

Choreography

The Other and its epithet

In *Choreographing empathy: Kinesthesia in performance*, Susan Leigh Foster (2011) analyzes how choreography, kinesthesia and empathy have been understood in different historical stages. By analyzing each concept separately, she discusses how they relate, and how they affect the view on body and culture. Foster describes the relationship between idiosyncrasy, a view of the specific and how a universal view creates structures and positions that make room for cultural differences, but also the risk of reducing them.

Aware that it is precisely the relationship that makes themes in the text available, I choose in this work to zoom in on aspects of Foster's description of choreography. Based on the description of definitions of choreography in different times, it is also possible to see what has been placed outside, what has been excluded from the definitions and what the epithets of this otherness might be.

Foster describes how choreography as the writing of dance, through Feuillet's notation system, gave dance status as science. She explains how, through the possibility of documentation and systematization of dance, an understanding arises from a superior position of universal interpretation. Foster points out how the cultural and historical specificities of particular dances became homogenized by a system that implemented absolute conceptions of space and of time. "Perhaps for the first time, dance was asserted to be a universal language" (Foster 2011, 25). The shifts go towards choreography as something created by an author.

When Feuillet's notation was devised, the act of composing a dance, learning a dance, and learning to dance were conceptualized as overlapping, if not identical projects.

(Foster 2011, 38)

Foster describes how choreography in the nineteenth century created ideals and norms and where the Other dance is used as an exotic element. Foster writes about attitudes that formulate that "[...] if properly restrained, it, like the other national dances, promised to enrich the story ballet with exotic difference" (Foster 2011, 41). Foster shows notation and collection of dances during the eighteenth-century ballet by borrowing stereotypical gestures. On how the dances of different cultures during the nineteenth century were "assimilated into the vocabulary and style of classical ballet, imbued each ballet with local color while simultaneously displaying the ballet's mastery over all forms" (Foster 2011, 42).

Foster shows that legitimacy and exclusion during the twentieth century is linked to ethnicity and race. She describes how white choreographers' practices of modern dance ensured its elite status by excluding social dance and forms of dance that purveyed entertainment.

Even after World War II, when a large number of African-American artists appeared on concert stages, their work where required to display the values and issues associated with their specific racial communities, while white artists could continue to “experiment” with an unmarked radical newness in form and meaning.

(Foster 2011, 54)

From another perspective, the dilemma of universal practice is made visible by modernist assumptions at the core of the creative process, embracing all forms of dance while at the same time establishing itself as the meta-process through which all forms could be evaluated (Foster 2011, 60). I see this as important for my reading of my position in my study. Foster shows how definitions of choreography create structures and in what way there is space for different types of dance.

“Traditional” dance forms from many different cultures where presented on stages under the label multiculturalism – a label that maintain the modernist distinction between single authored contemporary work and ambiguously authored ethnic or world dance.

Where experimental choreography assumed the role of challenging viewers’ expectations as to the nature of art and movement, these concerts where regarded as purveying joy, exotic excitement, and dazzling physical skills, while providing an “authentic” glimpse into another culture’s value.

(Foster 2011, 65)

Foster describes the later part of the twentieth century that dance as movement, came to be seen as completely separated from music, as physical effects that were separated from any connotation of the spiritual or the emotional.

Dance makers saw the body itself as meaning-filled, and they believed that the pragmatic execution of movement offered a glimpse into the self of the performer that felt more real and revealing than any performance in which the dancer enacted a character.

(Foster 2011, 64)

Foster's analysis shows how the practice creates values and structures that determine who will be given the opportunities to constitute themselves in the field. These perspectives are important for how I may articulate my practice in the field of choreography. They provide an opportunity to discuss the current definition of an expanded concept of choreography, what values it constructs and whether it makes space for differences or not, in practice. This gives my study a constructive force in the discussion of difference in context. It shows how the definition changes over time, an area in change where I see that my study can contribute to development by problematizing the concept today. By highlighting the epithets that have been absent in the definitions of choreography, I want to gain an understanding of the types of otherness they may involve. I want to discuss the dilemmas that determinations of a field can result in and how they relate to my examination of constitution and comprehension.

Foster provides knowledge of how ideas about choreographic practice take form in different times and contexts. By highlighting the epithets that, in different historical stages have been excluded from definitions of choreography, it turns out that it is about what is seen as special, unchanging, existing (without author), exotic, national, ancient, natural, social, as pleasure, for joy, to music, equilibristic, original, distant and fascinating. The epithets are interesting to note in relation to my practice and I see that Foster's analysis can be used to open discussions about what different definitions of choreography mean systemically today.

Foster concludes the chapter on choreography by proposing an alternative to a universal body that can master all kinds of dances by recognizing the intense physical engagements that different practitioners require.

In each case, choreography gestured towards the world's dances only by assimilating their differences into its economy of meaning. Now choreography is convening the world's dances in order to substitute for each dance's locale commoditized markers of alterity. In these projects it mobilizes a universally versatile body capable of mastering any and all traditions of dancing. Alternatively, choreography holds out the promise to affirm the local's connection to the global, recognizing the specific and intensive physical commitment that any body must invest in order to ground itself in the world.

(Foster 2011, 72)

Foster, Susan Leigh. 2011. *Choreographing empathy: kinesthesia in performance*. Routledge, London.