

# 'After dance...?' A critical dialogue on possibilities for the un-disciplining of dance

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## **Abstract**

Recently considerable scholarly attention has been given to the notion of 'un-disciplining' dance, and there is an idea in the air that ought not just be waved away that after the great modern and post-modern 'revolutions' of the twentieth century dance, at least in its codified, institutionalised and presentational 'artistic' forms, may have worn itself out and become incapable of self-renewal through yet another stylistic 'revolution' that ushers in the 'next big thing'. There is also a sense that academic and corporate institutions of dance have sacrificed (or forgotten about) the aim of the emancipation of the human spirit through movement, and become fixated on increasingly sophisticated and technologically-driven ways to codify, standardise, and otherwise control the creation and distribution of movement and movement performances created and marketed in the name of 'dance'. With no illusion of delivering a final word on the topic, we begin a brief dialogue on the 'un-disciplining' of dance, with hopes that we can raise some interesting questions, even if we settle none.

## **Introduction**

Recently thoughtful scholarly attention has been given to the notion of 'un-disciplining' dance—witness the Undisciplining Dance Symposium held at the University of Auckland in June 2016. That symposium was motivated by the challenge, as the hosts put it, "to understand the inherited knowledges and embodied practices of previous eras, while allowing space to imagine different futures and ways of moving and creating". The conference brief goes on to say:

Discipline is ever-present in the field of dance studies; creating specific terrains of practice, defining professional attitudes, connoting forms of punishment that determine acceptability and unacceptability. Discipline can

be a gatekeeper, a kind of shame, a pathway to virtuosity and professionalism, a form of sophistication and an application of control and power. (Conference planning committee, University of Auckland, NZ)

Many, if not all, of the presentations and discussions at the symposium were nourished by the sobering notion that, after the great modern and post-modern 'revolutions' of the twentieth century, dance, at least in its codified, institutionalised and presentational 'artistic' forms, may have worn itself out and become incapable of self-renewal through yet another stylistic 'revolution' that ushers in the 'next big thing'. Presenters and attendees also noted frequently that academic and corporate institutions of dance have in many instances sacrificed (or forgotten about) the aim of the emancipation of the human spirit through movement, and become fixated on increasingly sophisticated and technologically-driven ways to codify, standardise, and otherwise control the creation and distribution of movement and movement performances created and marketed in the name of 'dance'. Still, others suggested that the time has come for the historically colonising cultures of the world to recognise that the centuries-long project of appropriating and assimilating the dances of all other cultures to eurocentric ideals of 'grace' and 'beauty' is not ethically tenable, and never was. The above list of what 'un-disciplining' dance might mean could go on, and readers will no doubt have their own views on the matter. Some may even hold the position that what dance needs is more disciplining, not less, and that idea certainly deserves a place at the table no less than any other. With no illusion of delivering a final word on the topic, we begin a brief dialogue on the 'un-disciplining' of dance, with hopes that we can raise some interesting questions even if we settle none.

Ali: As a lecturer in Dance Studies from the University of Otago, NZ, I attended and presented ideas at the Undisciplining Dance Symposium. As I contemplate the topic further, what first comes to mind is perhaps the most ordinary use of the term 'discipline' in relation to dance. I think of the intense 'disciplinary' training traditionally assumed by institutions of dance as required to create the accomplished or 'good' dancer. As one old saying goes, in dance the first 10 years of training is just the beginning. This old saying conveys the idea that accomplishment in dance is not something that comes easily or quickly, and that dance is not for everybody, or

every body, as the case may be. In my experience, lurking beneath the old saying is the idea that accomplishment in dance is not something one can decide for oneself—one is told by ‘masters’ whether and to what degree one is, or has, or never appears likely to become ‘a good dancer.’ Thus, to be disciplined in dance is in large part to submit to being disciplined by someone else. I think also of the recent proliferation of somatic education alternatives to traditional stand-in-front-of-the-mirror-and-be-corrected-by-the-teacher approaches, and I am mindful of the ‘discipline’ required in acquiring efficient ‘natural’ alignment, even as the latter state might in some circumstances also be determined by someone other than oneself. I begin to wonder how an ‘undisciplined’ body may be discerned. Is it an overweight or underweight, or a lazy or a hyperactive body that lacks the ‘fitness’ to be trained? Is it a wild body that must be tamed to find a place in dance? I ponder all of these things as I reflect on my own physical and intellectual disciplining and un-disciplining in dance over the past half century.

I also wonder where in the world is it even possible to un-discipline dance, and who would impose, oversee, or assess any such operation? ‘Dance’ is such a huge word, and of course in some parts of the world no single word for all the activities we might call ‘dance’ even exists, so fundamental are these activities to the living-through of daily life and work and worship. In many places there is no tactical separation of dance from the rest of life for the purpose of ‘disciplining’ it in such a way as to single it out now for un-disciplining.

So I confess to uncertainty about what I might want to un-discipline about dance. An extended foot? An aligned torso? Arabesque? A waltz? A sacred danced ritual? A training regime? An academic dance department? A professional dance touring company? A definition of what it might mean to dance?

Larry: I was not able to attend the symposium, but the issues and questions it raised, and those you mention above, resonate with many I have thought and written about over the past 20 years or so. My first thought in response to your remarks is to wonder who is the ‘we’

who might have the power to decide whether, how, and to what degree to un-discipline dance, or do anything else to it? For it appears attendant to the discipline of dance as I have experienced it (as a student, faculty member, and administrator in the academic dance world in the United States) that some persons do have that power, or at least claim it, and some do not. Teachers appear to have it, students do not; choreographers appear to have it, dancers do not. Those with the power to discipline dance and/or dancers use their power to create and maintain curricula, and lesson plans, and critical standards, and training methods, and requirements for advancement, and the like. In the higher education domains, within which I have worked for more than 30 years, I have seen those with power authoritatively determining, in their particular contexts, who dances and how they dance and what dances they dance, and when and where they dance their dances, and what older dances and ways of dancing are to be considered as 'important' and worth re-doing or emulating in any new dances that might be made. They toss around words like 'legacy' and 'tradition', and espouse the idea of 'keeping repertory alive' as it suits their interests. Through these behaviours the discipline, if you will, injects its values into every corner so that very little that has not been at least tainted, if not coloured entirely, by the preferences of power-in-the-discipline survives very long on its own.

