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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5h2140jp>

Journal

Berkeley Undergraduate Journal, 25(3)

Author

Taylor, Robyn

Publication Date

2012

DOI

10.5070/B3253018116

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TAKING UP SPACE

Locating Thoreau, Whitman, and Kerouac in Place

By Robyn Taylor

I. Reading Dance

As I read the words, “look into it,” I see a dancer looking into a second dancer’s face as if she were reading her own image. The first dancer begins to move in a conservative manner, keeping her movement tight and close to her body. Her movements are evenly paced and continual. Her arms carve around her body as she sways in subtle arced shapes. Her focus shifts inward and she no longer makes eye contact with the other dancer. The second dancer stands as a statue, an image. She suddenly contrasts the first dancer’s movement, making sharp direct gestures with her arms. Her focus on the other dancer suggests confrontation. Her movements are deliberate and direct. The pace of her movement is sudden and quick. This contrast in movement between the two dancers could be read as a clausal sentence, “not continent but insular.”

II. Background

The first time I read Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, I imagined a dancer walking around a room interacting with objects, sometimes carefully examining them and sometimes speaking to them. As I read the chapter called “The Pond in Winter,” I was squirming in my chair with excitement at Thoreau’s ability to challenge his social environment. I did not know how to intellectually articulate my excitement, so again I imagined a dancer articulating it for me with her movements. I saw a connection between Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, and Walt Whitman’s “*Song of Myself*,” in that they all challenge the constraints

of structure. But I also saw them move in their writing in distinctly different ways. I became obsessed with the notion that their words could be choreographed. If prose and verse move rhythmically, and really good prose and verse have affect, then literature must be related to dance in some way. Thus, my senior thesis was born. For the creative component to my thesis, I would choreograph Kerouac, Whitman, and Thoreau. I decided, however, that it was not enough to read these authors from the container of my house. If I were going to choreograph them, I needed to gather information by traveling into the geographical space of the United States that they both inhabited and wrote about. There must be a connection between place and author, I thought. I felt I could gain insight into my own choreography by experiencing the place where the constructed space of language meets the physicalized space of geography.

During this paper, I will focus specifically on one particular passage from *On the Road* and its relation to choreography. I will also describe the choreography of a particular moment in the urban landscape of New York City. I will then illustrate how both the particular experience in the urban landscape, as well as a passage from *Walden*, will inform my future choreography.

III. The Road Trip

Thoreau took up residence at and wrote about *Walden Pond*. Whitman was born in Huntington, Long Island, and lived most of his life in Brooklyn. Kerouac wrote about his first trip across the United States beginning in New York City and eventually ended up in San Francisco. This established the framework for my trip.

So with camera, field journal, and husband/research assistant in hand, I took off on a plane to Washington D.C., where I began my trip. From D.C. we took a train to New York City. My husband and I stayed in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, and spend five days touring Manhattan and Brooklyn. In the spirit of jazz, we took the “A” train from Brooklyn to Harlem. In the spirit of Kerouac, we listened to music in the subways and jazz in the parlor of our bed and breakfast. In the spirit of Whitman, rather than ride a ferry across the Hudson, we rode bicycles over the Brooklyn Bridge.

We rented a camper van in midtown and drove out to Long Island, visiting the Walt Whitman birthplace and eventually we took a

ferry from Orient Point to Connecticut. Making our way up the east coast, we landed near Walden Pond where we spent a couple of days swimming, walking in the rain, and reading Thoreau. We headed north to Maine and when we got to Portland, we were seized by the burning need to head west. We traveled through New Hampshire, Vermont, and upstate New York. Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. We spent a couple of days in Chicago then kept heading west through Iowa, Nebraska, and Colorado. Denver, nicknamed “Wall Street of the West,” marked a defining line in our journey. Everything about it felt western from Big Brother’s Bar, the oldest bar in Denver and one of Kerouac’s old haunts, to the hot, dry western plateau. From Colorado we headed to San Francisco. As we crossed the Bay Bridge, I looked at the city with what Kerouac would have called, “my innocent road eyes” and took in the salty, foggy beauty as if for the first time.

IV. Conceptual Framework

When traveling, be it riding on a train cross-country or moving through a dance studio, we understand our taking up of space as “a geography of time, timing and time-consciousness.” Social geographer Nigel Thrift contends that time and space are bound to one another. He defines space as the structure or “the means by which a particular sense of time comes into being and moves forward to frame our understandings and actions.” Thrift names this “social time.” We experience time-space both kinesthetically and cerebrally, and measure it with social constructions. Our understanding of time and space is both understood and constructed through language. Thrift observes that not only does language bring time-space into conception but time-space also helps to create language: “In the end not only is space seen as linguistic but language is seen as spatial.” Choreography can be looked at as both a spatially experienced language, as well as a taking up of space, inviting meaning-making through verbal language.

