

Becoming Gypsy: Tell Me What the Body Knows in Flamenco Dance

Diane Oatley

ABSTRACT

In *The Meaning of the Body*, philosopher Mark Johnson makes a case for the significance of movement in terms of the body processes he holds as essential to the generation of meaning and knowledge acquisition in physical interaction with the world—equally essential as language and cognition. The article employs this theory in interpreting the experiences of women learning flamenco dance in Spain. The investigation of the perceptions of women studying flamenco dance, a dance tradition often defined as “gypsy,” indicates that exposure to flamenco dance and culture leads to revision of stereotypes regarding embodiment and difference, but respondents did not relate this revision to bodily engagement, or physical processes particular to dancing flamenco. Although Johnson’s failure to properly account for the role of the unconscious proved to be a serious shortcoming in the theory, and one which had implications for the findings, application of the theory disclosed the parameters of a discourse on the body in flamenco. The theory thus represents a radical gesture in redefining embodiment in its own right in a manner that precludes dualism with the consequent opening of a range of alternative perspectives on the articulation of embodied knowledge.

SAMMENDRAG

I *The Meaning of the Body* gjør filosofen Mark Johnson rede for hvordan bevegelse og fysisk utforskning av verden er grunnleggende for menings- og kunnskapsproduksjon hos mennesker, like grunnleggende som språklige og kognitive prosesser. Artikkelen ser på kvinners erfaringer i læring av flamenco dans i Spania i lys av teorien, særlig med tanke på evt. holdningsendringer i forhold til sigøynernes betydning i flamenco. Kontakt med flamencodans og dens tilhørende kultur førte til en endring av oppfatninger omkring den spanske sigøynerkulturen hos kvinnene som ble intervjuet i undersøkelsen. Ingen av kvinnene derimot ga uttrykk for at disse endringene hadde sammenheng med fysiske prosesser, følelser, persepsjoner eller fornemmelser i forbindelse med å danse flamenco. Selv om Johnsons teori syntes dermed å komme til kort da den ikke tar en klar stilling til underbevissthets og det denne hadde av konsekvenser for funnene, avdekkes det ved hjelp av teorien konturene til en diskurs omkring kroppsforståelsen i flamenco som kunnskapsfelt. Teorien representerer dermed et radikalt grep i den grad den omdefinierer det kroppslige på et vis som overskrider dualisme og slik åpner opp for alternative perspektiver på kroppslig viten.

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Introduction

Hundreds of women travel to Andalusia every year from all over the world to study flamenco dance. Why women decide to make such a journey and what they are seeking to achieve is, of course, very individual. Flamenco dance has in fact a multitude of manifestations: it is both a dance for the stage and a folkloric practice, and the role of the *gitano*¹ population in the development and practice of flamenco remains a source of controversy. In this regard, the *gitano*, whether perceived as a mythical figure, a cultural identity, or an ethnic or racial category, represents a complex site of negotiation that dancers who come to Spain from abroad to study flamenco must address in their journey to understand the dance as an aesthetic practice and art form, as a tradition, how and where it takes place, its position in society, and the role it has assumed or been assigned in terms of cultural identity. Flamenco dance scholar Michelle Heffner Hayes offers the following explanation for some of the underlying complexity:

Flamenco dance has a multitude of manifestations and the role of the gitano population in flamenco remains a source of controversy. On stage here is dancer Miguel Angel Heredia from Jerez de la Frontera. Photo: Loly Castellano Alcedo.



A gypsy at the time of Cervantes or Mérimée had a different ethnicity, a different community and way of life from that at the turn of the century or today. However, the category of “gypsy” retains some of its exotic, mythical significance in contemporary contexts. In flamenco dance, the “gypsy” style exists independently of gypsy bodies, or rather, constructs gypsy bodies through the layering of coded visual and audible signifiers. (Hayes 2009, 137)

The negotiation of this complexity is a learning process that is lived and unfolds in different ways in different women. I was interested in exploring how practitioners experience this process, both within and outside of the dance studio/performance space. Did the experience of learning about flamenco culture specifically through the practice of dancing in the art form’s originary setting produce a particular form of knowledge about that culture and its manner of being in the world? Second, in exploring the *gitano* identity as found in flamenco, or the specific manifestations of flamenco perceived as being particular to *gitano* practitioners with an eye to its embodiment, are practitioners seeking to “become gypsy” or, at the very least, to learn to dance like the “Other(s),” however they have or have not defined this for themselves? A Finnish study of teachers of transnational dances in Finland suggests that “probably it is specifically this [Spanish] exoticism that attracts people first” (Siljamäki, Anttila, and Sääkslahti 2012, 8) to flamenco. The authors state further that:

According to the teachers, many Finns—both the so-called general public and some of the beginners in flamenco dance—still consider flamenco a feature of Spanish exoticism, and this may have several different implications. Some of the amateur flamenco dancers are drawn by this dance form because they find it different, fascinating, and exotic. (Siljamäki et al. 2012, 8)

To reframe my question in these terms, are women who come to flamenco initially seeking to “become exotic” in the sense of finding expression for and/or embodying through dance a felt sense of exoticism, which they otherwise do not find space for in their own culture? Based on the above, it is reasonable to believe so. Is this perception of the above-cited exoticism of flamenco gradually shed and revised in the process of learning the dance in the site of its sociocultural origins?

These questions in themselves proved to be fraught with a number of issues: On the one hand, I was looking for something more than “socially desirable responses” and was unsure about how to acquire these. I was also interested in disclosing knowledge that was specific to the experience of dancing and dancers. Finally, I wanted to employ an approach that would enable me to steer clear of any Orientalist² assumptions that one might best access the *gitano* identity, and any perceived exoticism pertaining to this, through dance and the body. The idea that, by moving into a state of being-subsumed by/in the body through dance, one will be better equipped to become/access the Other, relegates the Other to a position outside of language, as if that Other could be somehow reduced to the body, thereby rendering it dumb and mute, to be best understood sensually.

Embodiment in and of itself is neither an authentic or privileged state—it does not enable us to “access” the soma³ of other bodies in a manner that is more true. The issue thus became how to go about exploring these questions without further perpetuating stereotypes and in a manner that enabled bypassing a reactionary fetishizing of the body as the bearer of “the real,” also in my own perception of embodiment (Hewitt 2005, 7). Inversely, how can one get away from privileging cognitive knowledge as more true than the knowledge of the body? In short, is it even possible in such an endeavor to bypass dualist thought and all of its trappings?

The Meaning of the Body

What I was looking for was a theory that configured the body and knowledge in a manner opening up for the possibility of thinking about these issues through different parameters. This search brought me to the theory of philosopher Mark Johnson as presented in *The Meaning of the Body*. Working within the interdisciplinary field of embodied cognitive science, Johnson makes a case for the significance of movement, perception, and emotion in terms of the primary body processes he holds as essential to our production of meaning and knowledge acquisition in interaction with situations in the world. The embodied cognitivism of Johnson as outlined in this book and in earlier writings with George Lakoff (Lakoff and Johnson 1999) has been addressed by dance studies scholars from a number of sub-disciplines ranging from kinesthetic empathy studies to dance ethnography, and critical performance and movement studies.⁴ Drawing from findings in neuroscience, what Johnson's theory explores is not only how the body is lived, but how the body experiences and is wholly implicated in the acquisition of knowledge and sense-making, as he makes a case for the mind and body as a continuum. On the basis of this, he claims that "it is originally through movement that we come to inhabit a world that makes sense to us [...] we literally discover ourselves in movement" (Johnson 2007, 20).

Johnson's theory thus rejects mind-body dualism, stating that "the cognitive/emotive dichotomy [that pervades Western philosophy] does more harm than good" (Johnson 2007, 9). Instead, Johnson holds that meaning is actually grounded in our bodily experience, reaching deep into our physical encounter with the world: there is no disembodied mind, no transcendent soul or ego that is the source of meaning. Thought is not something external that we apply through our intellect to represent our experience. Meaning emerges from our sensorimotor perceptions, our feelings and visceral connections to our world, and

our imaginative capacities to create abstract concepts out of the continuum of lived experience. Reason is an embodied event, by which our experience is explored, criticized, and transformed in inquiry. It is tied to structures of our perceptual and motor capacities and inextricably linked to feeling. Emotion is significant because "what is meaningful to us and how it is meaningful depends fundamentally on our ongoing monitoring of our bodily states as we experience (have feelings about) and act within situations in our world" (Johnson 2007, 57).

The theory thereby offers a means of rethinking knowledge in a manner that profoundly institutes the body, sensation, and perception, and the role of emotions/feelings in knowledge acquisition. All of these types of experiences are traditionally discounted by Western science and philosophy as subjective and therefore as not being "factual," scientific, or even useful in determining truth. To understand embodied meaning, Johnson maintains that you must look at the affordances of felt qualities – meaningful qualities and patterns of bodily experience, which ground our more abstract structures of meaning. Central to his theory is the connection of abstract thought to sensorimotor experience through what he calls image schemas—"dynamic, recurring pattern[s] of organism-environment interaction" (Johnson 2007, 136) that enable us to make sense of and navigate the world – and metaphor, which "makes it possible to extend body-based meaning and inference into abstract thought" (Johnson 2007, 177).