It is important to note that nowadays many progressive forms of dance and choreography are inter- or transdisciplinary, and there are no tidy categories into which many new works aspire to fit. Yet in my experience dance departments have been slow to accept that it is no longer sufficient to teach choreography in strict accordance with the modernist/formalist compositional 'rules' inherited from the Horst/Humphrey tradition. I have seen many works that seek to subvert that legacy, and have created a few myself, and often these are labelled by colleagues as 'not real dance' in an effort to dismiss such works, or labelled as 'experimental' and 'alternative' as a way to try to assimilate the subversive works to a marginal category that is 'owned' by the dominant strand of thought in dance. Such dismissive labelling is, of course, a tried and true way of taming and

caging the wild. Another common way to perform this taming and caging, at least in academia, is to situate the alien work in a known category such as 'happenings' or 'Dada' or 'performance art' or some other recognised style or genre around which the discipline has erected its own boundaries to protect whatever it refers to as 'real dance'.

It may be that a desire to create and preserve and defend such exercisings of power is the reason dance became disciplined in the first place in the places where it did, and in the ways that it did. For at its root (or what I take to be its root) dancing does not need to be disciplined to exist: moving freely alone or with others, with music/sound or in silence, with or without a specific 'message' or end goal in mind is something that virtually anyone can do unless they are in a place or situation where such moving may be entirely banned. It may be that when folks talk about un-disciplining dance they have in mind concert and theatrical dance, spectacle dance, commodified dance, show-biz dance. Meanwhile, the rest of dance—which is far more expansive than concert and theatrical dance—happily goes about its business.

Ali: As I reflect on my own physical and intellectual disciplining and un-disciplining in dance over the past half century, I find I am proud to consider myself a 'trained mover'. At the same time, I do not construe my training as qualifying me to claim some higher position on an imaginary ladder of merit in dance than a differently-trained or not-trained mover. As a matter of fact, my disciplinary training was eclectic, incorporating everything from African dance to Skinner Releasing, Cunningham, Limon and Hawkins techniques, to name a few. Some of it was classical, though I never performed in the classical style. By the time I entered dance, I had a background in athletics and gymnastics and a childhood on the farm that had already shaped my body. The latter point seems important to recognise: humans are the producers and the products of culturally informed techniques and discourses, only some of which seem to become named, promulgated and protected as 'disciplines'. But there is nothing inherently superior about the movements, say, of classical ballet in comparison with the movements intrinsic to other

forms of movement activity, or other forms of dance. To think of one or another of these activities as superior is a political act, not one of merely classifying things in the world.

I was different from many of my peers in that I was never interested in dancing *for* someone in their particular style. As soon as I could I became a choreographer in my own right with my own company of versatile creative practitioners, who were both dancers and musicians. Our work required disciplined strong athletes, improvisers and collaborators, who were prepared to take risks. We were focused, but not self-absorbed. Our mission—beyond the artistic practice—was to foster in communities more eco-political awareness, using dance and music to explore and share our ideas. We performed protest dances, and eco-affirming dances, in the streets and small town community halls as well as in theatres. We were certainly willing to be 'entertaining' in the sense of capturing and sustaining the attention of others, but we were never interested in being at the forefront of the dance 'entertainment' industry.

Larry: Your account of your disciplinary history—and it really is a *multi-disciplinary* history that includes much more than 'dance'—is interesting in light of your lack of interest in moving up the ladder of influence within the dance entertainment industry. For I think one of the main goals of the latter industry, and the training techniques and institutions that support it by feeding it a steady supply of willing and obedient dancing labour, is the goal of expanding the market share of dance as entertainment; the 'show-biz' aspect of dance.

For many years and in many places I have heard dance teachers invoke the hope of 'making it', or the threat of not 'making it', in the dance entertainment industry as they exhort students in technique class to work harder. They might say, "If you want to make it into a good company you are going to have to ...". Or "How are you ever going to make it into a good company if you don't ...?" I have not studied this issue in any detail but I suspect that students whose background training has been primarily or exclusively in something called 'dance' are more susceptible to that kind of threat-based exhortation than students with eclectic movement backgrounds. That is, they may be more likely to strive to earn a

place in the dance entertainment industry than those with a more varied physical training/experience background such as yours.

It happens to be the case that my movement background, too, is quite diverse—as a boy growing up in Southern California I was not exposed to much dance; boys were socialised into sports, not dance. We were supposed to be ‘tough’ not ‘pretty’. I played baseball, football, basketball, and ran on track and cross-country teams for many years growing up, and spent a lot of time swimming and body-surfing, and skiing. I did not become involved in dance until I was in my early twenties, and I was the only male student in class most of the time. Like you, I had no intrinsic motivation to ‘make it’ as a performer in a dance company, even as I enjoyed performing in dances other people created. From the start I wanted to make my own dances, and I wanted to make ‘strange’ ones that poked fun in some way or the other at some of the basic assumptions of the concert dance world that seemed arbitrary and ridiculous to me even as a beginner. For instance, I wanted to make dances that fell off or spilled over the edges of the stage, or that took place in the lobby of the theatre, not on the stage. I also made dances that poked fun at the rather authoritarian ways in which dance is taught: lining up people in rows and telling them how to move and commanding them to move all in the same way at the same time. All of that seemed odd to me from the start; certainly it was not an emancipatory way of being with people and moving together. Of course, all the things I did are virtually institutionalised ‘transgressions’ by now, if they weren’t already by then—dance has a way of taming and caging the wild, as I mentioned earlier. My point is not that the ‘art’ I was making (and still make) was some kind of ‘next big thing’ because it probably wasn’t, and I did not know or care whether or not it was. My point is, first, that I naturally resisted becoming assimilated into the dance entertainment industry from the start, as you did, and so in this sense I was ‘un-disciplined’ and perhaps even ‘un-discipline-able’ from the start. I say ‘naturally’ resisted because my resistance was not some considered position I was taking, at least not at the start. It was a position, or rather a direction, I took by following my interests, and they led away from the disciplinary specificity towards

which dance technique and choreography class processes and procedures tend almost always to channel young people. And the second part of my point is that part of the naturalness of my resistance to the appeal of the dance entertainment industry (which is quite narrow when viewed from a global perspective) was the fact that my movement identity, so to speak, was already so varied before dance was even added to it. By the time I came to dance I knew my body as a mover in so many ways already that the challenges and pleasures of dancing were not the only or the most important thing to me the way they sometimes are for people who have danced their whole life and done little else.

