

# Dancing with and for others in the field and postcolonial encounters

*Franca Tamisari*

In the early 1990s, I arrived in Milingimbi, an Australian Indigenous community in Northeast Arnhem Land, to study ceremonial and everyday dancing, a key element in the very complex political and land tenure system expressed and negotiated in a religious and aesthetic idiom<sup>1</sup>. As a young naïve and rather arrogant fieldworker, I thought it would be easier to learn the dances rather than one of the local languages, and thus since the beginning of my fieldwork, I started participating in the dancing with assiduity and enthusiasm. Like toddlers who are learning to dance, I was always encouraged to observe (*nha:ma*) the dance movements of older people and later to imitate them (*yakarrman*). However, unlike local toddlers who participate alongside their parents and relatives, I started practicing the basic foot and arm movements in the seclusion of my house and, while sitting with the women, I limited myself to asking for the meaning of particular arm gestures. “This is sea water” (*gapu dhuwal*), the women would say with great patience cupping their hands and moving them up and down in front of their stern; “this is rain” (*waltjan dhuwal*), their fingers together just above their faces bending at the knuckles; and for seagull fishing in flight they would reach for a stick, a leaf or blade of grass and, by holding at its extremities, would move it up and down perpendicular to the ground. Given the apparent simplicity of Yolngu stepping and arm movements, I quickly felt confident enough to perform in public. Yet, despite my practice and confidence, the first time I stood up to join the women dancers, the mechanical competence that my body achieved in isolation completely dissolved. In my solitary practice, I had rehearsed the movements without music and, more importantly, apart from the surrounding performers and

<sup>1</sup> Established as a Methodist Mission in 1923 and located around 500 km East of Darwin, Milingimbi is one of the five Yolngu communities in the Northeast Arnhem Land region, Northern Territory Australia, that extends from Cape Stewart in the West, near Maningrida, and the Koolatong River in the Southeast, near Yirrkala. According to the 2016 census, residents in the Milingimbi community numbered 1.225, and those in Northeast Arnhem Land region 14.020 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

away from the eyes of attentive and vociferous observers. Overwhelmed by the rhythm beaten out by the moving bodies around me and by the shouting encouragement of the seated participants, my knees started trembling uncontrollably, and I was almost unable to move my arms. This made me realize that I had to practice and learn by performing with others and for others; and endure the laughter and shouting my underdeveloped arm movement and rhythmically insecure steps provoked. Despite my initial awkwardness and embarrassment, I was often invited to participate and instructed how to correct my posture, stress my arm gestures, beat time correctly, and come to a standstill on the last beat. My teachers were particularly insistent about the need to improve my double shuffling step which characterizes women's "hopping along" style (*wap'waphum*). Shuffling becomes good dancing when each forward-moving foot also "throws sand" (*munatha djalkthun*) over the other and through displacement imprints a trail of marks on the ground.

After several months of public practice and mistakes, I finally felt I had learned to dance with others and for others when having stopped to concentrate on my movements, my body became a "knowing force of action" (Ness 1992, 5) which, propelled by the music, started guiding my motor projects. As I was to find out and understand later, it was not by chance that my achievement was noticed, and in the late afternoon, I was summoned by a local leader and mentor that I called my mother's brother in the kinship network in which I had been adopted<sup>2</sup>. During a short conversation, he told me how much he had appreciated my dancing at his younger brother's mortuary ceremony and emphatically encouraged me to keep on dancing "not only for close kin but for everybody". As I understood much later, he could detect my proficiency by observing how I danced or, more precisely, how I moved my 'knees'. During all ceremonies, the watchful eyes of the elders look at the young performers' knees to judge their learning before revealing further knowledge to them and thus entrusting them with subsequent ritual responsibility. The dancer's knees moving up and down in the stepping are said to "be talking" (*bonwanga*). This absorption and transmission of knowledge through the body brings about potential psychophysical changes to the dancer, exposing him or her to a certain degree of danger. Prior to the physical exposure of a

<sup>2</sup> The complex land tenure system is negotiated through the nurturing and mentoring role of the mother's brother's with his sister's children (MB-ZC) at individual as well as at group levels (see Keen 1994).

## Dancing with and for others in the field

young person to further knowledge to be literally in-corporated through dancing, elders often rub their underarm sweat onto the youths' knees to protect them from the potentially dangerous consequences of such bodily transformation.

Following my mother's brother's suggestion was easy as I enjoyed dancing, although at the time I could not understand nor appreciate the significance that Yolngu people attach to participation in dance performances. It was indeed my participation in dancing that activated a "somatic mode of attention (Csordas 1993) that thanks to "proprioception: the reception of stimuli produced within one's body, especially movement ... is to apprehend, as felt experience, the kinetic dynamics inherent in movements, images, and sounds" (Sklar 2000, 72). A "somatic mode of attention" in dance as a process of knowing could also be understood as a pathic moment in perception, which Straus (1966, 12) defines as "the immediate communication we have with things based on their changing mode of sensory givenness" and as "the immediately present, sensually vivid, still preconceptual communication" which is consequently "so difficult to understand conceptually".<sup>3</sup> The pathic moment is central in the formation of "immediate experience" (ibid., 19), a "vital doing" (ibid, 22), a "lived movement ... that inhabits the space created by the music uniting us with the world, an "opening wide of body space [that] can be experienced as enrichment or as jeopardy" (ibid. 28). In other words, we can say that performance in general, and dance in particular, reconfigures meaning and directs experience (Kapferer 1986).