Johnson stresses, however, that meaning cannot be delimited to such felt qualities, nor to conscious thought, both of which can only *lead us* to meaning. The sensorimotor processes he is describing are by his own admission predominantly automatic and unconscious. He notes, "Mostly, meaning emerges for us beneath the level of our conscious awareness" (Johnson 2007, 17). So, although meaning-making, as Johnson defines it, is intimately tied to perception and

emotions, this does not necessarily imply a *conscious* feeling of the emotion having a meaning, and in fact, as he concedes, in most cases it does not. While he explains at length how such unconscious processes of embodied meaning-making take place neurologically speaking, and relates this to metaphor, the broader implications of his theory for language (if any) or more importantly for discourse and power remain unaddressed. As will be seen, for the purposes of this study, the fact that “most of this ongoing processing and action is never consciously entertained” (Johnson 2007, 68) proved to have immediate ramifications for the findings, not least because my thesis question relates to preconceived notions.

Methodology

I interviewed five women who had been dancing flamenco for four years or more, where at least half of that time had been spent learning the dance in Spain. The women were from Spain, the Netherlands, Canada, Norway, and Japan. With the exception of the Spanish woman, all the women first began learning flamenco dance outside of Spain, in their respective countries of origin, and subsequently moved to Spain to pursue study of the dance in depth and with time began dancing professionally. As such, all of the women, again with the exception of the woman from Spain, pursued flamenco dance as if it were a job: it was a full-time endeavor involving regular classes and private rehearsal on a daily basis. The Spanish woman was from Jerez de la Frontera, and did not begin dancing until late in life. She was the only one of the group with no professional ambitions, but she invested all of her free time and resources on activities such as studying the dance and the music, attending concerts, and taking private lessons and group classes. One of the women was based in her native country at the time of the interview, and performed and taught internationally, while all of the other women travelled back to their countries on a regular basis to perform

and teach flamenco.

I conducted the interviews individually and in person (orally as opposed to in writing). The interviews were structured and based on a list of questions I had prepared in advance (see appendix) in Spanish or English. The interview style was informal, and transpired as a conversation in which I pursued relevant information through follow-up questions. I assured the informants of their anonymity as a means of enabling them to open up and share experiences that they otherwise might not want spread throughout the flamenco community. For this reason, when I make direct quotations below, I do not mention the nationality of the woman in question; furthermore, the subject of nationality was neither addressed as a part of the interviews, and at this preliminary juncture, its relevance has not been entertained. The interviews were very interesting for a number of reasons, not least from a narrative standpoint. I would have liked to have commented on the details here, but for reasons of space I will restrict myself to a summary of main findings. The most striking feature of the material relevant to the question at hand was in fact a commonality in the nature of their experiences, or more specifically, in the way they spoke about them, as will be discussed below. Neither do I present or explore the diversity of their backgrounds. However, the commonality of their responses was in fact all the more striking given the diversity of nationalities, dance backgrounds, and personal histories.

My position as researcher as pertains to methodology. I began studying flamenco dance in Oslo, Norway in 2002, and travelled to Jerez in 2005 for the first time to take flamenco dance classes in Spain. I have since that time spent on average six months every year in Jerez de la Frontera studying the dance. My position as a foreign student, with a long-term relationship to flamenco's host culture, thus mirrors that of my informants. This found expression in the inductive nature of the interviews. I was not seeking to

uncover a “reality” or “truth,” but rather to encourage and take part in the construction of a narrative about the bodily experiences of studying flamenco dance in Spain. With this in mind, I designed the questions to target Johnson’s felt qualities—meaningful qualities and patterns of bodily experience as explained above – particularly through follow-up questions on what I perceived as the expression of relevant information. None of the informants had a dance studies or theoretical background, and neither did I present or seek to teach them the theories forming the basis of the study. The underlying intention was then in part to “stage” an (implicit) encounter of theory with practice with an eye towards, on the one hand, testing the veracity of the theory itself and, on the other, exploring the nature of a potential discourse of the body in the experience of dancing flamenco in Spain.

How Does It Feel?

Will dancers who have spent the greater portion of their lives working with precisely the levels of knowledge that Johnson seeks to elucidate have a more acute understanding of what he proposes as the inevitably embodied nature of knowledge? In being experts in movement, will they then, as a matter of course, also expertly produce meaningful metaphors about that expertise? And on the basis of such expertise, will women coming to flamenco with all kinds of stereotypes about that tradition, through the experience of learning the dance, gain and produce knowledge through the learning of the dance itself that will inevitably undo those very prejudices?