Ali: Yes, I can see how coming to dance as we did with a body/mind that has already included many other ways of moving and being with our bodies in movement could inoculate us in a way from the somewhat narrow concerns of 'dance training' aimed at the concert dance stage. I love to be on stage, though, and to perform for (and often with) an audience, and to do so under the general auspices of 'dance'. Thus, I confess to not quite knowing what I might want to un-discipline about dance. I am happy to lick my partner's leg and call it dance, but I am equally happy to lick my partner's leg and not bother to call it dance. I am pleased that others are looking down gutters and crawling naked through the streets in dance's name. But calling that or anything else 'dance' does not make it more or less interesting to me. Yet for all of my ambivalence about labelling or not labelling something as 'dance,' I do have concerns about un-disciplining dance so fully that it might be lost in the mist, or worse—taken over by some stronger invading discipline and lose its visibility. It is comforting somehow to imagine that dance will not lose its proprietary sense of form and content, its 'body' of knowledge or disciplinary identity—even as the latter may be far more an artificial than a natural construction, for it is certainly a construction that has existed since the first campfire celebrations and placatory rituals in every culture on the planet. I like to think that something broadly called 'dance' still maintains a place and a face in this rapidly morphing technological world—and that it will not just be assimilated into musical theatre or performance art. Perhaps

it is simply a name that I wish to preserve—a word rather than a body-based somatically informed physical practice. In other cultures, some kind of highly disciplined and sacred 'dance' performance practice is woven into the very fabric of a nation's culture, stratified and denoting class and status for its performers. Is the same true within western dance genres?

Larry: I recognise and sympathise with the nostalgia you feel for 'dance', even as you are happy to lick someone's leg, on- or off-stage, and not worry about whether or not anyone calls it 'dance'. I wonder what calling something 'dance' actually means anymore; what kind of status does that name provide to an activity or an event, or a mode of being? For me, incessantly jockeying for positions of status is one of the main things that has gone terribly wrong in dance. Now, it is certainly the case in the west that there are dance 'stars'—performers and/or choreographers—who enjoy celebrity status and are seen as trend-setters, and so forth. In my dance education I learned all about the 'pioneers' of modern dance (and by the way, the reference to colonial conquest in *that* term should no longer be lost on anyone) and about the various 'revolutions' in dance that led to 'the next big thing' and the next, and the next, and the next. Commodity culture, entertainment culture, the demand for something 'new' and 'fresh' and 'original' are all pressures that not only exert force on dance but shape the ways in which its practitioners imagine and undertake their practices. In the US, whoever is currently 'on top' gets a lot of invitations to teach 'master classes' or to adjudicate students' dances in competitions so that young students can have a chance to touch or at least be near 'greatness' and/or to discover what they need to change in their work to 'make it' in the field. What has always interested me about this is not that it unfolds as it does—there is nothing all that surprising about it—but that dance people who are so firmly ensconced in and committed to what we may characterise as crass/commercial pursuits in dance nevertheless speak of it as if it is some kind of higher calling, some kind of spiritually emancipatory gift they are giving and receiving. I suppose I am criticising the 'sacred' gloss that is often put on dance practices that are, to my

way of thinking, far more calculated and egocentric than I want 'the sacred' to be. I've been in institutions where candidates for inclusion—in a degree programme, in a new choreography—have been more or less lined up, assessed, and rewarded by ostensible gate-keepers on the basis of some combination of body appearance and a demonstrated capacity to conform to a prescribed norm in an obedient manner. How sacred is that?

To get back to the main topic here, the un-disciplining of dance, I might suggest that no training whatsoever is actually required for a person to dance: small children dance all the time, and the injured and infirm may also dance. It is curious to wonder why it might be so easy to say that the latter dancers are not 'good dancers'. I suggest anyone would agree they are 'dancing' but not all would say that they are 'good' or even 'real' dancers. Why is that? I think the reason is that from the standpoint of professionalised dance—that is, the kind of dance most prone to rewarding itself for being 'disciplined' and most prone to defending its territory with all manner of 'high standards' for dancing—from that standpoint the ostensibly 'good dancer' is the dancer who is in some way thrilling or entertaining for others to *watch* while they are dancing, and also to admire for moving in ways beyond the abilities of the watcher. There is a kind of desperation in some forms of dance to always make sure that dancers do things that ordinary people cannot do. This means that to be *watchable*—to be worthy of being *seen* dancing—requires that one be *disciplined* through training at dancing. The question of being 'sincerely' or 'wholeheartedly' dancing, which everyone can achieve with no training at all, is conveniently set aside in many discourses about 'good dancing', although 'good dancers' are certainly trained to *appear as if* they are sincere and wholehearted even if they are bored with what they are dancing because, as in the case of repertory works, they are tired of dancing the same old thing in the manner of a circus animal who performs the same tricks in every show.

Ali: As a seasoned dance practitioner in higher education, I am aware that we attract students who have a particular interest in 'learning to dance', and 'learning about dance', and they trust us to tell them and show them what dance is. I wonder if we can attract students to an 'un-discipline' that has no particular shape or name, even as there may be valid and interesting ethical and ecological reasons to un-discipline ourselves in those and many other ways. I wonder if I

am ready to wave away my discipline or simply broaden its parameters? I am concerned that, without its disciplinary skin, the dancer and the dance may cease to exist and the foothold in the door of the academy that we have fought so hard to attain may slide away.