It was, indeed, my assiduous dancing practice, dancing with and for others, that allowed me to go over and above the symbolism of the movements and their semantic relationships to the song narratives and understand Yolngu dancing as "a body technique" which forms a bridge to an "empathic understanding" (Jackson 1989, 135). With this expression, I do not mean a form of affectivity with others—one's participation in the other's feelings, but rather a modality of knowing in its widest sense, a 'technique of participation which demands total involvement' (Turnbull 1990, 51). A knowing that requires an embodied, cognitive, and affective engagement rather than being simply a stage or a step towards an interpretation of the cognitive and discursive type (Jackson 1989, 135). Empathy is rather a modality of co-presence and co-presencing, a way of

<sup>3</sup> See Straus' (1966) contraposition between the "pathic" to a "gnostic moment" that is a modality of knowing mediated by language used to decodify meanings.

knowing, an initial contact which, by changing the dimensions of perception, opens a way to get acquainted with the unexplored depth of another person or more-than-person (De Monticelli 1998, 134ff; Dufrenne 1973, 398-407; Stein 1989) both in the context of Yolngu dancing and in fieldwork (Tamisari 2000). The general point I make here is that, far from interpreting the significance of Yolngu dancing from the recess of my idiosyncratic experiences, my participation in dancing—indeed making and negotiating political and emotional statements about my increasing involvement with others—brought to light aspects of Yolngu performances, epistemology, and ontology which would have otherwise been beyond my grasp, both at the level of experience and analysis. This performative perspective inscribed in my body, as “bodynotes”, has not only allowed me an analytical, but also an empathic understanding of how Yolngu knowledge associated with country is embodied by re-enacting the past in the present, how it is negotiated and transferred to the next generations, how its efficacy is reckoned by its capacity of affecting others and being affected by others, and why it is deployed to create a diplomatic space where non-indigenous people are invited to enter observing Indigenous values and principles (Tamisari 2024). I also started to understand how, through dancing and especially virtuoso dancing, one can demand respect and impose one’s authority yet, by attracting attention, become vulnerable. If by dancing in general and virtuoso dancing in particular a person can affect others, she is in turn open to being affected by others. More generally, through dancing a person enters the intimate sphere of intercorporeal relationships at a different level of intensity, in which one is emotionally involved and socially accountable. From this perspective, it is perhaps easier to understand why dance performance is often used in encountering and confronting non-indigenous people and institutions. Dancing, as Yolngu people would say, is knowing one own’s country, holding and teaching the Law, helping and working for other people, and, in mortuary ceremonies, it is showing love for the deceased and his/her family. If in the local contexts dancing can be a way of knowing and relating with people and the environment, a way of helping and expressing love for others, it is also a “performative tactic” (Tamisari 2016) deployed to create a space in which non-indigenous people are challenged to learn and recognize Indigenous ways of being and are required to participate and respond.

## Dancing with and for others in the field

### *Dance as law work, help, love and competition*

Principally, ritual dancing, together with songs, is a way of reproducing ancestral cosmogonic action that shaped and named the country and assigned the ownership of specific territories to each group constituting Yolngu society. As ancestral beings transformed themselves into the land as it is today, Yolngu dance performance (*bunggul*, from *bon*, knee), in circumcision, mortuary and regional ceremonies, is a modality of re-enacting forms that come to presence, a doing through shaping, a form of manifestation through movement and naming (Tamisari 2002). Often Yolngu people talk about dancing not so much in terms of following the tracks left by the ancestral beings, but rather in terms of a way of summoning, re-embodiment, and re-enacting the ancestors in the present and concrete bodies of the dancers. Embodying and reproducing cosmogonic actions through ritual dancing affirms ownership of one's country and allows the negotiation of authority over it at individual and group levels. More importantly, dance performance not only allows the transfer of this knowledge to the younger generation but also, most importantly, allows the elders to teach the younger generations a way of looking after the land so that the land can keep on looking after people in a reciprocal life-giving relationship interlinking all human and more-than-human beings.

As all country has a song and a dance recounting its origin, story, and personality that brought it into being, so “singing up”, and “dancing up” the country in ceremonies or, indeed, in pop/ rock performances (Tamisari 2021), is a modality to celebrate and reactivate the meshwork of relations linking all being to one another (Tamisari 2022).