With regard to the question of becoming gypsy, what the interviews revealed was that the respondents’ exposure to flamenco dance and the culture of flamenco led to a revision of received notions regarding ethnicity, difference, and otherness particular to that same culture. In other words, they all gave me politically correct, well-informed responses and otherwise demonstrated an awareness of the complexity

of the *gitano* community and the role of the *gitano* in the history and practice of flamenco dance. However, they did not relate this revision to bodily engagement, movement acquisition, or other forms of sensory perception experienced while dancing. On the whole, their responses for the most part bypassed the level of physical sensations altogether, to such an extent that the obvious conclusion was that they either were not aware of any processes taking place at this level or, if they were, were not able to verbalize them. When asked whether learning to dance flamenco had introduced new embodied knowledge⁵ or bodily experiences, most of them had difficulties understanding the question, and gave little or no indication of this having taken place. This was the case no matter how I reformulated the questions. For example, one woman cited articles and books she had read, and although I reminded her again and again that I was interested in her experiences, she seemed unable or unwilling to speak of these. The “experience” she wanted or was able to give me was that of what she had read about flamenco and dance.

Three of the five women had dance-related injuries at the time of the interviews. None of them understood these injuries as a potential source of new knowledge about themselves, the art form of flamenco dance, or about dance in general. They did not contextualize their injuries within the situation of dancing flamenco, or as being something particular to their own manner of responding to the dance. Their perception of their injuries was wholly instrumental, a mechanical, health condition to be treated, viewed as a malfunction for which they were personally responsible, as opposed to a potential cause for reflection about any felt qualities of the movement patterns specific to the aesthetic of flamenco dance, the teaching methods to which they had been exposed, or any other type of physical process particular to the dance or learning situations.

Two of the respondents did speak about, on

the one hand, a changed body image: "I accept my large frame in a way I did not before; there is more acceptance for this in flamenco"; and on the other, improved self-esteem: "I have more self-confidence since I started dancing flamenco. My body is stronger. I feel proud of myself as a woman." I find this to be relevant to the issues at hand, although the respondents again did not specifically relate these changes to any experiences particular to the physical processes or sensations involved in learning the dance or dancing; rather, this was presented more as an unintended outcome or a side-effect. But certainly the fact that the dance practice produced a revision of their body image is relevant, and it is of interest that the discourse they used to speak about this was a psychologizing discourse, on the one hand, and the discourse of self-esteem, on the other. These represent perhaps the most available discourse we currently have on hand to speak about such processes.

Another respondent made clear reference to a transition in her learning experience whereby she came to understand flamenco dance as being about self-expression, about the importance of finding "her own" flamenco. In this context, she described a very specific experience whereby she ceased "copying" the teacher's movements, and began "pulling the dance out of [herself], from inside of [her] body." When I followed up by asking her how this felt, she elaborated that it implied "a particular embodied understanding, greater presence, more coordination, and interaction between different parts of the body." So rather than exploring in greater depth any specific sensations or feelings involved in "pulling [the dance] out of [her] body," which I viewed as a complex observation and an opening to precisely the types of knowledge I was interested in exploring, her subsequent explanation closed this opening, shifting instead into a formalized and general contemporary dance vocabulary, using concepts such as presence and embodied understanding. I do not want to dismiss this out of

hand as being irrelevant: it is a type of knowledge and a valid means of describing experience. However, it also serves to highlight precisely some of the parameters I am seeking to transcend by encouraging the women to consider *how it feels* to dance flamenco. Understanding the flamenco dancing body through the lens of contemporary dance will of necessity serve to delineate those areas (if any) in which the two dance practices are similar, and risks bypassing altogether that which is particular to flamenco. I will expand upon this point below.

The same woman spoke of the experience of dancing with live music, and how "the guitar music goes right into your body." When I asked her to comment on this further, whether she had any recollections of how this felt, she replied that "the movements of the dance come of themselves [...] that I stop thinking and let the body improvise." She moved here again from a personal statement, opening up an embodied experience, to close it, in this case through a reinstatement of a mind-body dualism: the implication is that it was when she stopped thinking that her body movements were freed. Thought is contrary to "free" movement.

