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# AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY OF ENGAGEMENT THROUGH DANCE

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**Abstract:** This paper proposes a reflection on collaboration through dance. Drawing on ten years of fieldwork within the Swiss contemporary dance scene, the author, an anthropologist, dance scholar, and dancer, discusses her ethnographic practice, method, and writing inspired by collaborative anthropology. The first part of the paper advocates for dance as a practice-based research method, and for auto-ethnography to convey anthropological knowledge in a more accessible way. Research-creation is claimed to particularly suit sensorial topics, tending toward symmetrical relationships between anthropologists and fieldwork interlocutors. Drawing on an applied anthropological project using djembe dances for better social cohesion, the second part of the paper shows one possible engagement with society through dance practice. Generating intimacy and misconceptions, the project Kunda emphasizes how dance can become a laboratory to learn and negotiate intercultural differences.

**Keywords:** auto-ethnography, contemporary dance, practice-based research, djembe dances, social engagement, structural racismo.

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## Dance as a practice-based research method

My reflections on engagement emerged while writing my doctoral dissertation on contemporary dance (Vionnet 2018). Attending production processes alongside dance companies in Bern and Lausanne, dancing myself in one of them (Totentanz by Nina Stadler), I realized the discrepancies between my own research question – influenced by the type of knowledge produced within Academia – and choreographer's concerns. Having framed my research question in resonance with the academic field, I became aware – through a conflict with a choreographer reading my ethnographic account – that my framework only addressed anthropologists.

Upset by my text, the choreographer criticized the argumentative tone of academic writing valuing anthropologist discourse over emic voices<sup>1</sup>. She highlighted how my paper felt like a “violation” of emic opinions and gave too much authority to my position as an anthropologist. If Clifford says that “ethnographic texts are orchestrations of multivocal exchanges occurring in politically charged situations” (Clifford 1988, 10), the issue remains how to allow these voices to respond to each other non-hierarchically.

I thereby started to pursue more collaborative forms of research with my counterparts (Marcus 2013), attempting to go beyond

the asymmetrical relationship between a scientific subject (the anthropologist) and an art-object (here, dance practice). Convinced by the value of artistic creation for knowledge production – artistic or anthropological (Ingold 2013, Schneider and Wright 2013), I carved a method of dance workshops to investigate the phenomenon of intimacy within contemporary dance.<sup>2</sup> The following video reports the workshops I ran with several groups of dancers/choreographers in Montreal in 2019



<https://tube.switch.ch/videos/ccgOi9A8Bk>

This methodology allowed me to excavate an embodied knowledge that is challenging to grasp within interviews alone. According to Leavy, practicebased research particularly suits sensitive topics related to sensoriality, intimacy, body, and identity because the knowledge is not necessarily verbalized (Leavy 2009, 13). Seeking “to break down the distinction between researchers and researched,” I followed Conrad’s claim about researchcreation as a space where the “subject-object relationship” has more space to become a “subjectsubject relationship” (Conrad 2009, 166). Although it might only be an ideal to be achieved, participation stands for working horizontally, helping to break down hierarchy between academics and so called “informants.” Empowering affective dimension and processes, Conrad writes, it is a research “for”, “with”, and “by” the people rather than “on” the people (Conrad 2009, 166)

### Auto-ethnography to address research participants

I wondered how to address my writing to dance scholars and practitioners, how to include my fieldwork interlocutors’ interests, and articulate different expectations. Following Ingold’s words, this aim bypasses an ethnography of, to claim an ethnography with:

To practice this method is not to describe the world, or to represent it, but to open up our per-ception to what is going on there so that we, in turn, can respond to it. (...) We need it in order not to accumulate more and more information about the world, but to better correspond with it.