Larry: I recognise the fear that nothing will be left—that a certain institutional legitimacy may be lost—if we wave away the discipline of dance, as you phrased it. It is more a marketing concern than it is a human spirit concern, so to speak. Nevertheless, to address that concern it may be useful to unpack a bit more what we mean when we contemplate the disciplined or undisciplined dancing body. The word 'discipline' is loaded with assumptions and appears to mean something very different in distinct contexts. Many of our learned colleagues are weary of the 'D' word or see it in negative terms, but others view the training of discipline in the arts as highly necessary, if not definitive of the arts. As concerns the latter idea there is probably no better example, at least in terms of transparency of thought, than Louis Horst, the ostensible 'father' of teaching choreography. Horst asserted unequivocally that choreography—dance composition—is based on only two things:

'... a conception of a theme and the manipulation of that theme. Whatever the chosen theme may be, it cannot be manipulated, developed, shaped, without knowledge of the rules of composition ... The laws which are the basis on which any dance must be built should be so familiar to the choreographer that he follows them, almost unconsciously'. (Horst & Russell 1961, p. 23)

As concerns teaching choreography, Horst asserted that the 'disciplinary period' required for learning is best considered as a period "of law and order, and any art must demand it" (Horst in Coleman, 1949, p. 128). For me, the ease with which Horst conjoins 'any art' with a 'demand' for 'law and order' reveals an unabashed drive to tame and civilise a wildness to which dance and choreography might otherwise succumb unless it is 'disciplined' through the imposition and enforcement of the 'laws' of civilisation, which are represented in Horst's case by the pre-classic and classical forms of Western music for which he advocated as

compositional paradigms. Big surprise huh? Western civilisation as a tamer of 'the wild'.

We find ideas very similar to Horst's voiced by Margaret H'Doubler, a founder of dance in higher education, when she writes (years before Horst authored his 'laws' proposition) that a dance "as much as any other work of art ... is subject to the general laws of unity or wholeness, and of organic coherence" and that "only artistic form can do full justice to sincere and earnest feeling" (H'Doubler, 1925, p. 184). Viewed through the lenses of eco-feminism and post-colonial theory, which lenses were of course not available to H'Doubler or Horst, we can see that H'Doubler reinforces a patriarchal culture/nature dualism and interiorises the expressions of earlier peoples when she writes that "with the savage, expressive acts could have been none other than random, impulsive movements that afforded quite unconscious outlet to his passing feelings" (p.10). H'Doubler reassures us, however, that the expressive acts of 'the savage' gradually "became consciously and intentionally expressive" and that "it was when thus modified that early man's expressive activities became art" (p.10). I suggest that by 'modified' H'Doubler means what many of our colleagues mean when they say 'disciplined'.

I suggest that in holding that there are or should be 'laws' of choreography, and in withholding the status of 'art' from 'random and impulsive'—i.e.,—expressions until they have been consciously and intentionally 'modified', Horst and H'Doubler set up a justification that remains firmly in place to this day for the exertion of developmental rule upon bodies and movements. Horst and H'Doubler's ideological manoeuvres reflect and sustain the infamous mind/body dualism, which is generally traced to the 'substance dualism' articulated by Descartes: the idea that the mind and body have distinct essences, one of thought and the other of spatial extension—i.e., the body. Yet the logic of mind/body dualism dates back much further than Descartes: in *Phaedo*, for example, Plato privileges mind and rejects dependency on the body, claiming that the body "is of no help in the attainment of wisdom" and that the nearest approach to true knowledge comes with "the least possible intercourse with or communion with the body" (Plato, 1948, p. 204). In *Timaeus*, Plato (1965) remarks that the body—and nature as a whole—must always be mastered and controlled. As the site of 'lower passions', Plato sees the body as needing control by 'commands' and 'threats' (Plato, 1965, p. 70). Plato's sentiments foreshadow the denial of the mind's dependency on bodily senses issued by Descartes and other enlightenment thinkers, and their suspicion of bodily senses as sources of error. For me, we should remember these

earlier, and in some cases ancient, sources of ideas about 'discipline' as it pertains to dance, bodies, movement, and so forth. For the ancient ideas remain very much in play today within the so-called 'dance world'.

To go back briefly to some of our earlier remarks on the connection between 'discipline' and the idea of the 'good dancer', I suggest the latter dancer is the one who can perform the right movements at the right time, on demand (and in the same way time after time) as stipulated by external choreographic imperatives, and censor from their performance any and all movements deemed as 'incorrect' or in any case *not included* in the dance that is to be performed. I think these abilities and a consistent willingness to embody them is what all the 'discipline' and all the 'training' is about, and is the criterion or the basis on which 'artistry' as a dancer is assessed. I might even go so far as to suggest that dance training is arguably more a movement *prohibition* system than a movement *emancipation* (enabling) system.

Ali: Renowned somaticist Professor Emeritus (Brockport, NY) Sondra Fraleigh also critiques what she refers to as 'the racist baggage of slave and master', 'dominance and mastery'<sup>1</sup> that is often implicit in the traditional dance technique class, suggesting that it represents a dead end for learning, not continuation. She asks, "Can we not simply meet students where they are and match this as they and we make choices toward growth along the way?" (Dialogue with the author, 2016).