As Yolngu would often say, dancing is not only a way of holding Yolngu Law (*Yolngu Rom ngayatham*), that is possessing and observing the right way of doing things as the human and more-than-human ancestral being taught to the living, bringing the past knowledge into the present, claim and negotiate land ownership, and looking after country, but also articulates key Yolngu moral principles and values. Holding the law should thus be understood as “holding dear”, “worrying”, namely to experience the Law through participation in a logic of feeling (*ma:rr*), openness and attention towards others founded on mutual care and responsibility pertaining to the singularity and depth of each intra-action<sup>4</sup>.

In Yolngu dance performance, matrilineal relatives, and in particular a

<sup>4</sup> Drawing from Barad (2003, 815), I use the term “intra-action” rather than “inter-action”, to refer to “reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations of the world” (Barad

man's sister's child have the strongest rights in the execution of his group's dances. The sister's son has the strongest rights to the knowledge of his mother's group and he is said to be the "manager" (*jungaya*) and "carer" of (*dja:gamirr*, literally "care-having") and holder of his mother's clan's knowledge (*ngandi watangu*). The lead dancer not only dances in front of the other dancers, and is thereby close to the singers, but is also responsible for emitting the dance calls and, through these, for directing the singers. The leader always dances with energy and passion and his performance often outshines that of the other dancers. The jumping is higher, the movements more dramatic, the interpretation theatrical and emotional. Being a virtuoso is his right and duty, a way in which he displays his legitimate authority over the knowledge of his mother's group and the fulfilment of his rights and responsibilities. It is significant that such claims, together with their implicit affirmation of knowledge and rights, are made through dancing, as these are brought and displayed into the public arena, usually in front of a large audience. Dancing as a means of legitimising one's knowledge and consequent authority is also a duty, a notion that is conveyed by speaking of dancing, singing, and painting as "work" (*dja:ma*). As in other parts of Indigenous Australia, a man's sister's children are the workers (*dja:mamirr*, literally "work-having") for their mother's group(s) and, as such, they are expected to take the responsibility for organising their ceremonies as well as for leading their dances. In this sense, dance as "work" fulfills duties to one's kin, the responsibility of carrying out a successful and efficacious performance, a labour that produces and reproduces the knowledge associated with the country of one's maternal relatives.

Yolgnu dancing looks effortless but the backward posture with bent knees with the weight on the heels (as in skiing) requires, in fact, constant tension in the leg muscles. In addition, dancing as work is considered a form of help and a way of showing love to all close relatives of the deceased who participate in a mortuary ceremony. When people are not "helpful" (*gungayunamirr*, literally "help-having") or they do not show their love by dancing in a ceremony, they are usually expected to contribute in several other ways, for instance, by offering lengths of cloth, sheets, food, money or carrying out particular tasks. However, dancing is not only another way of helping to carry out a successful ceremony but also expresses love rather than sadness, grief, or generosity. As I was repeatedly told: "Through

2007, 141) among all beings and things, including song and dances, in order to understand the significance of Yolgnu relational ontology and epistemology (Tamisari 2024).

## Dancing with and for others in the field

dancing, you show your love. When we cry we share our sadness, when we dance we are not sad, we share love”<sup>5</sup>.

Finally, contrary to singing, which is a much more specialised practice that young people are permitted to access after long-term training and testing, dancing is open to everybody’s participation and, as such, it is the arena that most people enter to affirm their knowledge and claim authority over a specific territory. However, dramatic and spectacular interpretations in dancing expose the virtuoso to “compliments” which at once offer appreciation as well as exacting a request. In the ceremonial context, if an individual is particularly and somewhat unexpectedly gifted in playing music or dancing, he/she is complimented by being told *wamarrkanhe*, an expression that is usually followed by a request for material goods. A tentative translation of this expression would be “power/sentiment [have] you”. Once again, I learnt about this practice through participating in the dances and it was only then that I started understanding how flattering, yet dangerous, compliments may be if they are not repaid appropriately.

### *Dance as co-presencing: The curse of compliments*

My ability to learn Yolngu dances and my assiduous participation surprised and pleased most people. Often I was told *wama:rrkane Wuluku*, and in the same breath, the speaker would ask me for something in return: an item of clothing, packs of cigarettes, or a few dollars, and, at times, substantial amounts of money<sup>6</sup>. Little did I know at the time that if I had not given them what they had asked for I would fall ill and I would even risk dying. On one occasion, one of my sons asked me for my vehicle, a request that like the others I did not satisfy. The fact that a few days later I contracted hepatitis A and had to go to Darwin to recover was explained to me as the consequence of my not having repaid the compliment. Initially, from this and similar episodes, I concluded that such compliments carried out a warning which, if not repaid in kind, could act as a curse.<sup>7</sup> From this understanding, I described this practice as the “curse of compliment”, a means by which virtuosos, who could misuse their dancing

<sup>5</sup> On care and affection in women songs see Magowan 2007 and in Christian devotional dancing (Magowan 2016; Tamisari 2019).