How could my writing resonate better with choreographers' interests? Since autoethnography localizes narratives in a specific position, it became a fruitful methodological tool, building upon my ethnographies. As "an embodied practice", autoethnography "is ethnographic investigation that takes autoreflective perceptions of the world as the starting point for generalizations and theorizations about the cultural, the social, and the political" (Lancaster 2011, 46). I discovered that choreographic practice is inspiring for writing ethnographic accounts: writing while maintaining the possibility of alternative voices, rather than locking the text into a single interpretation. Indeed, the five choreographers of Bern and Lausanne I conducted fieldwork with leave the interpretation of their dance plays open. Instead of delivering a precise message, they intentionally create space for the audience to make their own judgement.<sup>3</sup> They conceive their dance plays as a proposition about the world, without excluding other interpretations

In my experience, auto-ethnography emerges out of a collective and reflective process because observations and hypotheses are shared and negotiated with fieldwork's interlocutors. It "refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture" (Leavy 2009, 37). Contrary to criticism against the self-centeredness of auto-ethnography (Buckland 2010), I noted how it is a method of investigation that articulates the subjective with the plural (Nancy 1996), attributing the authority of the text to a particular voice, meanwhile acknowledging other viewpoints.

The interweaving of the intimate and the collective within autoethnographic narratives highlights the way a dancing body is shaped by others (Vionnet 2021). Fieldwork displaces the gaze and intimate opinions, thereby the transformative process that anthropologists undergo is marked by the plural. Jackson confesses "making myself the subject of an experiment, allowing the world to work on me, reshaping my thinking and guiding my actions" (Jackson 2012, 5). The traces of the world on the subject convey self-transformation, which is the key for raising anthropological knowledge. Discovering a new sensorial world within my body and in relation with my surroundings, I draw on my subjective phenomenological experience to convey sensoriality through my writing (Vionnet and Ingold 2018). Jackson urges the search for "techniques of writing that enable us to resonate with and remain in touch with the events, persons, and things being written about, writing that does justice to life, that makes sense, that rings true" (Jackson 2012, 175).

Through auto-ethnography, I have found a way of overcoming the confinement of the other in a tied-up text from which one is deprived of agency. By reinscribing my own discourse in a positionality, giving a space to sensations and affects, I felt that I was ethically respecting my interlocutors (Lassiter 2005, chap. 5), avoiding crushing their voice under an explanatory meta-analysis. Auto-ethnographic writing solved the issue with the choreographer I had an disagreement with, who, in the end, appreciated my monograph

This phase in my research also created a reflexive dialogical space with the creation of performance video-essays together with a visual artist.<sup>4</sup> These research-creations not only



Shadow Dance (still)

© Christelle Becholey Besson

allowed me to empirically examine the theoretical hypothesis I was developing in my writing, but also enabled the disseminating of knowledge to artists who would not necessarily read my academic writing. Furthermore, performance is an essential tool to translate sensory qualities, not always shareable with written words. It allows me to adopt a poetic voice to attune to the phenomenological sensoriality of dance, transmitting gestures and affects, following Dwyer's dialogic anthropology: writing in a way that experience becomes concrete, transmitting the tone of the voice, moods, and gestures (Dwyer 1982, xviii).<sup>5</sup> Rethinking traditional scientific modes of representations, Chapman and Sawchuk write that research-creation challenges the argumentative form of academic research (based on deduction, logic, and analysis), because theoretical, technical, and creative dimensions intermingle (Chapman and Sawchuk 2012, 6; 13)

Convinced by dance practice as a research method (Guisgand and Schiller 2017), I was still looking for a greater engagement within society, "suffocating" in the dominant white and elitist contemporary dance scene. This recently became possible through a collaboration with Senegalese artists and Swiss activists, using dance to question racism. This project is not "proper" ethnographic fieldwork for academic research. Rather, it is an engaged anthropological project in cooperation with cultural and state institutions. In the following section, I will be primarily speaking from the perspective of a project leader, dancer, choreographer, and activist.

## Kunda: a research-creation as ethnographic encounter

The project began in 2019 with the production *Requidounga*, involving sixty young musicians of the music conservatory of Delémont in the Swiss Jura.<sup>6</sup> Rehearsals emphasized the



<https://tube.switch.ch/videos/5y5XZmxNkE>

potential of artistic creation as a space for intercultural exchange, art becoming a buffer zone between cultures (Enwezor 2012). Music students learned to play the djembe, discovering the diversity and complexity of the drum's rhythms. Through the encounter with Dédou, a Burkinabe musician, and André, a Senegalese dancer, these Swiss teenagers faced “the exotic faraway” – most of them for the first time.