Yet in offering remarks that counter the above ideas, classical pianist, poet and arts writer Dr Denys Trussell (NZ) holds that, 'rather than punishment, sadism or rigid adherence to old doctrines for their own sake, the truly disciplined acquisition of skills involves knowing that even a technical exercise involves an artistic intention. In music, [he suggests], even the playing of a scale has to be treated as a beautiful musical process—a poiesis with sound, a singing. It follows from this, [he continues], that each choreographic figure, each musical phrase, is forever being approached anew each time one is learning or performing it, Trussell (2016, in correspondence with the author). He adds "We could say that this creative poiesis kind of discipline is a form of undiscipline. In other words, true

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<sup>1</sup> Sondra Fraleigh, in her book *Dancing Identity: Metaphysics in Motion* (2004) cites Paulo Friere's belief that "education... should be the practice of freedom" (p.120), that "teacher student interaction replace models of teacher/student division and the rule of mastery" (p.122). She suggests that, "Matching our [nature] selves, rather than judging, allows us to slow down and notice what we are already doing in our movements and thought processes" (Fraleigh, 2004, p.122).

discipline (having Poiesis) and undiscipline, might be one and the same thing” (Trussell, 2016). Citing both biological processes of nature and those of quantum physics, Dr. Trussell explains that while one must submit to certain disciplining (causal) processes (such as gravity, or the mechanism of the piano) the pianist, or dancer, will ask ‘How can I turn that into a symbolic language?’ “In nature, [he adds] every organism represents a series of enigmatic (acausal) processes that, while consistent (homeostasis) are also free to produce novelty (spontaneous adaptation)—and that both processes are constantly interacting ... There is a difference between constancy (essential for homeostasis) and military style rigidity—a straightjacket which is eventually calamitous.” (Dialogue with the author, 2016).

Representing a very different cultural perspective, yet concurring with Dr Trussell, Dr Anwesa Mahanta, a highly regarded Assamese Sattriya dancer in India, writes:

Discipline in dance allows me to understand the form and content of the ‘language’ [of the dance] in its best way. I would like to refer to my own (Sattriya) training, where each and every move both within (inner motions) and outside include intense work out, focus and concentration. After that rigorous training, a practice which is almost equivalent to hard labour in order to live up to a standard of the highest order, the body gets acquainted with a form or interpretative pattern which gets developed as my own language. I enjoy the freedom to choose my moves in sync with moods, thoughts, music. Be it an abstract movement sequence or narration of the story it is a lived experience, a freedom of expression, which enlightens me, enlivens me or liberates me. The disciplined training is somewhat like a generative grammar for me that allows an infinite number of ‘unique artistic structures from a finite set of primitives, rules, and principles’. (A.J Bergesen, 2005). (Mahanta, A. in dialogue with the author, 2016).

Larry: I am of course familiar with many ways in which something termed as ‘freedom’ is held out as the reward, so to speak, for submission to, and possibly mastery of, something termed as ‘discipline’. Indeed, it has been my experience that a promise of freedom almost always accompanies a description of the disciplinary programme to which one is asked, or commanded, to submit. Discipline is recommended to, or

demanding of, people ostensibly for their own good, and the good is represented, just as heaven is represented in theological arguments for accepting this or that god or religion, as some kind of liberation from the bonds of the un-developed and un-tamed way that things stand in advance of the imposition of the recommended discipline. I do not advocate for the abandonment of discipline, but I do advocate for recognising that what is at the root of it is the logical structure of patriarchal dualistic thought that holds nature, the wild, the un-tamed, the un-developed, etc. as lacking in value and purpose unless and until it is instrumentalised—i.e., disciplined. There are some who might say that nature—which I might provisionally define here as the way the world is before human beings meddle in its workings—is, as Trussell intimates, always and already disciplined. That is, the wind, the tides, the seasons, and so forth, perform their work consistently, diligently, relentlessly, over and over and over, never tiring of exerting whatever forces are theirs to exert, and never soliciting applause for so doing. What could be more 'disciplined' than that, it may be asked? More pointedly, it might be asserted that the disciplinary zeal of nature is proof of the necessity, if not the righteousness, of the disciplinary zeal of humans as exercised over/upon nature, and over/upon other humans.

Missing from these kinds of rationalising accounts of the 'naturalness' of the human exertion of disciplinary force over virtually everything in the world, including other humans, is recognition that nature itself—the wind, the rain, the tides, the seasons, and so forth—does not act *politically*, does not act in the service of ego-based self-interest, and does not act with malice. Wind and rain, for example, do not actually care whether or not the mountain crumbles rapidly or slowly under their duress. The wind and rain do not make a fetish of their tradition, or sit around reminiscing about the good old days of some past storm, nor do they create training academies to professionalise their activities through a levelled curriculum that begins with soft breeze and ends with tornado. Perhaps I am being absurd here, but it seems as good a way as any to reiterate my earlier suggestion that dance, as a discipline, is anything but 'natural', and may be seen as a movement prohibition rather than as a movement

emancipation system; dancer training arguably represses more human movement than it engenders or sets free.

Ali: Yes, I see that differences among definitions of terms and in how they are used, plays a big role in how we discuss these matters, and what conclusions we may draw. I often sense that my current thinking is quite different from that of my first-year students, so I decided recently to canvas their definitions of discipline in dance. The questions I posed were particularly relevant to the ongoing discussion within my class on Dance and Somatic Practices (titled Fundamentals of Dance). Responses (written spontaneously by the students) included:

The discipline of dance—holding yourself well, striving and putting everything into getting a beautiful outcome, not worrying too much about harm or discomfort. Knowing all the common patterns that we already have in dance. Strict standards to reach that don't necessarily take into consideration individual bodies and limits. Following rules—all same dance and motions, standing the same way, looking the same, right and wrong movements. Instructions, stand up straight, first position, head high, shoulders back, pointed toes, movement pretty, right and wrong. The discipline of dance encourages innate technique, movement and body growth and traditional teaching. Disciplined dance is rigid, but 'correct', each movement and where it should be placed.

In these responses one sees the same diversity of views about discipline in dance as one sees amongst learned colleagues. This diversity of views prompts me to wonder whether and how we might create, in the University, a preparatory programme that satisfies all expectations.