<sup>6</sup> *Wuluku*, the proper name for a particular species of green sea turtle, is the term of address with which are called all women of the Birrkili-Gupapuyngu group into which I was adopted.

<sup>7</sup> On the notion of *cursing* in the context of names and naming and the process of “morphopoiesis”, speaking forms into place, the making of place through names see Tamisari 2002.

skills to humiliate or overcome others, are prevented from imposing their supremacy in an unjustified and exaggerated manner. The practice of “cursing with appreciation” in the context of performance, I concluded, is central to understanding the two meanings of power (von Sturmer 1987). On the one hand, virtuosity in performance is recognised as an expression of knowledge whereby performers, embodying their own ancestral beings through dance, claim and legitimise their closeness to their power. On the other hand, virtuosity is also recognised as the means through which people can impose their will on others for their ends. Cursing the virtuosos who are aspiring to, or legitimising, their leadership seems to be a way of controlling or preventing their possible abuse of power. If warnings of this type are repeated and they are not paid back, the pressure increases and the virtuoso usually “gives up dancing” altogether (*gul'yun bunggulngur*) or “buries his clapping sticks” (*bilma galkan munath'ilil*) to avoid illness and death. However, if this interpretation well illustrates how virtuosity can be understood as the manifestation of ancestral presence and an expression of control and authority by individuals, the notion of “*ma:rr*” in the expression “*wam:rrkanhe*”, points towards a far more subtle and ambiguous dimension of the relationship between who pays and who repays such a compliment. This notion not only connotes, as it has been mainly translated in the literature, ancestral power, which is manifested in the cosmogonic shaping of landscape features, names, animals, plants, objects, designs, songs, and dances. As Thomson (1975, 2) noted, this is not only “spiritual power from the totemic ancestor”, but also a “feeling of affection” (ibid., 4) as well as a “desiring a yearning”. In most cases, *ma:rr* provides special prowess and courage to whoever possesses it, or it may connote danger from which one should protect oneself. More specifically, this term is equivalent to and often analogous with *ngayanggu*, the seat of emotions that is located in the stomach, and refers to a person’s inner feelings, moods, and desires<sup>8</sup>. More specifically, “*ma:rr*” refers to people’s innermost feelings of love, care, and compassion for relatives including country and everything constituting it, as well as referring to concealed desires which are not expressed but are felt and met, silent wishes which, as I was told, “make things happen”.<sup>9</sup>

The hidden feelings and desires of a person can be “seen”, and as Yolngu would say, to “see someone’s *ma:rr*” (*ma:rr nha:ma*) is to recognize the other

<sup>8</sup> *Ngayanggu* is cognate with *ngoy*, which can be translated as “the living, pulsating part of man” (Thomson 1975, 8 note 16). *Ngoy* also means “inside” and “underneath” in the expression *ngoyngur*, thus private, and not readily visible and accessible by others.

<sup>9</sup> On the term *ma:rr* and phrasal expressions, see Tamisari 2024, 186-188.



## Dancing with and for others in the field

person's desires, a recognition which is however effected not by asking but by fulfilling their wishes. Through the displaying of unusual skills, the dancer is said to have reached the "inner feelings" (*ma:rr*) of the viewer, when the latter declares his or her appreciation. Virtuosity and appreciation, I propose, are not limited to the intent to impress and a willingness to recognize. The practice of *wama:rrkanhe* seems to lock two persons in an intimate relationship in which, by crossing each other's physical boundaries and reaching each other's inner feelings and desires, gives life to and, simultaneously, jeopardises each other's embodied consciousness. As the virtuoso dares, through his dancing, to reach the viewer's *ma:rr*, to see beyond appearances "the living, vital, pulsating part of man" (Thomson 1975, 8 n.16), the viewer responds to this invasion by proffering a compliment which, in turn, can affect the dancer by challenging her/his or her wellbeing. The practice of *wama:rrkanhe* thus epitomises how the act of dancing is also, and most importantly, a modality of co-presencing, an encounter at a novel level of intensity that, changing the dancers and the spectator, opens a way to a different dimension of being with others. In addition to deterring virtuosos imposing their authority in an exaggerated manner merely through their dancing skills, it also reveals the most obvious, yet neglected, empathic aspect of intersubjective relations. Bringing this empathic dimension of intercorporeality to the fore points to the necessity to go over and above the referential meaning of performance and analyse how "meanings ... are created during performance, ... in the negotiation between the principal performers and the participants who share its action and intensity" (Schieffelin 1985, 722).

This practice is not only an excellent illustration of how Yolngu dancing interweaves political and aesthetic aspects, dance as an affirmation and claiming of knowledge that is rendered effective by a particular virtuoso interpretation that affects others, but also, by shifting attention to the efficacy of performance, and seeking its significance over and above the referential meanings of dance movements and discursive elements of ritual, requires consideration of dance as a modality of knowledge that is not separate from experience and its affective dimensions.