One of the respondents did speak briefly and articulately about sensation in relation to the dance, stating that, when she danced well, it was as if her "blood vessels seemed to expand and [her] blood was vibrating." This is an experience I could identify with, as an informed viewer of the dance, in the sense of a particular kinesthetic texture that is produced in flamenco. In my mind, it also corresponds with what Johnson would call the felt qualities produced through a given aesthetic, in a given situation. This respondent was thus able to identify and verbalize an awareness of bodily sensations that were specific to her experience of dancing flamenco. But they fed only back into the dance itself: she demonstrated no awareness that the sensations she was able to speak about might have consequences in a broader sense, for herself personally,

or her perception of (her own) embodied identity, of these sensations being a potential opening for further reflection about flamenco or the dance itself, her practice of it, alternative perceptions about life, aesthetics—in sort, as an opening for the production of knowledge.

So What If I Can't Talk About It?

To paraphrase William James (quoted in Johnson 2007, 92), what sensible difference to any-body does the theory's truth make? What does it mean that these women — all of whom it must be said were highly educated, intelligent, and extremely articulate — for the most part did not refer in any sense to experiences related to sensation, perception, feelings? There was very little reflection whatsoever about their experiences with the dance that surpassed on the one hand a predominantly dualist, instrumental view of the body, and on the other a very conventional, even romantic, perception of dance as transcendent performance object.

Reading these findings against Johnson's theory, what can also be identified here is a grey zone, comprising non-verbalized layers of experience, between a psychologizing discourse or the discourse of self-esteem, which posits a very specific and in fact conventional perception of knowledge and the body, and a discourse for the description of sensation that remains sequestered, if not within the body's soma, then within the understanding of dance as artifact referred to above. I am not saying that either of these experiences are wrong; neither am I saying that an understanding of dance as artifact or transcendent object represented here is defunct or without value. The latter is also a tradition that is very much present in flamenco and a thread that has played a very important part in the evolution of the dance itself, with regard to the mutually influential practices of flamenco as folkloric practice and flamenco as dance for the stage.

What I am suggesting is that this particular understanding of dance and its concomitant transmission does not stimulate the types of reflections or processes that I was hoping to find: it presupposes an understanding of embodiment and aesthetics, an understanding of meaningful movement that is very different from the implications of Johnson's theory which, as I will seek to show, offers among other things the possibility of thinking about dance also as *enactment* rather than solely mimetic spectacle. Such a perspective would be of interest with respect to women coming to the dance from outside of flamenco's sociocultural context, who will of necessity be dancing flamenco unhinged from its [originary] "putative historical determinants" (Hewett 2005, 212). This feeds immediately into the site of negotiation that is the focus of this article. However, what was revealed by the study is that the interview subjects had in fact very specific unquestioned, preconceived notions about dance and the body, which either had been reinforced by the tradition of flamenco itself, or at the very least, flamenco had not led them to question these.⁶ These notions in fact presented a stumbling block in the investigation with regard to exploring any ideas they may or may not have had about *gitano* cultural identity. As such, rather than answering the specific question I had posed at the outset, the study served to open up and give further nuance to the field of investigation.

Second, what is at stake here is the articulation of types of experience and knowledge that are so profoundly devalued by our culture that we do not view them as important: such experiences are merely "subjective," personal, private, and therefore not scientific. In an interview situation, the respondents were seeking to provide me with information that would be valuable to a study, however they might define this. They sought to appear well-informed and intelligent, and also to demonstrate their (extensive) knowledge of flamenco, all of which are agendas in

which such “subjective knowledge” or “emotional experiences” will not even be considered, no matter how much I explicitly asked for this. For indeed, as Johnson emphasizes, “One of the serious limitations of philosophy and of much cognitive science[...] is that it tends to equate meaning with language, more specifically with propositional language” (Forceville 2008).

Another interpretation is that it is simply not possible to speak about such things—that we do not, on the one hand as I intimated above, have an available discourse by which to refer to them, and that, on the other, that there are quite simply levels of embodied experience that cannot be told. I would however maintain that, if knowledge exists, it must be possible if not to express it in straightforward terms, at least to *refer to it*, to say something *about* it. This leads us back to all of that which Johnson holds cannot be “consciously entertained” as mentioned above, which I would propose is a wrench in the mind-body continuum Johnson is proposing here. However, while I cannot speak about the knowledge of my heart that enables its beating, there are nonetheless many other layers of sensation that I can certainly become conscious of and reflect upon, however much I may be little practiced at doing so. Johnson himself insists upon this, stating that “...once you start to pay attention to how you feel as you think, you will notice an entire submerged continent of feeling that supports, and is part of, your thoughts” (Johnson 2007, 97). The implication would appear to be that it is necessary to cultivate a particular type of awareness. Despite this, and despite Johnson’s insistence to the contrary, an insidious dualism is reinstated in the theory between that which can and cannot be known, whereby the body (and by extension, dance) is inevitably relegated to the obscure realm of the unconscious/unknowable. I would maintain that it is here that a barrier remains securely in place, with respect to any revolutionary implications this theory might have.