Larry: I do not know that it is appropriate, assuming it is even possible, to set up a dance programme in a university that satisfies all the different kinds of students with all the different kinds of ambitions in dance. Most dance programmes and departments in the US, for example, tend to locate themselves at some particular point on the spectrum between 'conservatory' and 'liberal arts' approaches. The latter approach is marketed to the student with myriad creative and scholarly capacities and interests but perhaps

no outstanding talent or passionate drive towards any single facet of the field. These students enjoy performing dances, making dances, writing about dances, as well as teaching dance, and participating in dance production activities. Many of these students carry a second major in another field altogether, and do not anticipate a successful professional career performing or creating dances even as they hope to maintain a lifetime of involvement with the field. For these students, discipline means managing their time and energy sufficiently well to be able to keep stirring a lot of pots, only some of which may be in dance, and to generate multiple avenues towards multiple kinds of careers, only some of which may involve dance. Yet dance is what brought them to the university in the first place, and I am glad that it did, and that they are there.

The conservatory programmes, on the other hand, focus exclusively on training performers, and to a limited extent, choreographers for the concert dance stage (what we earlier were terming as the dance entertainment industry). These students are usually hand-picked through an audition process, and that means that to even enter the training programme most, if not all, of them are already 'good dancers' *before* they enter, and the programmes they enter are indeed more aptly characterised as 'training' than as 'educational' programmes. In training programmes one learns to perform prescribed actions in the correct manner without necessarily learning the underlying reasons why that manner is deemed as correct in the first place, and without experiencing opportunities within the programme to challenge the authority who deems it as correct. There is, in such programmes, a precise and efficient transfer in largely codified ways of largely codified knowledge from teacher to student. The goal is the production of stage-ready dancers who pick up movement material rapidly and can faithfully execute it time and time again, and who do not aspire to do much else in the field besides perform.

Ali: So what, I ask, might an *undisciplined body* actually look like? Indeed, what might one mean in the first place in using the term

'undisciplined'? My students responded this way: Un-discipline in dance = Being able to explore your own range of movement, being able to find beauty without pain. A free dance, a dance that doesn't care about the things that we already know about dance. Unique to the mover, intuitive; any new domain of dance; the movements are not contained or constrained. To not have to be particular and perfect. It probably isn't delicate or easy to watch but it feels good and that makes it enjoyable; dance-which goes outside the box and dares to discover. It is not afraid to break from traditional dance technique such as pointed toes etc.; hip hop, improvising. A dance free from restraints, or restrictions, free to bloom as it likes; butoh, hiphop, improvised dance. un-disciplined = sloppy, no routine and rules; unique to each person; free movement, personal dance interpretation. No punishment for being out of line; no right and wrong guidelines, no showing off of skills. Movement without balletic lines, unsculpted, untrained. Undisciplined = free, going against the status quo. Wild, free, creative, soulful, natural, free movement, improvisation, could be animal-like. Never having had discipline, always free. Un-discipline = deconstruction from discipline, liberated.

Larry: I hear those students referring to the body that has yet to be tamed, domesticated, and de-wilded by the traditional disciplinary regimes of dance—what I referred to above as codified. I hear the students naming the idea of the undisciplined body—that is, the 'not-yet-disciplined' body—as moving in accordance with its interests and needs, unaware of and therefore unconcerned with labouring to achieve the wishes of authoritative others, and especially unconcerned with orchestrating their body's appearance to achieve some aesthetic effect desired by an 'authoritative other' whose commands script the body to move this way but not that way.

It occurs to me that in inserting the hyphen between 'un' and 'disciplined' we create the notion of the *already trained* (disciplined) body that seeks freedom by throwing off the movement prescriptions imposed by others upon it. I am thinking here of the idea that to engage in un-doing something one first

has to do it, or find that it has been done. Then one can un-do it. In the same sense, we may think of an un-disciplined body as one that *remembers* but no longer adheres to choreographic imperatives for movement; it *remembers* the self-surveillance and self-correction processes it was taught to govern itself to remain true to the dance it was given to dance, but it no longer governs itself that way. Like the body that has *never* been tamed, domesticated, and de-wilded by the disciplinary regimes of dance, the *formerly* tamed, domesticated, and de-wilded body seeks to 'un-do' its discipline and immerse in the freedom of governing itself by following its actual moment-to-moment interests and proclivities; it moves as it wishes to move. It is 'wild' insofar as it is extricated from the definitional boundaries of movement on the basis of which named dance techniques assert their identity, and compete with one another in the concert and theatrical dance production industry.

I confess to having an affinity for the undisciplined body and the un-disciplined body, for each may be out of the control of *dance*. But that is not to say that these bodies are out of control, for each controls itself, when and how and as it wishes to do so. They are auto-poietic (self-making and self-regulating). And, even as the movements and the patterns of movements enacted by the undisciplined and the un-disciplined body may not be governed by the rules and tools of dance and/or choreography, the movements may be just as beautiful, if not more beautiful, to behold than any dance movements performed when disciplined dancers dance. Certainly the movements enacted by the undisciplined and the un-disciplined body are as exhilarating, if not more exhilarating, to enact than any dance movements.

Al: I find myself reflecting on the question of whether, and how, and to what degree somatic approaches are about disciplining or undisciplining the body? There has been, over the past 10 years or so, a proliferation of 'somatic education' alternatives to dance training, some of which have been infused into the traditional dance technique class. As a teacher of comparative somatics I am mindful of the discipline, the work, the hours of supervised

training such alternatives often deem as necessary to acquire efficient 'natural' alignment and 'ease and economy' of movement. Is all of this work actually achieving the production or recovery of the 'natural' body or is it merely constructing a different kind of artificial body, so to speak, as dance techniques essentially do?