As a theorist of performance, SanSan Kwan is “interested in how corporeal movement through specific places at precise historical moments can illuminate those places and those moments as well as the bodies that move through them.” She uses her own body as “a kind of auto-ethnographic choreography, an examination of [her] own movement through [space]” In her essay entitled, “Jagged Presence in a Liquid

City,” Kwan discusses how she uses her own body as a tool for measuring her spatial surroundings. I follow my mentor’s methodological approach as I pay attention to my own kinesthetic and somatic responses during my travels across the United States. By kinesthetic and somatic, I refer to the information I receive through my body.

V. Kerouac: Through the Lens of Choreography

A dancer reaches her entire torso, arms, and head to the right while her legs take her left. Her arms continue a sustained movement in line with her spine, taking up the space in an arc upward from right to left while her legs move her body leftward. She takes a total of five even steps and hesitates for a moment her entire torso, head, and arms now stretching leftward. A pause. Suddenly she throws her entire body forward in a lunge, offering herself toward the audience, her head down in genuflection.

This is the image that comes to my mind as I read a particular sentence in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. The syntactically incomplete sentence, “a western kinsman of the sun, Dean” lends itself rhythmically to the movement I just described. The “particular sense of time,” from the pace of the language, “comes into being and moves forward to frame our understanding” of these “actions.” The five steps to the left land evenly on each syllable of ‘western’ ‘kinsman’ and ‘sun.’ The comma acts as a hesitation before the surprising thrust forward, which is “Dean” both in the character Kerouac describes as well as in the abruptness of the sentence ending without a verb. The dancer’s expansive arc from right to left lends itself to the idea of westward movement in the passage. As a reader, I continue on in search of a verb like a free radical in search of a missing electron. I am sucked into this passage. As a choreographer, I realize this need to move forward in search of a verb, so I imagine kinetically laced together movement phrases, incorporating many verbs such as “warned,” “get,” “hear,” “see,” “rejection,” “putting,” and “wanting.” In fact, an entire dance piece could be thematically informed by this set of verbs found in the paragraph following the initial sentence, “a western kinsman of the sun, Dean.” This sentence or phrase from *On the Road* is language, which has been constructed into the spatial dimension. Once constructed into the spatial form of dance, opportunity arises for the “space [to be] seen as linguistic.”

VI. How I See Choreography in My Own Experience on the Road

In his essay entitled “Paradoxical Body,” José Gil looks at the interiority and exteriority of space in movement. Gil contends that “the dancer does not move in space; rather, the dancer secretes, creates space with his movement.” I imagine what Gil calls “the space of the body” extending beyond the human body and into the material objects that people affect as well. At the very beginning of my trip, I take off in an aircraft leaving Oakland airport with the projection of arriving in Washington D.C. I think of the entire aircraft as well as the projection in space as the “space of [my] body” as we push through air at rapidity impossible in my corporeal body alone. The speed with which we travel creates both a suspension and a tension between the outer space of the aircraft and the aircraft itself. This tension is notable in all of the passengers because no matter how much one is used to traveling by airplane, we all feel the physical implication of flying 30,000 feet high at a rate of 550 miles per hour. The “space of the body” creates space as it pushes through the density of the air. The air becomes dense because of the speed at which the aircraft travels, thus creating space with the movement of the plane.

Moving through cities such as D.C., New York, and Chicago by subway also ignites a fascination between the space of my corporeal body, the space of the subway train, and the space through which we are moving. I arrive by an Amtrak train from D.C. to Penn Station in New York City. I look at a map showing the vast network of a subway system and I imagine the trains moving in and out of these locations like a constantly contracting and expanding nebula. The forlorn brassy melody of a saxophone fills the hot balmy underground air. Bells ding, rails squeak. As people come and go, so does the sound of their voices. And then, the rushing sound of the train approaches before it is even seen. The train sweeps through the tunnel on cue, disrupting carefully orchestrated hairstyles, lifting skirts, and blowing around discarded newspapers. The train is “secreting space” as it arrives at the station in order to pick up the passengers. Once aboard this train, which happens to be the “A” train, we become a part of this space. The “space of the body” includes the train, my body, all of the bodies on the train, and the trajectory toward Brooklyn.