As the practice of "the curse of compliments" well illustrates, what performance expresses, goes beyond representation, presence, and the body, and establishes a "secret commerce" or even a "mutual possession" between the performer and the spectator in the lived, here and now experience of performance (Dufrenne 1987, 119). In Yolngu terms, it is an encounter between the inner feelings (*ma:rr*) of the dancer and of the person who pays the compliment. The efficacy of dancing does not merely reside in

the skillful and technically flawless execution that meets the aesthetic criteria of Yolngu dancing, such as the rhythm and energy of the steps, the inclination of the body, and the marks a dancer leaves on the ground. As Dufrenne (1973, 387) notes for art, aesthetic criteria and overall technique are general qualities, and although they are indispensable, it is how technique is surpassed and used in a singular way by an artist or performer that “surprises and possesses us”. I argue that in Yolngu dancing, it is not a question of excelling in dance technique as such, but it is rather a matter of how technique “serves expression”, how a dancer displays his own interiority and demands total attention through technique (Dufrenne 1973, 478ff). This leads me back to the nature of participation and how this participation is an integral part, if not indeed the very actualisation, of all Yolngu dance performances. I draw from Dufrenne’s notion of “feeling” and I also refer to the Yolngu notion of *ma:rr* in the expression *wama:rrkanhe* discussed above. In performance, *ma:rr* is a somatic mode of attention and not a mere sentiment; it is a form of transformation and constitution of self and other, a sort of “testing of the self through the other person and the other person through the self” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 120). In Dufrenne’s (1973, 377) words: “I must make myself conform to what feeling reveals to me and thus match its depth with my own. That is why, through feeling, I myself am put into question”. Although all dance events, from mortuary ceremonies to impromptu performances, are highly charged with strong emotions, the success of a ceremony does not depend on the intensity of the emotions staged in this way. Emotion is a means and not an end of the ceremony. The ritualisation of these emotions offers a field, or a setting, which allows performers to reach an uplifting and uplifted state of consciousness; that is, a way in which these performances affect the performer, as well as others, through feeling. Feeling (*ma:rr*) is the participation, the “secret commerce” established between performer and spectator through dance and song. Feeling establishes an inner communication, a mutual resonance, between the depths of the dancer and the inner being of the spectator. Thus, feeling opens up the self and makes one receptive, not only to emotions but also to knowledge. In Yolngu terms, *ma:rr* has to do with one’s change in attitude, a real sub/jection of the self, both to ancestral presence and to the other participants with all the socio-physical transformations and consequences this submission implies. This feeling is also intelligent and intellectual, a way of learning, transferring, and negotiating authority through perception and experience. The learning, and teaching of Yolngu knowledge is an intellectual process that must be, nevertheless, literally absorbed through one’s body. Indeed, as Dufrenne

## Dancing with and for others in the field

writes, while the knowledge (*savoir*) of the work of art (e.g., the categories that inform and educate us on its constitutive elements, its composition, and history) is part of a deep self, we would not fully understand an artwork in its totality without feeling. Dufrenne (1973, 471) thus concludes that “feeling revives this knowledge, which in turn renders feeling intelligent”. In Yolngu terms, we can say that feeling (*ma:rr*) activates knowledge, and knowledge, in turn, is grounded in the experience, engagement, and commitment of the self through the other. The notion of *ma:rr* and the practice of *wama:rrkanhe* in Yolngu performance stress that feeling, a somatic mode of attention, is at the basis of intersubjectivity, in which the other does not exist simply in terms of one’s aims or intentions, but also in terms of the transformation of one’s self in participation with others (Dufrenne 1973, 394 n.1). In art and dance performance, intentionality is not merely being conscious of something, but being subjected to, not an intention towards but a participation and association with “being alongside with” a becoming constituted in relating (Haraway 2008, 136), an intimacy which strengthens as well as makes one vulnerable (Dufrenne 1987b, 3-11; cf. von Sturmer 2001, 104; de Monticelli 1998, 181–182; Jackson 1998, 1). It is feeling and, in particular, its capacity to affect and to be affected, that in dance renders political claims effective. However, these political assertions could not be made without having previously acquired a high and sophisticated degree of knowledge of the country and everything composing it in its multidimensionality, a knowledge that is gradually accumulated through a myriad of relations with human and more-than-human beings throughout one’s life (Tamisari 2022). Beyond the *here and now* of execution, dance is neither limited to embodying ancestral cosmogonic events by recomposing their linguistic, visual, musical, and kinetic dimensions, nor does it simply serve to represent one’s country history to claim or affirm one’s distinctive rights over it. Dance allows the possibility of bringing ancestral actions to presence in a unique socio-political synthesis. Performance, however, demands attention and it is this attention that gives form and life to that presence. “On the level of presence everything is given but nothing is known” (Dufrenne 1973, 338) and for this reason, the meaning of the dance event cannot limit itself to the body nor to the notion of “embodiment” no matter how immediate and potent presence is. Beyond the symbolism of the gestures, and the limits of the body, a higher meaning is produced. It is an expression that determines the success of the ritual in its totality. The symbolic is crucial yet it neither exhausts nor precludes the expressive. The attention demanded by a dance does not primarily reside in what it represents but in how it is performed. It is atten-

tion that brings presence to its apotheosis and activates the singularity and the truth of the knowledge conveyed through expression.