Where Discourse Meets Practice

I would hold that Johnson’s theory is valuable for dance studies because of its proposed reconfiguration of the traditional body-mind dualism by which Western philosophy organizes the world. In the context of this study, the theory did, albeit somewhat by default, serve to shed light on a meaningful path towards the formulation of an alternative understanding of the body and knowledge. Although it is perhaps the case that many of the experiences Johnson holds as being critical to knowledge production cannot be told, his theory represents a radical gesture to the extent that it suggests a redefinition of embodiment in its own right, with a basis in neuroscience, and along with it, the cognitive/emotive dichotomy that pervades Western philosophy. It hereby offers sufficient grounds for a rethinking of our definitions of knowledge because, in the very simplest of terms, what Johnson is saying is that our meaning-making is always inevitably embodied—and that embodiment is of interest to the extent that we can come to grips with it not as a representation of ideas, but as something ideological in its own right.

It is of interest to note in closing that the subtitle of Johnson’s book is “Aesthetics of Human Understanding.” He explains the use of the word *aesthetics* here by stating: “Aesthetics is not just art theory, but rather should be regarded broadly as the study of how humans make and experience meaning, because the processes of embodied meaning in the arts are the very same ones that make linguistic meaning possible” (Johnson 2007, 209). There is an obvious and interesting convergence here with the insights of cultural studies scholar Andrew Hewett about social choreography, which I feel opens further the intended field and direction of this study and its subject matter. Social choreography is, on the one hand, an approach to *dance practice* that proceeds on the premise that site-specific movement interventions will impact performatively. The Institute of Social Choreography

in Frankfurt works on such a premise, stipulating that “Social Choreography engages everyone’s perception and knowledge of ‘how things move’, inquiring if and how individuals can imaginatively order and re-order aspects of their personal, social, cultural and political lives” (Institute of Social Choreography 2015).⁷ Social choreography as a *theoretical* branch of aesthetics, on the other hand, addresses all movement as ideological rather than ideology’s representation. Andrew Hewitt’s work *Social Choreography* is perhaps currently the best-known proponent of this approach in offering, as dance studies scholar Mark Franko has written, “a certain conception of the aesthetic,” the framing of which foregrounds a historical shift in the aesthetics of ideology from a mimetic (representational and idealist) to a performative (integrated and embodied, ultimately “productive”) mode. With this shift, choreography becomes social. (Franko 2006, 189)⁸

In this book I think of the body as doubled: neither as the brute soma that must resist or conform to a social choreography, nor as the purely discursive construct that it can become in an overzealous new historical reading. (Hewitt 2005, 14)

This echoes my observation regarding the discursive grey zone that emerged in the interpretation of the respondents’ experiences through Johnson’s model. As Hewitt puts it,

I do not claim that aesthetic forms do not reflect ideological positions: clearly they can and do. *But they do not only reflect.* My claim, instead, is that choreography designates a sliding or gray zone *where discourse meets practice.* (Hewitt 2005, 15)

In terms of my investigation of the concept of “becoming gypsy,” I would propose, to paraphrase Hewitt, that the dancing does not do away with such categories, but [hereby] contains the potential to rehearse and refine them (Pristaš 2007).

This reverts back to my above comments on

validating other modalities of thought. On this basis, the theory encourages us to view and value dance in a manner that has larger socio-political implications, as something less removed from our pedestrian manner of being in the world. As an example, Johnson’s focus on situations, “which comprise physical, biological, social, as well as cultural conditions” (Forceville 2008), opens for understanding of embodiment and dance also as situational, interactive spaces of being, and by extension—for understanding dance as situation rather than performance object – the enactment of ideology rather than (solely) its mimetic representation, as a space for the working through and production of embodied identity.

As suggested above, this particular insight is of interest in terms of flamenco due to the fact that flamenco dance remains, also, a folkloric practice that is inexorably implicated in the social structures and identities of Andalusia as a profound manner of forming and preserving identity, within which there is performance, but also a highly performative aspect, having to do with the enactment of social identities and the creation and confirmation of family and community.⁹ A dense tangle of social choreographies reverberates within this of which anyone participating in the dance at this level will of necessity have a visceral knowledge, however intuitive and non-verbalized that knowledge may be. The exploration of the site of negotiation sought elucidated by this study has taken its cue from this, as an implicit attempt to come to grips with flamenco dance as a field of social enactment. It has asked: How does my body feel when I’m dancing? What does this feeling know? Although Johnson’s embodied cognitivism would seem to be implying that these types of experiences—to the extent that they are conscious – are straightforward and even universal, the study has demonstrated that they are not in any sense easy to access, much less express. It is not simply a matter of “getting one’s head around” the idea that mind-body dualism is an illusion, and developing

the appropriate awareness to enable one to talk about “felt qualities.” This is but one of the somewhat naïve conjectures running through Johnson’s work.