André & Dédou © Cie Kunda.

In addition to my position as a dancer and choreographer,<sup>7</sup> I found myself in the role of a cultural mediator, explaining the different cultural habits to each other, since communicative misconceptions about time,

artist's fees, event planning, and cellphone use emerged during the creative process. More specifically, the written culture didn't suit Dédou and André: urgent emails and sms were not answered, meanwhile audio messages were sent to greet our WhatsApp group: "bonjour la famille, j'espère que vous allez tous bien!"<sup>8</sup> The director of the orchestra, the two choirs' leaders, the costume maker and project's administrator were annoyed at what they believed was disrespectful, until we discovered that our counterparts could not read our written texts (illiteracy). I appreciated my assigned function, feeling I could give back my knowledge beyond papers and anthropological conferences, becoming part of a transformative process for better understanding and communication in the world I was living in.

The production was interrupted by Covid-19, but gave birth to the dance company Kunda. By contrast to the way ethnographic fieldwork is generally framed in relation to an anthropological interest, here, the project was initiated by my fieldwork interlocutor, who I describe as a "co-researcher" (Lassiter 2005, Leavy 2009). André encouraged me to further develop our artistic collaboration, enthusiastic about the possibility of dancing again. Indeed, André had stopped dancing since his arrival in Switzerland. Despite his international dance career with well-known Senegalese dance company Jant-Bi<sup>9</sup>, he couldn't make a living out of dancing. Since 2016, André has been working for a temporary placement office in Biel, accepting all kind of jobs. At this stage of his life trajectory, dance became a migratory resource rather than an aesthetic project (Despres 2016, 20).

Thanks to André's motivation, we created a short dance play, which we performed at a local contemporary dance festival in Bern. Through the creative process, I became aware of the potential for discussing important questions about the phenomenology of dance and dynamics of movement. I learned about his conception of movement through visual imaginary: blood circulating through veins, water spread all around his body pushing him to move, images of water, sand, forest, and baobab to transform movement qualities.<sup>10</sup> I discovered the taboo of nakedness and touch within "afro-contemporary dance", in contrast to its widespread use in French and Swiss contemporary dance.<sup>11</sup> If Swanson argues for Contemporary Dance as a practice of "dancing otherwise", allowing male dancers to disrupt conventions of heteronormativity and masculinity (Swanson 2019, 60), homosexuality is still a sensitive topic in André's mind, like most dancers I met during fieldwork at the dance school "Ecole des Sables" in Senegal, In August 2021



Duet Dereskina – © Enrique Muñes Lopez

Through this co-creation, I became aware of the discrepancy between what André calls “contemporary dance” and my understanding of “contemporary dance practice” learned alongside Swiss choreographers. The proximity emerging out of our rehearsals created a space for intimate exchange about each other’s practice and conceptions; however, it also generated intercultural misunderstandings. Our arguments mainly touched upon the “conceptualization” of performance. In Switzerland and France a dance production emerges out of a framework (the “concept” of a dance play), which ends up in a written project proposal. Within André’s practice, the creation results from an instant composition of movement sequences. He often resisted my questions about the meaning of our movements, considering them as superficial for inventing movement sequences

Our new collaboration actualized a desire I have been nourishing for a few years, through my learning of “African” traditional dances. Witnessing well-known artists arriving in Switzerland after a dance career in Senegal or Burkina Faso, I noted that they often had to stop



