human being, which is in a sense “inaccessible” to others, pointing out the limit between one and one another.

This assessment leads to the hypothesis that rather than a solipsist concept, intimacy starts at the edge of the community, when one faces somebody else. Philosopher J-L. Nancy considers *proximate* as the correlate of *intimate*, and argues that the two aspects hold together (Nancy 1996: 103-105). Intimacy is what delimits the border between (two) persons. It starts in the presence of others or/and in confrontation to them. Nancy writes that the proximity shared between two people is at the same time marked by distance (even if it is tiny). Anthropologist M. Jackson calls *intersubjectivity* the bond between people, writing that each one is simultaneously linked to others and at the same time separated from others. The “interplay between being a part of and being apart from the world” lays in human experience (Jackson 2012: 2).

Contemporary dance will shed light on a new manner on intimacy. My previous fieldwork among professional contemporary dance companies in Switzerland has shown the potential of dance as a medium/tool to experiment and understand intimacy, a perspective that I did not explore in my previous work. Since dance studio is a quiet space leading the dancing subject to become more self-consciousness and aware of the environment, it offers an appropriate space to experience the relationship oneself has with him/herself and with others. Intimacy will be approached under the loop of contemporary dance, focusing on three axes: feeling, moving, and touching.

Feeling

According to social scientist L. Blackman, social science researches on affective dimension have exploded since the 1980s. The “somatic felt body” (Blackman 2008: 52), a body made of sensations and affects, lays in the core of several recent anthropological studies (Clough 2008 ; Despret and Strivay 2016 ; Henriques 2010 ; Howes and Classen 2014). These contributions remain however unsatisfying. First, there is a linguistic imbroglio around the different notions used to describe the felt body (feeling, sensation, senses, affects, emotions). For instance, anthropologist A. Surrallés notes the absence of reflection on the notion of emotion (Surrallés 2004: 60). Anthropologists D. Le Breton and H. Wulff work with preexistent psychological categories of emotions, without defining them, nor questioning them (Le Breton 2008 ; Wulff 2007b). Furthermore, the notion of “affect” has appeared as another way of framing the felt body (Blackman and Venn 2010 ; Clough 2008)¹. To counter these inaccuracies, I will provisory use the term *feeling* to encompass these different notions. My research will clarify and define them.

Secondly, if anthropological researches have disclosed knowledge on the categories of emotions, they missed reaching feelings themselves, as it is the case by anthropologist D. Howes and historian C. Classen (Howes and Classen 2014). In my opinion, dance scholars (Abraham and Müller 2010 ; Brandstetter, Egert and Zubarik 2013 ; Foster 1996), contemporary philosophers (Despret 1999 ; Manning 2006 ; Solomon 2007) and phenomenologists (Merleau-Ponty 1945 ; Sartre 1995 [1938]) have more successfully contributed to the knowledge of feelings. However, these studies use conceptual language and often remain at a meta-analysis.

Through my own dance practice, I have noted the complexity of feelings and the difficulty to find the appropriate language to describe them. Psychological emotional categories are often not relevant to describe the sensitive dimension of dancing bodies. This proposed research will develop a more relevant vocabulary and explore whether feeling are part of the *inner* body (*private*) or, as philosopher P. Dumouchel suggests it, lying out in the world (*social*) (Dumouchel 1995: 16). A combination between fieldwork in dance studio and theoretical texts will contribute to the improvement of social theory on the intimate body. My research will confront the different fields of knowledge on feeling (mentioned above), select the accurate theories, improve them through dance practice and finally, complement the knowledge on feeling by going beyond linguistic categories.

Moving

As movement is interwoven with feelings, it is an appropriate start to investigate the intimate body, because the “outside” shape gives access to the “inner” feelings (my whole argument is to find the accurate language to talk about this without reproducing the dichotomy inside/outside). Movement is observable by social scientists, and closely related to feelings (Henriques 2010: 72). Dance scholar S. Foster showed this interconnection in the work of the expressionist dancer Martha Graham (Foster 1986: 25).

Drawing on the work of dance phenomenologist M. Sheet-Johnstone, this research will explore the interrelatedness between movement and feeling. Contrarily to the expressivist thesis that conceives movement as incorporation of feelings, Sheet-Johnstone argues that feeling incorporates movement (sheets-Johnstone 1998), or said differently, is generated by movement. This approach, points out

¹ I talked about this issue in an interview with the anthropologist Tim Ingold (which will be published in the next edition of the peer-review *Tsansta* 2018).

the relationality between sensation and the world, contesting experimental psychology which defines emotion as inner sensation (Despret 1999). Rather than considering emotion as an “inside feeling” preceding movement, I argue that feeling emerge with movement. In this research, I will critically build on the work of Sheet-Johnstone by exploring her hypothesis in the dance studio.