In the endeavor to bypass dualist thought, the study has disclosed the need for an exploration of the properties particular to the dimension of folkloric dance as embodied identity and social enactment, and the interfacing of such perspectives with readings of contemporary (flamenco) dance expressions. Here too a dichotomy exists with respect to established genre conventions in the field of dance itself, in the distinction between “ethnic” (understood as local, quaint, and traditional) dance forms and contemporary dance. Flamenco dance as an art form in its own quintessentially errant fashion blatantly flies in the face of such a distinction. The approach I am proposing also challenges the implied social hierarchy informing such definitions and their colonialist, racist legacy. It proposes instead a suspension of the “folk” vs. “high art” dichotomy, seeking to view movement practices as a unified field wherein all dances are equally meaningful and, to the extent that they are currently unfolding in real time, equally “contemporary.”¹⁰

For on the basis of all of this, a nagging question is subsequently and pertinently begged: do the above-cited barrier and stumbling block constitute two sides of the same coin, a coin that in fact represents a larger issue? In that the experience of “becoming gypsy,” for the participants of the study, was not something they were able to “feel,” i.e., isolate, identify, or describe in relation to the process of studying the dance of that culture, does this and the overall image of knowledge as outlined here suggest as well a silencing of “the gypsy” within the discourse of flamenco itself? And does the silence in its own right indirectly imply an equating of the gitano with somatic sensation, rendered thereby sequestered and mute—but in this case within the perception of gitano identity as exotic unknown/unknowable Other, like the body itself? To the extent that the women’s accounts of their flamenco dance-

learning experiences upheld conventional perceptions of the body and knowledge, the “Western” subject is thereby preserved in the discourse of flamenco. The subaltern, on the other hand, remains silent (Spivak 1998). While the study provided no basis through which to answer such a question, an abundant potential can be gleaned in the delineated grey zone, underscoring its relevance as an important field of inquiry.

Appendix

Interview questions

How long have you been studying flamenco?

How much time in that period have you spent in Spain?

Do you remember your first meeting/experience with Flamenco?

What was it that made you decide to learn to dance Flamenco?

Do you have any recollections about your initial experiences in learning the dance?

Has learning the dance changed you? Your self-perception as a woman? Your relationship to your body?

How do you relate these changes to the tradition itself?

Are these changes related to a physical knowledge?

Do you feel that in learning to dance you acquire knowledge about things beyond the actual dance in and of itself? Knowledge that has ramifications for you in your life outside of the dance situation (studio, performance, class)?

Do you have specific bodily or emotional reactions after having danced or while you are dancing?

Has your perception of Flamenco changed since you started learning?

What are your goals with the dance, and are they the same as what they were when you began?

What is your definition of Flamenco?

What are the origins of Flamenco as a dance form?

How do you understand the role of the gitano culture

in the evolution of Flamenco?

Is the gitano culture something you feel it is important to know about and understand in order to dance Flamenco?

Who are some of the dancers you have been influenced by or like?

Do you have close contact with any Flamenco dancers/practitioners from Jerez (natives)?

If so, how have they influenced you and your perception of the dance/yourself as a dancer?

Do you feel that you are part of a Flamenco community in Jerez?

Do you have any experience/training with/in other dance forms or other art forms, or was Flamenco your first experience with dance, an art form?

In your opinion, is it possible for somebody who is not Spanish or gitano to dance Flamenco well? Explain your answer with examples from your own experience.

Notes

1 The Romani people in Spain, from the Iberian Kale group. The Spanish word gitano means "gypsy", and I employ the Spanish term here because I do not perceive it as having the same pejorative connotations in usage as the word gypsy does in the English language.

2 As defined by Edward Said, "Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')" (Said 1979, 43). Said continued by discussing the Orientalist attitude in general. It shares with magic and with mythology the self-containing, self-reinforcing character of a closed system, in which objects are what they are because they are what they are, for once, for all time, for ontological reasons that no empirical material can dislodge or alter" (Said 1979, 79). I would in my approach seek to avoid the reproduction of such a bias, and specifically its perception of "Oriental women" who are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid and above all they are willing" (Said 1979, 207).

3 I use the word soma in its conventional sense, and as defined by Stedman's Medical Dictionary, meaning the body of a person, as contrasted with the mind or psyche (The American Heritage® Stedman's Medical Dictionary. Retrieved June 21, 2015, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/soma>).