<https://tube.switch.ch/videos/OTBiz7B3oE>

their artistic practice due to mechanisms of exclusion within Swiss cultural institutions (Vionnet 2022). For instance, I used to train with Richard, a Burkinabe dancer from Vevey who finally stopped his dance activities after he performed with two important contemporary dance companies of Lausanne and Geneva. Not finding other dance contracts, he launched his own dance company, hoping to provide work for himself. But as an illiterate person, he could not face the amount of computer work required. He finally quit the dance scene. This exclusion is not only a problem of educational access, but also a matter of structural racism. Dance scholars have highlighted mechanisms of racial privilege within dance history (Manning 2019, 237) and the need to understand racialization as embedded within socio-cultural, political, economic, and legal structures, and processes that give qualities/privileges to one group of people (“white”) and stigma/disadvantage to others (“nonwhite”) (Cukierman, Dambury and Vergès 2018, 7).<sup>12</sup>

Witnessing the cases of Richard, André, and my other dance teachers, I wondered how it might be possible to create more space for the voices in the margins to express themselves (Spivak 1988). How could Swiss democracy become more participative, culturally speaking, including for people who are not literate? What about co-defining a common framework with a negotiated agenda that also fits the concerns of local communities? (Lassiter 2005). In the summer of 2020, I developed a proposal together with André and a team of artists and activists based in Bern and Biel. Our project was accepted by the program Neues Wir launched by the Swiss government, which encourages community-based initiatives that question discourses, images, and history related to the We and Them. Based on the assumption that fifty percent of the population living in Switzerland has a migratory background, the program aims to support local projects that help create a better social cohesion and a “we-feeling” out of diversities.<sup>13</sup> Our project Kunda – which means “house” in Mandinka – addresses multiculturalism, racism, and discrimination through the means of dance.<sup>14</sup>

## Intimacy, stereotypes, and structural racism

The same space that allowed intimacy also highlighted cultural and personal differences. The intense proximity (Enwezor 2012) of the dance floor led to frictions. Some discussions touched upon sensitive topics about music, costume, and dramaturgy: André vehemently opposed my idea when I proposed that we dance in silence, or to repeat the same movement sequence but with two different costumes (to question the meaning of movement shaped by clothing). We constantly had to negotiate. Through this experience, I realized how dance could become an intercultural laboratory providing a space to share, disagree, and learn. On stage, the space of performance meets the space of ordinary values since intimate issues are revealed through fiction. Thereby, creation is not only art, but “choreography-fiction” (Sjöberg 2008) revealing aspects of life’s condition. Jackson also strikes a balance between his voice and the voice of his interlocutors, looking for “a space for conversation, negotiation, and encounter that switches unpredictably between accord and discord, attunement and disharmony” (Jackson 2012, 174). Since we had an outcome to produce – a dance performance – we needed to agree with one another, or at least, compromise. Our long conversations and arguments slowly diminished, and even appeared invisible in the final piece, reflecting a dance form of cultural mediation

Recounting my past experiences with Cameroonians, Tanzanian <sup>15</sup>, and Senegalese communities, I had always considered myself sensitive to discrimination. I didn’t expect the production process to become such a mirror of discriminatory attitudes, highlighting how they



Dereskina Sabar (Christelle Becholey Besson)

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are embodied in behaviors and daily micro-gestures. For instance, through the imposition of a “Swiss” way of planning, organizing work, sharing money, and making decisions, I unconsciously expected my

Senegalese co-artists to adapt themselves since we were working in Switzerland. But they also “forced” me to adjust to them, so that we constantly had to find a middle line between “here and there” such as musicians asking for artist fees one week before the show.<sup>16</sup>

Aware of the violence of the exhibition of bodies throughout history – such as human zoos (Cervulle 2017), minstrel shows (Mandel 2019), Broadway musicals (Decker 2012) – I constantly asked myself how to avoid the exoticism around Black dancing bodies, and their association with entertainment (Fauley Emery 1972).<sup>17</sup> My aim was to prevent neocolonial residues, such as audience comments like, “Africans are so good at dancing, it’s in their blood”!<sup>18</sup> Dance scholar S. Manning highlighted the stickiness of “Blackness”, which defines “the social and artistic meanings that adhere to dancing bodies” (Manning 2019, 235).