Touching

Touching is an interesting way of investigating intimacy, since it brings two bodies into relation. This research will explore how feelings differ when touch comes into consideration². Where lays the frontier of oneself when the body enters the space of another? Is the skin the border of one’s intimacy? Anthropologist D. Adis Tahhan uses the notion of “skinship” that she understands as intimacy through skin (Adis Tahhan 2010)? But does bodily intimacy necessary lead to intimate relationships? In the case of contemporary dancers, accustomed to enter into relationship with others by touching, the notion of intimacy seems to be understood differently to Western ordinary life (where bodies maintain very little bodily contact). The research will give insights into the interrelation between intimacy and touching, asking whether there are several versions of intimacy. Recent researches by dance scholars G. Brandstetter, G. Egert, and S. Zubarik (Brandstetter, Egert and Zubarik 2013) and philosopher E. Manning (Manning 2006) will be a point of departure to define theoretical aspects concerning touch. Using new sensing configurations, Manning tries to surpass the preconstituted Cartesian body by positioning the senses relationally (Manning 2006: xii). My investigation will follow the same model, however, taking distance from the conceptual vocabulary of Manning and instead offering new notions.

2. Methods: Research-Creation/ autoethnography

Influenced by collaborative methodologies that consider art as a medium of reflection rather than an object of analysis (Ingold 2013 ; Lassiter 2005 ; Schneider and Wright 2013), I consider contemporary dance as a relevant medium to investigate intimacy. My previous fieldwork in dance studios confirms the potential of dance as an investigation tool. Expanding on this, the proposed research will apply the methodology of research-creation to complement traditional methods of social sciences which mostly stress on the linguistic dimension through an ethnographic investigation (Laplantine 2010 [1996]), comprehensive interviews (Kaufmann 1996), and qualitative questionnaire (De Singly 2012).

In anthropology, autoethnography has started to be used in order to go beyond representative anthropology (Holman, Adams and Ellis 2013 ; Lancaster 2011). The representation of others in ethnographic accounts has led to criticism about the authority of the anthropologist and his/her instrumentalization of others. My methodology will focus on “research-creation”, a methodology developed by Manning in her *Senselab*, a laboratory for thought in motion at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. Manning describes *Senselab* as “an international network of artists and academics, writers and makers, from a wide diversity of fields, working together at the crossroads of philosophy, art, and activism. Their aim is to experiment with creative techniques for thought in the act”³. “Research-creation” is used to rethink theory and practice beyond dualism, with the idea that philosophy is a creative practice “thinking by doing, always with the understanding that concepts are

² An interesting aspect is that in French and German, “toucher” and “berühren” refer at the same time to the physical touch of an object, and to intimate feelings.

³ <http://senselab.ca/wp2/>

made in and through the event”⁴. Hence, the new vocabulary that I propose will be made through the event/dancing

3. Objectives

In this habilitation project, intimacy will be regarded under the medium of contemporary dance. It is drawing on the central hypothesis that intimacy lays in a balance between individual and collective, and explore whether there are different versions of intimacy. In order to grasp the notion of intimacy, the three following topics will be explored: feeling, moving and touching. It will also bring into language (through written text) an embodied knowledge that is retained in the dance practice and in the living bodies. New experimental methodologies combining dance and ethnography will be tested⁵, which will, hopefully, extend the current methodologies available. This will permit to unite artistic with academic research, going beyond dualism between theory and practice, bringing new aspects in the establishment of the theory of the body. The first stage of the research will be an *Early Postdoc Mobility*, with the following objectives:

- Establishing the current state of research on intimacy
- Clarifying the notions used to describe the intimate body and their articulation
- Studying a relevant corpus of texts on intimacy and the felt body in anthropology, dance studies and contemporary philosophy
- Developing a methodology permitting to reach the core of the intimate dancing body, stressing on feelings, movement and touch

This proposed research is finely connected to the current FNS-project *Dancing together* run at the institute of dance studies in Bern (cf. attached document *Research partners*). Therefore, it will be set up in a stimulating research team. This interdisciplinary project will also create bridges between the institutes of social anthropology and dance studies at the faculty of philosophy and history in Bern, as well as create some exchanges with the institute of philosophy. It will also develop international collaborations with important scientific research centers at Universities in Montreal, which offer interesting methodologies for the investigation of the senses, affects, performances and new technologies on stage (cf. attached document *Research partners*).

4. Bibliography

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⁴ Idem.

⁵ Studies in anthropology of dance often use classical ethnographical methods and depict dance communities in a descriptive way, like in the work of H. Wulff on classical ballet (Wulff 1998) and Irish dance (Wulff 2007a) and in the work of E. Bizas on Sabar (Senegal) (Bizas 2014). Collaborating with contemporary choreographers, B. Farnell has experimented with more interesting methodologies using Laban notation to describe Indian dances (Farnell and Wood 2011). However, her model only relies on a linguistic approach, what I offer to surpass.

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