4 See e.g. Sklar (2007), Daly, (1995), Hewitt (2005). Lakoff and Johnson, specifically *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (1999) is required reading for the Masters in Choreography at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts.

5 In philosophical terms, knowledge "... which has been embodied has, literally, been put into a body. Embodiment can mean either the process of taking form in this way, or the state of having been embodied. Philosophers are most concerned with the embodiment of consciousness, that is, with the way in which thinking, conscious things inhabit physical forms, and how a conscious being relates to its embodiment" (Glossary of Philosophical Terms, at http://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780199812998/studentresources/pdf/perry_glossary.pdf).

6 It is relevant here to mention the categories of teaching methods outlined in the above-cited Finnish study of transnational dances as taught in Finland, which stipulated a combination of a teacher-oriented method and constructivism in the teaching of flamenco. About the latter approach, the authors stated, "The teachers emphasize that the learning should go 'through the dancers' body and mind' and the responsibility for learning is shared by both the teacher and the students. Even though the teachers use a lot of teacher-oriented methods, at the same time they stress the importance of the students' own thinking when learning flamenco dance" (Siljamäki, Anttila, and Sääkslahti 2010, 6, my emphasis). I have not explored the types of teaching the respondents had been exposed to in this study, but based on the findings, it is reasonable to suggest that constructivism as defined here has not been a method they have been exposed to when learning the dance in Spain. This corresponds with my own experience of learning flamenco dance in Spain, where teacher-oriented methods were the norm.

7 The Institute of Social Choreography website elaborates as follows: “Emerging from a specific historical configuration of transformative and ultimately paradigm-shifting artistic work at Ballet Frankfurt in the late 1990s . . . the term ‘Social Choreography’ has become synonymous with a *new participatory / situational epistemology* which has begun to emanate from the institution and conceptual architectures of contemporary dance” (http://socialchoreography.com/?page_id=35; accessed 20 March 2015).

8 Mark Franko gave the book a scathing review in *Dance Research Journal* (2006), citing among other things its failure to engage with dance history and/or the writings of dance studies scholars, and its conflation of dance studies with cultural studies. Franko’s conclusion is univocal: “I understand that Hewitt considers dancers and choreographers as caught within a dialectical movement of history, not as initiators or respondents. He reads choreography’s social embeddedness through the narrative fantasies of its literary expression” (191). However much Hewitt may fail in his work to carry through on his intention, this article takes the social choreographic bull by the horns of his initial premise, which invokes the performative as central to meaning making, and the focus of social choreography as being precisely the above-cited shift in aesthetics. Movement is hereby instituted as central to meaning and identity, in keeping with Johnson. This approach also takes its cue from the aforementioned practice-based applications of this school of thought.

9 This observation is my own, and is based on my own experiences and conversations with members of the gitano community in Jerez de la Frontera. For an explanation of the particular importance of flamenco for the gitano community, see e.g. Pedro Peña Fernández, *Los Gitanos Flamencos*, pp. 93–6.

10 See e.g. Lena Hammergren’s article “The Power of Classification” in *Worlding Dance* (2009) where in the context of reflections on perceptions of ethnicity and difference in the fields of cross-cultural and multicultural dance studies, she asks, “What kinds of meaning and power reside in the category of ‘multicultural’ forms of dance?” This book in its entirety intends examination of “the legacy of Western dance history—and the violence against dancing wrought by various rubrics of categorization,

such as the ‘primitive,’ that have created complex hierarchies of value and worth” (Foster 2009, 3) and which inevitably translate “ethnic” dance as “local rather than transcendent, traditional rather than innovative. . . a product of the people rather than genius” (Foster 2009, 2). Hammergren’s contribution also identifies an underlying perception of “ethnic dance” as somehow static and unchanging, in short, an Orientalist perception (see footnote 2).

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BIOGRAPHY

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Diane Oatley (f.1960) er cand.philol. med hovedfag i litteraturvitenskap fra Universitet i Oslo, med spesialfelt innenfor kjønnsrollestudier og kroppsuttrykk i det poetiske. Hun har en lang publikasjonsliste innenfor dansestudier og arbeider som selvstendig forsker, forfatter og oversetter Etter avsluttede studier begynte hun å jobbe som dansekritiker og har etter hvert definert et eget felt og tilnærmingemetode der kroppsuttrykket er et gjennomgående tema.. Født og oppvokst i USA, og bosatt i Oslo siden 1982, har hun siden 2005 hatt flere lengre studieopphold i Jerez de la Frontera i Andalusia, Spania.