Gil describes “the space of the body” as “a lived experience of the dancer, who feels himself moving within a kind of container that

supports movement.” The subway tunnels act as a container supporting the movement of the train. The train itself acts as a container supporting the movement of the people. Never before have I experienced so many different people in one place, moving in and out of the subway trains. A young black man in acid wash jeans and bright orange shoes interjects when my husband and I argue about which stop to get off at. “Where do you want to go?” he asks. He tells us where to go for pizza and asks us about California. He says, “I want to go to L.A. one of these days.” A young white woman with a long torso outfitted in a grey wool cardigan sweater smiles at a little boy of about five years of age, wearing a yarmulke. He is with his mother and she is shy at first, letting her son interact with the strange woman, but not saying anything herself. The mother finally explains that they are on their way to Queens to visit the little boy’s cousin. While on the train, I hear countless languages. I see people dressed for business, dressed for traveling, dressed in street wear, and dressed for fun. A girl studies her sheet music. Three Italian teenagers on their way to Coney Island sing a song as one of the girls leans away from the boy who tries to embrace her. A woman wraps up her partner’s hand with an ace bandage as he proceeds to tell my husband, “This is what it’s all about, man. I want to grow old with somebody. No need to mess around. I love this woman.” All of these people are “dancing inside the possessed subject,” which I see as the train. Gil discusses the idea of the possessed body in terms of one dancer moving as if something other than her “self” is moving her from the inside. I suggest that this image mirrors that of the train. The train is not just moving because the conductor is driving the train; the train is moving because all of these different people have a need or a want to go where the train is taking them. The train is possessed by a single projection of deliberation and by the various stories that make up that projection. Kwan notes that, “bodies and space do mutually transform each other.” The bodies moving through the subway systems transform the space of the subway and the body of the train transforms the space of the tunnel. We can look at this space in terms of bodies because it is bodies that make up the space. Or, we can observe the negative space around the bodies. Thrift discusses the binaries of “self” and “other” and of “inside” and “outside.” Linguistically, we draw a line in the sand making distinctions between you and I, and between “interiority” and “exteriority.” We move through the geography of space with an ownership over “spatialised selfhood.” If we think in terms of Gil’s argument about the body “secreting space,” the binary lines between “negative space” and “positive space” are blurred. It

is this blurring of lines, “secreting of space,” and possession of the body of the train that I experience within the subways of New York City.

VII. How Can We Understand Space Through Choreography?

I can approach my choreography from two directions. Firstly, I can use the experience on the train as an overarching theme for the dance piece. I will also use specific passages from Thoreau, Kerouac, and Whitman to infuse sections within the greater theme. The overarching theme might be thought of as “taking up space.” I might explore what it means to be restricted in movement by being a part of a small container with many other bodies. A dancer elbows her way out of a crowd of other dancers because she suddenly feels constricted by space. The crowd of dancers undulate as the solo dancer moves into another space, another reality, taking with her the focus of the audience. At first, the other dancers’ bodies react sharply to the first dancer’s suddenness. They then contrast her continually abrupt movements by mirroring her initial movements with a slow gentle quality. The solo dancer, while spatially separate from the other dancers, becomes part of the other dancers again, simply by joining their movement. Another dancer becomes the soloist. This seamless transition of individual dancers makes up one projection of direction into space, while also featuring the individual stories of the dancers.

In order to use various passages from Kerouac, Whitman, and Thoreau’s writings for my choreography, I will consider the way these writings move and take up space on the page. While Kerouac’s voice is urgent, scattered, and sometimes anxiety-inducing, Thoreau gives the reader the sense that she is in good hands. Thoreau is acutely aware of his surroundings and moves “deliberately” through the space at Walden Pond for two years and two months. Amongst his scientific observations of the space at Walden, Thoreau slips in philosophical moments that act as ways of decoding not just the imagery of the landscape, but the myths populating those landscapes. He says, “It is well to have some water in your neighborhood to give buoyancy to and float the earth. One value even of the smallest well is, that when you look into it you see that earth is not continent but insular.”

By extending our perspective from something as small as a “well” to something as large as the earth, Thoreau broadens our viewpoint, so

that we may realize that Earth's waters take up a copious amount of space compared to that of the land mass. Thoreau first draws attention to the positive space of the well and flips the perspective by changing that positive space into the negative space of the entire water system on Earth. He has us look down a well in order to turn our perspective upside down, working to reconfigure our positioning on the planet.

At the very beginning of this paper, I describe a dance phrase corresponding to Thoreau's "well." I describe two dancers looking into one another's faces as if looking into a mirror. One dancer begins to move, as the other dancer remains stationary. When the second dancer begins to move, she contrasts the quality of the other dancer, which is how I translate the "but" in the clausal statement, "not continent but insular." This contrast is not arbitrary. It also explains the interiority and exteriority of space that Thoreau is exploring. As one dancer moves or "secretes space" in a very particular way, the second dancer takes up the negative space of the first dancer by contrasting the quality of movement. The juxtaposition of the dancers' movements work as an amendment to the initial movement, creating a new meaning in their secretion of space.

The question remains: how does choreography help us to understand space or even the construction of language? As Thrift asserts, thinking in terms of binaries, in simply representation and form, "produces a static model of language operating as a closed system rather than as an evolving or emergent system." Considering choreography as another language brings us into the space of three-dimensionality and offers a portal through which we can not only conceptualize space but inhabit and be affected by space as well.

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