Together with André, we applied small strategies, hoping to distort the exoticism of “African” folklore and the image of “African” imaginary enclosed in a “traditional Africanism” (the stereotyped vision of a generalized Africa embedded in savanna, forest, village in great harmony with nature) (Chrétien 2007, 167): for instance, by wearing western costumes rather than traditional “boubou”, inserting ballet movements and floor work sequences between Dudumba and Soko steps. In addition, we proposed to debate with the audience at the end of our performances, to share our reflection on the production process and the “modernity” of “African dances” – a category criticized for its generalizations and association with the village (Cooper Albright 1997; Lassibille 2004; Tiérou 2001). We also created a short video essay out of our performance to transmit some of our theoretical questions (Vioram et al. 2021). For a next version, we also wish to have a DJ on stage to counterbalance the image generated by the two drummers, Ibou und Abou.



Dereskina (Christelle Becholey Besson)

Even though I wished to avoid confining the Black dancing body into a presumed tradition, Ibou and Abou didn’t see any issue with wearing their traditional clothing. Aterianus-Owanga argues that through the transmission of Sabar to European practitioners, Senegalese artists are

participating in a process of self-affirmation in a migratory context (Aterianus-Owanga 2019). Thereby, what aesthetic choice to make between the cliché of the “traditional” and the musicians’ wishes? Should I respect my counterparts’ desire or follow my need to represent culture “not as a tradition to be saved but as assembled codes and artifacts always susceptible to critical and creative recombination”? (Clifford 1988, 13). However, in pursuing my urge to thwart the epistemic violence of stereotypes, I would force my co-artists to fit into my representation, pretending I might know, “better than them”, the gaze of the audience. Finally, I decided to respect their wishes without trying to convince them of my opinión



Dance Workshops, Interface Summer School (Peter Bille Larsen)

Part of Kunda’s mission also includes interventions in schools and youth centers, articulating dance and discussions to reflect on discrimination and racism in Switzerland. We took part in the Interface Summer School.<sup>19</sup> The rich exchange with students in anthropology about questions of categorization made me realize the following discrepancy: on the one hand, operations of deconstruction relevant on a theoretical level and in raising anthropological knowledge; on the other hand, the need of activists to use operative categories in the field. How to negotiate between anthropologist’ and activists’ interests in finding a common framework? How to talk about differences with teenagers and children without reifying categories?

Facing the sensitive challenge of language, together with our anti-racism activist Baba – responsible for workshop mediation – we opted to use the terms Black and Blackness with



Photo Parc Biel city (Cie Kunda)

capital letters to express the political constructedness, and relativeness, of the terms: rather than defining a skin color, they refer to political categories and legitimized social identities. They describe people of African heritage who experience shared cultural identities and a similar reality (of anti-Black racism) because of social, historical, and political processes of racialization. Blackness is an experience shared by people facing racism, meanwhile Whiteness is the norm defining all others (Hartigan 2020, 497). Within the context of dance, Whiteness refers to “the social and artistic privilege that adhere to dancing bodies that can be read as racially unmarked, the legitimizing norms against which bodies of color take their color” (Manning 2019, 235).

Kunda has just started. In autumn 2021 a two-day workshop has taken place in a secondary school in the Bern area together with Swiss Refugee Council,<sup>20</sup> and a regular Sunday workshop with female teenagers from diverse cultural backgrounds in a Bernese youth center. Hopefully, Kunda will enable me to further understand the extent to which neo-colonialism has left traces not only in our status and positions, but also in our daily behaviors, language expressions, and micro-gestures. In doing so, dance invites exchange, and elicits engagement with communities for better mutual comprehension. Finally, Kunda attempts to follow a current trend of decolonizing art practices, criticizing white hegemony within cultural institutions (Liepsch, Warner, and Pees 2018; Moroni 2019).

