



**INFINITE  
REPERTOIRE**

*On Dance and Urban Possibility  
in Postsocialist Guinea*

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## DANCE AND THE CORPOREAL UNCANNY: PHILOSOPHY IN MOTION

by Philipa Rothfield. 2021. Abingdon, UK:  
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What makes for great dancing? Is it a depth of technical proficiency embodied in the signature moves of a dancer, or the constellation of impulses orientated in the moment by moment resolution of a virtuosic exchange of forces? This is a question that recurs in Philipa Rothfield's *Dance and the Corporeal Uncanny* as she probes two distinct paradigms for contemplating and engaging with dancing, spectating, and choreographing. Two ways of thinking about the value of dancing, its grip on the individual subject and the world, emerge through the axes of this book as it speaks to the possibilities enacted by the movement of thought taking place at the threshold between dancer and dance, dance and audience, dance and world.

Rothfield, an Australian philosopher, dancer, and dramaturg, invites practitioners and scholars of dance to consider how we can think the subject in corporeal rather than conscious terms. Underscoring her thesis is consideration of the ethical dimensions of dance practice and its place in sociocultural contexts inscribed with the politics of difference. In a time when dance education and training in universities and conservatoires are undergoing an expansion of kinaesthetic practices and movement techniques—in part a long overdue response to decolonial thinking, BLM, and calls for social and creative justice—thinking through the question of corporeal subjectivity must necessarily address difference and speak to the affordances of a multiplicity of movement subjectivities. Rothfield does this through her attention to the figure of the dancer conceived in relation to agency and action within historically and culturally specific “kinesthetic milieu.” Concerned with the “place of the subject within a philosophy of action” (1), Rothfield navigates lineages of thought relevant to dance thinking

and practice, mining the philosophical literature from phenomenology to post-subjectivity and feminism. Expanding upon and departing from key tropes of dance discourse such as kinesthetic awareness (Ehrenberg 2015) and kinesthetic empathy (Foster 2011), she brings the reader in proximity to what a dancing body can do at a perceptual level, provoking thinking about the ontological significance of dance as cultural production and innovation. Defining key terms—“kinesthetic sensibility,” “movement subjectivity,” “kinesthetic milieu,” “corporeal formation,” “sovereign subjectivity,” and the “ontology of force”—she builds a lexicon for a dance philosophy that is indelibly sited in the ethical dimensions of corporeal encounters, including her own lived experiences.

If the current state of crisis for dance means that norms of disciplinary techniques that have long inscribed dance habits and dominant subject types are being cracked open, how might we rethink what makes great dancing from a position of corporeal diversity? Furthermore, how might our own situated perspectives, movement habits, and tacit bodily schemata affect the modes of movement subjectivity we have available to us at a perceptual level? The familiar and the unfamiliar or uncanny in movement threads through the book as operations for orientating the vital experience of dancing as a disruption to the known and the given, destabilising hegemonic practices and everyday movement habits, including those imposed by colonial violence in an Australian context.

Part 1 addresses movement subjectivity through embodiment and agency as phenomenologically experienced and culturally inscribed in specific practices. Part 2 displaces the dance subject entirely through a Deleuzian interpretation of Nietzschean philosophy to ascribe value to the ontology of forces that provide a corporeal basis for action and innovation. Through the concept of movement subjectivity, Rothfield elaborates upon practice in the dance studio as a taking place of “motor intentionality” within distinct cultural and kinesthetic milieu. Crucial to the author's dance phenomenology is her reframing of Merleau-Ponty through an understanding of bodily schema. Rothfield distinguishes between body image and body schema

to clarify how movement intentionality organizes the dancer's perceptions, dispositions, and movement preferences toward a corporeal "signature" (54). Perception, as a movement beyond the self and into the world, is harnessed to an overall body plan, which emerges at the nexus between body and the world. Rothfield argues that we acquire specific habits through practices of dancing, embedding competencies and cultivating "specific modes of intentional relationships toward the act of dancing" (53). Rather than a conscious image of movement, bodily schema operates in the background of movement subjectivity, fuelling and impacting the choices dancers have available and their capacity to apprehend the dances of others.

Rothfield's inclusive approach calls attention to the atypical in dance as "disruptive variations between thought and action" (57), and it is to these minor gestures (after Deleuze) that her attention turns in order to en flesh her argument. Drawing on a range of kinesthetic fields emerging from Korean dance (Kim Mae-ja and Kim Jae-duk), Australian and US contemporary dance (Russell Dumas, Deborah Hay), and the performative radicalism of SJ Norman and Adam Goodes, amongst others, Rothfield provides concrete accounts for her proposal that dancing as "philosophy in motion" can provide the means whereby we might conceive subjectivity as a mode of desubjectivation. She argues that, through attending to somatic and virtuosic modes, dancers have the capacity to move beyond the givens of culture, loosening the hold of subjectivation and opening the potential for a type of freedom resistant to capture by the disciplining effects of subjectivity.