Larry: I find irony in the notion that 'the natural' should require disciplinary training to achieve, just as 'good dancing' and 'good choreography' is typically thought to require. This is, of course, quite different from thinking of *the natural* as the way things are *before and without* the intrusion of any disciplinary intervention. In any case, the dance world, at least in the West, has apparently taken it upon itself to manufacture the so-called 'natural' body through the parallel disciplines of teaching and learning 'dancing,' and new modes of somatic education that are regularly harnessed to the latter goal. It is as if it is not enough that the dancer *dance* the dance, she must look as if it is *natural* for her to dance the dance, and that she dances it *effortlessly*. In a nutshell *natural* and *effortless* are the two myths of movement (they may be the same myth) promoted by the paradigm of concert and theatrical dance and, generally speaking, dance teachers and choreographers will stop at nothing to enact the myth. I recall thoughts along these lines offered by Lepecki when he writes that choreography demands "submitting body and desire to disciplining regimes (anatomical, dietary, gender, racial), all for the perfect fulfilment of a transcendental and preordained set of steps, postures, and gestures that *nevertheless must appear as spontaneous*" (Lepecki, 2006, p. 9, emphasis added).

Ali: Dance education researcher Dr Barbara Snook offers perspectives on these ideas when she asks, 'Is it not possible to 'train' to be a 'good dancer' in the technical and expressive sense, and also work at being a 'natural dancer', moving with a somatic understanding of one's own body'? Snook's view is that there is some discipline—i.e., some focused work—involved in achieving such an outcome.

Larry: Certainly it is possible to work/train, discipline oneself to be, or become, a dancer who moves with a somatic understanding of one's own body. I do not understand why it is necessary or desirable to term that as being a 'natural dancer' for what is actually 'natural' about it? It is a deliberately *constructed* body no less than the 'techniqued' body of a highly trained dancer. I suspect the temptation to use the term 'natural' in such cases as these is to provide an implied criticism of the 'artificial' or, dare I say, 'false' body of the highly techniqued dancer, but without having to make that criticism explicitly or directly. Another sub-topic of interest here, for me anyhow, is the fact that the highly techniqued dancer is often praised for being, or at least appearing to be, so 'natural' in her execution of movement. 'She looks so natural' and 'She's a natural' are praises that one often hears offered to 'good dancers'. There is some romantic attachment that many people have to the idea of the dancer as 'natural'—and I suppose this is connected to the 'noble savage' trope. The noble savage, as we know, is a romantic stereotype that embodies the idea of the person who is not-yet-corrupted-by-civilisation, and who therefore retains the innate goodness believed to exist within mankind. Ironically, the noble savage, and every other so-called savage is on the losing end of history, as the sweeping force of civilisation has revealed itself over centuries as having little innate interest in protecting and respecting anyone who resists its influences. My point here is that 'natural' is a term used politically, a term used to draw distinctions between ostensible 'sides' in a duality. Traditionally, *culture* has the upper hand in its duality with *nature*, just as *mind*, *male*, and *intellect* have the upper hand in their dualities with *body*, *female*, and *emotion*, respectively. In claiming, then, that the 'natural' mover is the one who has somehow (through discipline) escaped or overcome, or at least mitigated some of the corrupting influence of dance technique, one perhaps seeks to reverse the duality, placing 'the natural' in the privileged position. Yet this reversal maintains the logic of dualistic thinking, so even as it may provide temporary relief it does not really change very much. The fact remains, I think, that as long as

there is a strong interest in putting swift, sleek, and beautiful bodies on display performing highly stylised (and hardly 'natural') movement that is practised to perfection for a consuming public to appreciate if not fetishise, we are going to have a struggle over the use of the term 'natural'.

Ali: On the subject of training the body, Professor Sondra Fraleigh (2004), recommends 'matching not mastery'. She suggests that if we can move away from ideals of mastery and towards new paradigms for learning in dance, we will do better.

Larry: I am curious to know what exactly we might do better if we made a shift away from mastery, which I assume means mastery of imitating prescribed movements determined in advance to be correct and/or beautiful, and toward matching, which I presume to mean adjusting one's body to movement that may be given by another dancer, teacher and/or choreographer. Although Fraleigh may have been intending more spontaneous interactive collaboration between improvising dancing bodies, in other situations the instruction might translate as, 'make it your own' which is a remark often made to dancers learning a dance. A great deal of the time, however, what that remark means is 'make it look like this movement comes naturally to you, and that you love doing it'. In other words, 'make it your own', which sounds at first like an offering, is actually a command to assimilate oneself to the embodied world view of the author of the movement, rather in the same way that one might try to sound authentic in reciting a loyalty oath, or spouting the company line. As a dancer I always experienced the 'make it your own' command as an instruction to do a better job in creating the fiction that this movement I am doing just occurred to me to do, and gives me great pleasure to do. I think the idea that 'make it your own' may also mean 'do it, or something like it, in a way that is actually comfortable and pleasurable to you' is an interesting step away from mastery because the latter term usually, if not always, means 'do it my way, this time and every time'.

Ali: Clearly there are many folds and wrinkles in the fabric of this topic, and one we have not yet named specifically is the question

of whether or not it is possible within institutions of higher learning to un-discipline dance; for to earn its place within such institutions dance has had to fight hard to distinguish itself from other named arts disciplines that are fighting just as hard to distinguish themselves as sufficiently unified and coherent to warrant the kind of separation that counts as success for any body of thought and practice also attempting to singularise themselves as 'a discipline'. All disciplines fear their assimilation into other, larger, named domains, fields, categories of disciplines.

Larry: I do see each discipline with walls around itself that it protects vehemently, as if such walls prove that what is trapped inside is worth protecting because it is indeed a discipline, and that being a discipline is superior to being, say, a loosely organised and highly diverse array of ideas, which I think is what dance actually is. Ironically, I find that within the protective walls there is a kind of loneliness, a longing for connection with other disciplines, so long as the others do not encroach in any permanent way upon 'our territory'. Each of the disciplines likes to be a guest in the home of the other disciplines, and to have guests come in, but none wants to cohabit in any permanent way for fear of losing its identity—i.e., its budget, its faculty lines, its courses, its offices, equipment, and support staff—within the walls of the fortress/institution of higher learning writ large. So here we all sit as the glaciers melt and the seas rise around us, and neo-Nazis feel newly emboldened ... here we sit protecting academic and artistic territory and defending definitions, and trying desperately to expand and enliven 'our discipline' at least in semantic if not practical ways without putting anything on the table that might be grabbed by another discipline, and thus lost to us. I find it all very short-sighted, and the time is getting shorter to make changes that might be sustainable.