If, as Best (1978, 137) insists, human movement (and I would add performance in general) “does not symbolise reality, but it is reality”, the reality of Yolngu dance is another way in which people collapses time and space linking ancestral events to the present context, the dancers to the public, language to movement, and music to place. Dance unconceals, brings into presence, and makes visible ancestral beings’ creative, as well as destructive, powers so that they can be literally absorbed by the body in order to be tapped and transferred. Through dance, people transmit moral orientations, reproduce correct practices and a way of life, as well as share and renew key social values such as mutual care and interdependence. From this perspective, I propose that the meaning of dance is between the steps: in the relation with another person or more-than-persons in the intercorporeal space of care, compassion, love, and competition into which one enters through dancing. Considering Yolngu dance as a body technique with the capacity to collapse past and present and transform one’s consciousness through the embodiment of knowledge and the relation with humans and more-than-humans, it is possible to understand how it celebrates being-in-the-world and being-with-others. Furthermore, as the “curse of compliments” demonstrates, to-be-with-others means to venture into a relationship that can enliven or consume us, recreate and at the same time suffocate us. If the songs and dances re-enact socio-embodied knowledge linking ancestral events and all beings constituting the country, the intercorporeal world one enters through dancing constitutes the space of mutual attention, care, and responsibility. As the land is not a product or an objectification of ancestral actions, but rather a lived country, dances do not only represent ancestral events but are a modality of participation with others that, going beyond the sense of perception, bring people to the threshold of one another’s vital yet unexplored depths.

I learnt how to dance not only when I started stepping and moving with confidence, but when, dancing with others and for others, I entered the empathic sphere of care, work, help, compassion, competition, love, and attraction, a space in which my emotional and moral commitment and responsibility towards others was recognised by my adoptive mother’s brother, Charles Manydjarri, with his words of appreciation for my participation in dancing. In dancing with and for others, I not only participated in the ‘unfamiliar kinesthetic experience’ (Sklar 1991, 9) of learning new steps, arm movements, and posture, but also learnt to move in synchrony with bodies beating the tempo all around me and, with them, I entered a

## Dancing with and for others in the field

‘shared body space’ that, at once, belonged to me although it was completely unknown. It was both welcoming and threatening, both inviting and challenging. To this day, my body literally *re-members* this tension that continues to stimulate my reflections and interpretation on Yolngu dance, and my further ethnographic fieldwork from a performative perspective. I now can say that, by dancing, I learnt to “hold the Law” (*rom ngayatham*), understanding this expression not only in terms of having, possessing, and observing the Yolngu ways of behaving and being but also with the meaning of “holding dear”, “worrying”. Over the years, I have cultivated and deepened my participation in a logic of feeling (*ma:rr*), openness, and attention towards others founded on mutual care and responsibility in the singularity and depth of all relations with humans and more-than-humans.

### *Dance as a diplomatic arena*

This has led me to understand why performance in general and dance in particular is a privileged modality among Indigenous people for encounters and negotiations with non-indigenous people and institutions at local but also at national levels<sup>10</sup>. As my participation in dancing with Yolngu people required my increasing emotional engagement with and social accountability towards the members of my adoptive family, and the local Yolngu community at large, in a similar way, Yolngu people deploy performance to invite non-indigenous people and institutions to enter a dialogue in their own terms. In this contexts, performance introduces Yolngu symbols into European political discourse and thus asserts Yolngu autonomy and independence (Langton 1993, Magowan 2000, Morphy 1983).

These diplomatic intercultural spaces “of colonialism, primitivism and globalisation” (Myers 2002, 6), opened up by what we can refer to as “performative politics” (Magowan 2000, 309) or “performative tactic” (Tamisari 2010) that deals with “a series of irresolved and perhaps irresolvable problems” (Morphy 1983, 111), are more than attempts to educate, more than mere performative means toward political ends. Nor are they simply strategies of communication or translation of culture (Myers 2002, 273). Rather, performance in intercultural contexts should be approached as a *doing* where meaning is generated and understanding reached through the possibility of affecting and being affected. I propose that the

<sup>10</sup> On the deployment of performance in diplomatic encounters, see Berndt 2004; De Largy Healy 2011; Henry 2011, Magowan 2000; Merlan 2014; Mundine 1997; Murray 2004; McIntosh 2000.

effectiveness of diplomatic encounters through performance should be appreciated in terms of our sensual participation and social engagement in, or refusal of, the possibilities, risks, and immediacy of knowledge that the here and now of aesthetic experience opens up to the participants.