Resisting hegemonic conceptions of kinesthetic value and dance categories, the social and political situatedness of dance is considered through a perceptual register that is focused around somatic attention, virtuosity, and a plurality of time. Atypical movements that break with the smooth contours of flow are read as instances of virtuosic skill in Australian dancer Melinda Smith's spasmodic movement in *Spasmodic* (2018). A visit to Korea compels consideration of the inadequacies of Western categories of aesthetic modernism for understanding the kinesthetic sensibility of Korean dance. Discussing the work of Kim Mae-ja and his attempts to modernize Korean traditional dance, Rothfield asks what new

kinesthetic sensibilities might emerge in the midst of preserving kinesthetic value? Rothfield calls for "temporal plurality," in perceiving the Korean dancing body as many timed, challenging the canonical authority of Western dance aesthetics, through "pluralization rather than progression" (111) and an "elastic temporality." Dance, understood as an ongoing practice of corporeal formation centered around kinesthetic sensibilities, emerges through negotiations with cultural, social, and historical forces.

If witnessing or experiencing "great dancing" is about perceiving difference in the arrival of something new, if it leads somatic attention to where it has not been led before, then it is to Nietzsche's concept of the "sovereign individual" that Rothfield suggests we look in part 2 to better understand innovation as an active refashioning of culture through the virtuosic expressivity of dancing. Dancing, as a contingent resolution of competing impulses, a moment in the flow of "becoming otherwise," keeps open the indeterminacy of the body. Virtuosity plays with this indeterminacy through a virtual field of trajectories inside and outside of the body. Reading Deleuze's Nietzsche through the kinesthetic milieu of dance practice, Rothfield analyzes cultural production through the corporeal inscription of forces. The returns of corporeality, what Rothfield terms "movement's riposte," arises from modes of attending, somatically and socially, to the experience of movement in the moment without resorting to a metaphysics of presence. It is this corporeal freedom that underscores the production of culture empowering dancers to move outside of and beyond habit and conformity, and potentially destabilizing historical figurations. Expressed as "sovereign virtuosity," collective and individual work that reconfigures the kinesthetic milieu through its movement qualities, timing, or technique inaugurates "new forms of value" (173).

Rothfield expands upon this Nietzschean concept to discuss the performance of embodied Indigenous sovereignty in performances by performance artist SJ Norman and football player Adam Goodes. It is here that Rothfield is most acute in her articulation of the body's capacity to resist hegemonic forces. SJ Norman's *Take This For It Is My Body* uncannily re-renders the past, disturbing the colonial

occupier from complacency. Adam Goodes's performance of an Aboriginal war dance on the football field and subsequent calling out of racism, is a further expression of Indigenous embodied sovereignty that unsettles the colonial occupier. In chapter 7, Rothfield reveals how SJ Norman and Goodes command that white Australia take stock of their position as "colonizing other" (200). Their counter-narratives, as embodied innovations, created an atmosphere of disequilibrium making possible something other than the mere repetition of colonial narratives.

Rothfield offers a conception of the body as midway between the intellect and the chaotic multiplicity of impulses. In concluding, she notes it is impossible to abandon entirely the plane of the subject. The uncanny is but a "glimmer," an invitation to move otherwise beyond habits of practice and the acquired codes of dances that are learned. Great dancing can be construed as the "informed manipulation of divergent forces" (140). Embracing this plurality can be the marker of skillful and great dancing.

In her conclusion, Rothfield quotes Deleuze: "in a book, there is nothing to understand, but much to make use of" (228). *Dance and the Corporeal Uncanny* is a conceptual book offering tools for thinking with and through dance in the studio, on the stage, in the stalls, and importantly on the side of and beside dance. At the time of writing, dancers' desire for velocity, amplitude, attunement, and reach has been frustrated by an extended health crisis, which saw a shift to online classes and restrictions on the proximity, palpability and scale of dance. New habits formed and the perceptual thresholds dancers are accustomed to were transformed within this new kinesthetic milieu. In navigating radical changes to the dance landscape, Rothfield's book is timely in its offering of thinking tools that can be applied to a range of dance contexts including educational, choreographic and scholarly. These tools privilege somatic attention, corporeal diversity, the elasticity of time and movement innovation toward a kinesthetic literacy that deepens understanding of dance's ontology beyond aesthetic categories.

As a contribution to Dance Studies, Performance Studies and Philosophy it is an invitation to form new corporeal-conceptual relations, reconfiguring what it means to move dance thinking and perceive dancing in ethical

ways through a reconsideration of the experience of what dancing does.

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## Works Cited

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## DANCE & COSTUMES: A HISTORY OF DRESSING MOVEMENT

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The costume a dancer wears in performance impacts a viewer's overall impression of a dance work as it invariably shapes how choreographies make meaning. Despite their centrality to performance, however, dance costumes are often undertheorized in academic contexts. Notable exceptions include art historians who have made critical contributions to scholarly examination of Pablo Picasso and Sonia Delaunay's costumes for the Ballets Russes as well as Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet* performed at the Bauhaus. Museum exhibitions in recent decades have also provided important interventions in demonstrating methods of using dance costumes to pursue interdisciplinary research. For instance, exhibitions at the Victoria and Albert Museum and the National Gallery of Art on the Ballets Russes (mounted in 2010 and 2013, respectively) accentuated how the painter-designed costumes of artists such as Léon Bakst and Natalia Goncharova contributed to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art, that impresario Serge Diaghilev sought in his dance works. Furthermore, the Fashion Institute of Technology has recently presented *Fashion & Dance* (2014) and *Ballerina: Fashion's Modern Muse* (2020), exhibitions that emphasized stage costume's sweeping influence on couture and ready-to-wear fashion.