Ali: Rather than thinking about un-disciplining dance, I suggest that we might re-visit what a discipline of dance, within the university, might mean in this time of change; what purpose does any silo-ing of knowledge serve in today's world as we struggle to confront issues that are so complex that they are not solvable by any single disciplinary approach?

My interests now lie in dance's role in a trans disciplinary world<sup>2</sup>—one in which the arts, sciences, technologies, social sciences, history, ecology, education and more work together to invent new collaborative ways of solving such enormous global concerns as—war, hunger, climate change and the like.

I am looking towards a 'dance without borders'—an opening up and sharing of our discipline knowledge and skill base with others from other disciplinary backgrounds, other cultures and with other sets of skills. I am interested in a dance form that wants to engage with the crucial and life threatening issues of the world and works towards world peace. In particular, I wish to declare dance technique training a de-militarised zone. (I am referring to what I and some of my colleagues have come to refer to as the '5, 6, 7, 8' mode of rote teaching and learning. However, I am aware that, for this to be possible, the discipline of dance itself must be clear about what it has to offer, be secure in its own self (disciplinary)—identity. Dance must be *ready* to morph, bend and re-shape itself to adapt to this new environment, for according to social theorist Niklas Luhman (2000), when a system (or discipline) is fluid, open and responsive to change (adaptation) it is more easily able to cross boundaries and survive.

Larry: One thing that is interesting here is that in order to practice boundary crossing there needs to be a boundary to cross. Thus, it appears we must first be able to *define our discipline* in order to breach or open up its boundaries.

Al: Proponents of transdisciplinarity, such as Sue McGregor (2008), describe 'zones of [disciplinary] non-resistance' where new methods are generated and a 'new transdisciplinary intelligence and knowledge' may be generated together. By inviting ourselves into a transdisciplinary domain dance, I contend, we can offer the other arts and sciences new ways of reframing, viewing and presenting knowledge, as a re-investment, a re-arrangement of symbols, just as

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<sup>2</sup> Nicolescu, B. (2008) describes Transdisciplinarity as being "at once *between* the disciplines, *across* the different disciplines, and *beyond* all disciplines". (pp. 2-3). Its aim is a bringing together of knowledge and its goal is about understanding the world we inhabit.

they inform us. (Transdisciplinarity, it must be remembered, is not exclusive of disciplinarity—in fact it depends on it) (East, 2011b).

Following on from all of this, Jenn Joy (Lepeki & Joy, 2009) reminds us that the dance act itself requires “a constant re-negotiation of presences” (p. 74). In our ‘unframing’, ‘rupturing’, and ‘re-invention’ of the definitions of dance, to use Guattari’s terminology (in Lepeki & Joy, 2009 p. 74), we could move slowly towards a dissolution or opening up of disciplinary borders and away from formulaic dance models of instruction and presentation. But the move is slow.

With more focus on concept driven creative process than product, comes increased possibility for new discoveries, new artistic directions and a deeper exploration of self for students. This would seem like a form of undisciplining where, to use the words of arts educators Irwin et al. (2006) “creating, teaching, learning and researching [remain] in a constant state of becoming” (p. 71)<sup>3</sup>.

I suggest we close with some remarks from some of the colleagues we heard from earlier:

Barbara Snook: While it is important to continually push boundaries it is also important to find new ways of having kinder, safer and more individualised ways of dancing ... Let’s be careful not to lose dance along the way while at the same time push[ing] all those boundaries and express[ing] ourselves in our time by broadening parameters and do so with a deliberate intention.

Denys Trussell: Yes, you could say almost anything could be dance including licking your partner’s leg, providing *that* lick and *that* leg meet with a fluent poesis appropriate to that instant. That could and would be dance.

Anwesa Mahanta: If I have to respond to the undisciplining of dance, it would itself refer to an intentional process of un-learning and adaptation to a new approach—a new discipline.

Sondra Fraleigh: It seems to me the whole question of un-discipline needs to be reframed to get it out of the groove of discipline. I am speaking about the ‘how’ not the ‘what’ of embodying movement, including

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<sup>3</sup> I have written at length about non-judgemental participatory engagement of teacher with students in the classroom (East, 2011a.).

style ... To me, the so-called un-discipline is all about approach to teaching/learning movement and dance, and I would rather call this approach somatic, where the teaching is not mediated with discipline, neither reward nor punishment, but rather being present to the moment of learning. I just think of the learning of dance as being in a wide field of *practice*, and the techniques as means, varying, and changing. If we can move away from ideals of mastery<sup>4</sup> and towards new paradigms for learning in dance, we will do better. The end, well, it does take care of itself if we are in the flow of learning and doing.

Larry: There are many wise words there. To *un-discipline* dance is to unfasten it from the very notion of a discipline in the first place. To unfasten it from masters and disciples and 'levels' and competitions and ego pursuits. To un-discipline dance is to re-wild it. To set it free. This is a complicated process, and a politically precarious one. As you and others have suggested above, it is initiated and sustained by an attitudinal shift towards power and influence, a shift from protecting-from-difference and keeping-out towards embracing difference and letting-in. What those concepts mean, on a practical level, will be different in different contexts.

Ali: And my final word? Well, I have always defined myself as a dancer first, human animal second and then ecologist, environmentalist, teacher, mother, grandmother and, more recently, writer. When I name myself dancer I am also naming the lens through which I view the world. Dance is more than my art or even a discipline—it is my paradigm, my practice, my source of spiritual understanding and enlightenment. It is my access to and connection with myself, others, and the world.

Nga mihi nui kia tatou katoa.

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<sup>4</sup> Fraleigh (2004) states, "I substitute 'matching' for 'mastery'. To match, rather than master, the already transcendent nature of the world would be to dance, to engage in anything for the pleasure of the doing itself and not for future rewards." (p. 123)

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