Thus, I propose that the significance and effectiveness of dance performance in diplomatic encounters resides in the relationship it consolidates or crystallises in the single act of its actualisation, including production and reception. Performances in these contexts “aren’t simply about a symbolic exchange of culture at the level of representation” but should be understood in terms of “a politics of presencing” which, by bringing together concerns about “depletion and appropriation, showing and seeing, giving and receiving”, produce and mediate a reciprocal relationship of respect and recognition “derived from the experience of being touched and transformed ...” (Deger 2006, 111-113). I propose that the efficacy of performance stems from the participation of performer and viewer, a participation that constitutes the unfolding of performance in a particular space and time and produces a truth of its own. It is the actualizing of performance: the “special kind of behaving, thinking, relating and doing” of drama (Schechner 1973, 8), which allows the pathetic (Straus 1966) or drastic (Jankélévitch 2003) way of knowing in aesthetic experience. In postcolonial contexts, such as the diplomatic arenas of confrontation and recognition between Indigenous and non-indigenous people in Australia, we should seek the significance of Indigenous performance in the immediacy and intimacy of this knowledge gained in participation. More specifically, beyond political motivations, expectations, and assertions of Indigenous actors in realigning their cultural values to particular historical circumstances, and beyond the politics of (self) representation, it is in the here and now of its singularity, that performance creates the condition of possibility for the social to realise itself in a concrete, although fleeting, manner. The social is to be understood here in terms of engagement, commitment, and accountability (von Sturmer 1995). Wherever, whenever, and however performance is employed, it does not establish a relationship, nor does it simply mediate it in cultural terms. Rather, performance takes the relationship between Indigenous performers and non-indigenous viewers to a moment of consolidation or, even better, of activation where, if it is to progress at all, it needs to be grounded in an openness to participate. In this participation, it becomes possible to find the responsibility of our reciprocal historical and moral position. It is a participation in which questioning the other depends on being questioned; and affecting demands an openness to being affected, in a mechanism

## Dancing with and for others in the field

that allows us to recognize our history and act on it. At all levels—between individuals or groups, personal and public, formal and informal modes, anthropologist and politician, from exhibitions of Australian Indigenous art to the courtroom—performance should also be understood as a reminder that respect and recognition run deeper than the legal and political sanctions of Indigenous property of land and human rights, and involve complex negotiations which oscillate between the generosity and risk, the acceptance and refusal, and the enthusiasm and indifference of social relatedness.

### *Works cited*

- Barad, Karen. 2003. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28 (3): 802-831.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Berndt, Ronald. 2004 [1962]. *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory Australia. Oceania Monograph* 54. Sydney: The University of Sydney.
- Best, David. 1978. *Philosophy and Human Movement*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Csordas, Thomas J. 1993. "Somatic Modes of Attention." *Cultural Anthropology* 8 (2):135-56.
- Deger, Jennifer. 2006. *Shimmering Screens. Making Media in an Aboriginal Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- De Lary Healy, Jessica. 2011. "'Murayana Va Á Garma Cette Année!' Cérémonies Publiques Et Rituels Contemporains Du Nord-est De La Terre D'Arnhem (Australie)." *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 1: 123-34.
- De Monticelli, Roberta. 1998, *La conoscenza personale. Introduzione alla fenomenologia*. Milano: Guerrini Studio.
- Dufrenne, Mikel. 1973 [1953], *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, translated by Edward L. Casey. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1987. *In the Presence of the Sensuous: Essays in Aesthetics*, translated by Mark S. Roberts and Dennis Gallagher. Atlantic Highlands (New Jersey): Humanities Press.
- Haraway, Donna. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Henry, Rosita. 2011. "Dancing Diplomacy: Performance and the Politics of Protocol in Australia." In *Made in Oceania: Social Movements, Cultural Heritage and the State in the Pacific*, edited by Edvard Hviding and Knut Rio, 179-193. Wantage: Sean Kingston Publishing.