For me, Kunda responds to a growing discomfort I have about the final aim of institutionalized anthropology. With a focus on publications, I didn’t feel my work was “engaging enough” through research-creation,

autoethnography, and ethical forms of writing as described in the first part of the paper. These means are relevant and need to be pursued. However, Kunda results from another urge. Through it, I finally feel I am engaging anthropology outside of academia, resonating with the reality of people expressing specific needs and expectations. This means thereby transforming ethnographic practice to better address contemporary issues, as Mikhail Epstein expresses in his manifesto for transformative humanities: “to study the human being also means to create humanness itself” (Epstein 2012, 7), asking the question: what kind of community do we wish to (re)create through anthropology?

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## Notes

- 1 I developed this question in a chapter of my dissertation (Vionnet 2018, chap. 2.3)
- 2 SNF Postdoc Mobility: "An Anthropology of Intimacy in Contemporary Dance: A Comparative Study in Montreal, Paris and Dakar."
- 3 I could observe a general tendency of this choreographic practice through thirty interviews with choreographers established in the Canton de Vaud, for an applied sociological inquiry run under the direction of Pierre-Emmanuel Sornet (AVDC 2016).
- 4 1) A dance performance about body and environment, shadows and identities: <http://liminalities.net/16-3/shadows.html> (accessed Dec 30, 2021). 2) A choreography with ten dancers about the birth of gesture and the body as living archive: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YISWdQmLoEI> (accessed Dec 30, 2021).
- 5 Unsatisfied with scientist's ethnographic accounts of the 1970s, Dwyer looked for a more appropriate way to portray the voice of his Moroccan

- interlocutor. Aware of the inequality in their relationship because of the history of confrontation between the West and the rest of the World, the anthropologist wished to break the idea of the West searching for knowledge of the other. His monograph results in a long conversation with his counterpart, based on transcriptions of tape-recorded interviews.
- 6 <https://ciekunda.com/requidounga/> (accessed Dec 30, 2021).
  - 7 Interview about Requidounga: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqKP\\_NRL5sDg&t=4s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqKP_NRL5sDg&t=4s) (accessed Dec 30, 2021).
  - 8 “Hi family, I hope you’re all doing well!”
  - 9 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_YvU6xYdkyw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_YvU6xYdkyw) (accessed Dec 30, 2021).
  - 10 In dance, “qualities” are not a moral judgment (good/bad). Rather, it describes a moving energy and dynamic: slow, soft, vivid, strong, chopped, squashed, etc.
  - 11 The exchanges with André were confirmed by interviews run with dancers from Senegal, Congo and Cameroun I met on fieldwork in Paris (2020–21).
  - 12 I wish to develop this question further in my next research project.
  - 13 <https://www.ekm.admin.ch/ekm/de/home/projekte/neues-wir.html> (accessed Dec 30, 2021).
  - 14 [ciekunda.com](https://www.ekm.admin.ch/ekm/de/home/projekte/neues-wir.html) (accessed Dec 30, 2021).
  - 15 Partly growing up in Cameroon (1986–1992), I also worked as a project advisor in Mbeya (Tanzania, 2011–2012)
  - 16 Invoking the urge of the money to prepare the Senegalese celebration Tabaski (known worldwide as Aïd elKébir).
  - 17 Emery showed how mainstream US American cultural industry created a space for Afro-American dancers – excluded from ballet and theaters – meanwhile reducing Black dancers to their role as entertainers (as opposed to serious artists) and limiting their dances to what was conceptualized as “African themed” such as spirituals, jazz, and plantation dances (Fauley Emery 1972, 327).
  - 18 From ancient Greek *exōtikos* (foreigner/outsider), the notion of exoticism was born in 1860 in France. Reinforced by the arrival of Afro-American dancers in the 1920s (such as Josephine Becker), Black dancers carried this notion of exoticism while entering in the word of balls, saloons, and musical halls (Décoret-Ahiha 2004, 4–11). The term only recently acquired its association with tropicalism and extra-western traditions
  - 19 More information: <https://ciekunda.com/exemple/>; <https://www.seg-interface.org/post/dance-racism-and-anthropological-knowledge> (accessed Dec 30, 2021)
  - 20 Schweizerische Flüchtlingshilfe SFH – Organisation suisse d’aide aux réfugiés OSAR.