- Jackson, Michael. 1989. *Paths Towards a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998. *Minima Ethnographica. Intersubjectivity and the Ethnographic Project*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Jankélévitch, Vladimir. 2003. *Music and the Ineffable*, translated by Carolyn Abbate. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kapferer Bruce. 1986. "Performance and the Structuring of Meaning and Experience." In *The Anthropology of Experience*, edited by Victor. W. Turner and Edward. D. Bruner, 188-203. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Keen Ian. 1994. *Knowledge and Secrecy in an Aboriginal Religion*. Clarendon Press: Oxford.
- Langton, Marcia. 1993. "Well, I Heard It on the Radio and I Saw It on the Television": *An Essay for the Australian Film Commission on the Politics and the Aesthetics of Filmmaking by and About Aboriginal People and Things*. North Sydney, NSW: Australian Film Commission.
- Magowan, Fiona. 2000. "Dancing With a Difference: Reconfiguring the Poetic Politics of Aboriginal Ritual as National Spectacle." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 11(3): 308-321.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2007. *Melodies of Mourning: Music and Emotions in Northern Australia*. Crawley: University of Western Australia.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2016. "Valuing Spiritual Intimacy: Convergences and Counterpoints of Christianity in an Economy of Yolngu Performance." In *Christianity, Conflict, and Renewal in Australia and the Pacific*, edited by Fiona Magowan and Carolyn Schwarz, 102-25. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Merlan, Francesca. 2014. "Recent Rituals of Indigenous Recognition in Australia: Welcome to Country." *American Anthropologist* 116(2): 296-309.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1964. "From Mauss to Claude Lévi-Strauss." In *Signs*, edited by John Wild and James M. Edie, 114-25. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Morphy, Howard. 1983. "'Now You Understand'. An Analysis of the Way Yolngu Have Used Sacred Knowledge to Retain Their Autonomy." In *Aborigines, Land and Land Rights* edited by Nicola Peterson and Marcia Langton, 110-33. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
- Mundine, Djon. 1997. Knowing When to Say Ole'. *Periphery Magazine*, March.
- Murray, Tom. 2004. *Dhakiyarr vs the King*. Videorecording, Sydney: ABC.
- Myers, Fred. 2002. *Painting Culture. The Making of an Aboriginal High Art*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- McIntosh, Ian. 2000. *Aboriginal Reconciliation and the Dreaming. Warramiri Yolngu and the Quest for Equality*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Ness, Sally Ann. 1992, *Body, Movement and Culture. Kinaesthetic and Visual Symbolism in a Philippine Community*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.



## Dancing with and for others in the field

- Schechner, Richard. 1973. *Essays on Performance Theory 1970-1976*. New York: Drama Book Specialists.
- Schieffelin, Edward. 1985. "Performance and the Cultural Construction of Reality." *American Ethnologist* 12 (4): 707-24.
- Sklar, Diedre. 1991. "On Dance Ethnography." *Dance Research Journal* 23 (1): 6-10.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000. "Reprise: On Dance Ethnography." *Research Journal* 32 (1): 70-77.
- Stein, Edith. 1989 [1917] *On the Problem of Empathy*, Washington, DC: ICS Publications.
- Straus, Erwin W. 1966. *Phenomenological Psychology*, translated by Erling Eng. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Tamisari, Franca. 2000 "The Meaning of the Steps is in Between, Dancing and the Curse of Compliments," in Special Issue *The Politics of Dance*, edited by Rosita Henry, Fiona Magowan and David Murray, *The Australian Journal of Anthropology (TAJA)* 11 (3): 36-48.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2002. "Names and Naming: Speaking Forms into Place." In *The Land is a Map: Placenames of Aboriginal Origin*, edited by Luise Hercus, Flavia Hodges, and Jane Simpson, 87-102. Canberra: Pandanus Books.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2010. "Dancing for Strangers. Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style. A Giullarata by the Chooky Dancers of Elcho Island." Special Issue *Indigenous Tourism, Performance, and Cross-cultural Understanding in the Pacific, La Ricerca Folklorica* 61: 61-72.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2016. "A Space and Time for a Generation to React: the Gattjirrk Cultural Festival in Milingimbi." *Oceania* 86 (1): 92-109.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2019. "Il dolore del lutto e il potere della danza. Continuità e innovazioni culturali nei riti indigeni australiani." In *Le religioni tra frustrazione e gioia*, edited by Silvano Petrosino, 145-63. Milano: Jaca Book.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2021. "Creating your Vision and Understanding. The Musical Legacy of Wirrinyga Band Within and Beyond Northeast Arnhem Land." in Special issue *Musical Awakenings. Between Cultural Regeneration and Political Claims in Oceania*, edited by Matteo Gallo and Matteo Aria, *L'Uomo Società Tradizione Sviluppo* 11 (1): 113-48.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2022. Yolngu Country as a Multidimensional Tangle of Relations. How 'Everything is Linked to One Another', Special issue: Humanities, Ecocriticism and Multispecies Relations. Proceedings (part II), *Lagoonscapes - The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 93-117, <https://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/it/edizioni4/riviste/the-venice-journal-of-environmental-humanities/2022/1/yolngu-country-as-a-multidimensional-tangle-of-rel/>. (last accessed 5 May 2024)
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2024. *Enacted Relations. Performing Knowledge in an Australian Indigenous Community*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books.
- Thomson, Donald. 1975. "The Concept of 'Marr' in Arnhem Land." *Mankind* 10 (1): 1-10.

- Turnbull, Colin. 1990, "Liminality: A Synthesis of Subjective and Objective Experience." In *By Means of Performance. Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, edited by Rebecca Schechner and Willa Appel, 50-81. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- von Sturmer, John 1987. "Aboriginal Singing and Notions of Power." *Oceania Monographs*, 32: 63-76.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1995 "R Stands For... An Extract from a Mabo Diary. Theme issue, "Mabo and Australia. On Recognising Native Title After Two Hundred Years." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 6 (1- 2): 101-15.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2001. "Hot Diggidy Dog or Stomaching the Truth or One Way Passage." *UTS Review* 7 (1): 96-105.