Bodies Unbound: Reflections on Dance, Horrorism, Vulnerability, and Resistance

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Hello, I'm Gurur. I'd like to thank Sandra Noeth very much for inviting me to this

thoughtfully conceptualized and timely working session on bodies and bordering processes. I'd

also like to thank the entire organization, the translators, and the technical team for making it

possible. Sandra already introduced me, but I'd like to tell you a little bit more about myself.

Precisely one month after I had submitted the proposal for my dissertation, which was an

empirical investigation on the emergence and transformation of contemporary dance as a

transnational art world in Europe, I found myself soaring above the clouds (*of teargas*). Riding a

rollercoaster of emotions and sociological musings, oscillating between hope and despair, I

embarked on the Gezi Uprising, the most significant social upheaval in the history of modern

Turkey. While I navigated through reshuffled priorities and urgencies, I constantly questioned

the relevance of my work in the context of the rapid downward spiral into a dictatorship of sorts

in Turkey in the aftermath of the revolt. An emergent oppositional movement was aborted by

sheer force, with the usual tactics of psychological manipulation and by provoking already

existing social fault lines. Through the politics of fear people have been forced into submitting to

authoritarianism and public spaces for dissent have been constrained. Some 1700 academicians,

including myself, who signed a peace petition against the military involvement of Turkish armed

forces in the Kurdish region in the Southeast have been deemed "terrorists." Many lost their jobs

some were jailed and prosecuted, while others have been subjected to social lynching and deportation. Unfortunately, the international community and the EU has turned a blind eye to the violations of law and human rights due to the shameful deal signed with the Turkish government regarding Syrian refugees.

Thus, not surprisingly, my current research comes from a personal investment in questions regarding the social psychology of fascism, the body in contemporary social movements, the body as protest and/or weapon, and vulnerability and politics. So, I envision my impulse statement as an exercise in thinking towards these larger questions, some of which we shall explore further in the workshop tomorrow.

Today, I'd like to talk about several different phenomena that underscore the instability of the concept of a body as a unified, bounded entity: contemporary dance, contemporary horrorism(s), processes of abjection, and the vulnerable body. While contemporary dance has been successful articulating the notion of the body as vulnerable, that is, open to affecting and being affected, contemporary forms of violence underscore how a closed version of the body, which parallels the notion of the autonomous individual of liberalism, is linked to denials of vulnerability or its exploitation.

Contemporary Dance as a Border-Defying Practice

Contemporary dance navigates the tension between the "lived body" in its materiality and the body as a site of tension and negotiation of personal and collective history. Since the early 1990s, choreographers have gone beyond the mind/body dualism and explored a notion of the body as a process, that is, as a dynamic site of exchange with social, ecological, and political forces. Unlike the virtuosic, invulnerable, well-contained body of classical dance forms, numerous

choreographers have depicted the body in uncertain, out-of-control, and disorganized states. One can think of, for instance, Meg Stuart's 1991 work *Disfigure Study* (1991) where she presents a fragmented body whose extremities are uninhibited to enter new connections. *(Slide 2)*. Here, she investigates "dancing states," such as sickness, sweating, blushing, and tics, treating them as movement qualities that emerge when one no longer focuses on the technical aspects of movement.

(Slide 3). Similarly, with *Self Unfinished* (1998), now considered as a "classic" of research-based contemporary dance, Xavier Le Roy complicates the notion of "subjectivity" and how it cannot be thought of in terms of dichotomies and binary oppositions such as man/woman, human/animal, and presence/absence. During the performance, Le Roy disguises parts of his body and appears in various configurations that evade any recognizable human form. What unfolds is a body in constant transition, in a series of becomings. As Le Roy (2000) explains, with this piece, he aims to introduce a concept of the body that does not end at the skin. Explicitly acknowledging the work of Paul Schilder and Deleuze and Guattari as his inspirations, he affirms that the body is capable of accommodating an extremely wide range of objects and discourses. Anything that comes into contact with the surfaces of the body and remains there long enough will be incorporated into the body image (Le Roy 2000, *Self-Interview*). Le Roy suggests that the body image is not purely an anatomical one, but is also a function of the subject's psychology and socio-historical context.

Here, let's take another example: *Solum* (2005) by Filiz Sizanli and Mustafa Kaplan *(Slide 4)*. It forces the viewer to explore their assumptions of the body that *is*, the body that *ought* to be, and the body *possible*. Our hallucinations of "wholeness" accompany our perception of the body. Images of bodies as incomplete are unsettling because they always remind that

fragmentation is always possibility, reminding us of our earliest experiences of the body in fragments.

Besides complicating the idea of the body as a bounded entity, dance has been a border-defying practice at the organizational/structural level in a more literal sense. The history of dance consists of cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary borrowings, appropriations, mutations and hybridization, rendering claims of cultural purity untenable. Today, dance is a highly transnational art world, not only at the level of aesthetics, but also regarding production, creation, and diffusion.

Horrorism

For the dance world and beyond, being contemporary also entails bearing witness and being subjected to the entanglement of bodies with multiple contemporary crises (of austerity, refugees, ecological disasters) and violence.

It's hard to find suitable terms to describe current forms of global violence. Even more problematic are the phrases such as "war on terror," "humanitarian war," and "preventive war." The terms are, in fact, part of the problem: while atrocities committed by sovereign states against civilians are named "collateral damage," those perpetrated by non-state agents are called "terrorism." *(Slide 5, 6, 7: Here are images from the Roboski massacre where the Turkish Air Forces bombed a group of young men and their mules as they were crossing the border of Iraq and Turkey to smuggle cigarettes, a routine activity they do to make a living. The Turkish state claimed that it was a mistake, "collateral damage" in its fight against the Kurdish guerilla. The final slide is a recent image from Cizre, a town in the Southeast, annihilated by the Turkish army. I don't even want to comment about the flags, and why they took the picture in the first*

place, as I think it speaks for itself.)

Italian political philosopher Adriana Cavarero (2009) introduces the concept of "horrorism" to describe contemporary manifestations of violence against the helpless. It does not matter who the perpetrator, or what the motivation, is. While terror is a transient state of survival, inciting bodies into motion to fight or flee, horror is linked to the feeling of being frozen, to the total paralysis of movement. It is a state of being.

Cavarero links horror more particularly to the reaction to dismemberment. Here, the human being is offended in the ontological dignity of its *being as body*. What is at stake is not the end of a human life but the human condition itself, as incarnated in the singularity of vulnerable bodies.

Suicide Bombing as Abjection

It is a well-known fact, although interpreted from diverse frameworks, that among the repertory violence, human bombs incite particular disgust. Although suicide bombing is a long-standing phenomenon, it became a genre of social scientific, psychological, and military study in its own right especially since 9/11. The number of attacks using suicide tactics grew tremendously since the 1980s, especially after the U.S. led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and rose from some 80 incidents per year to thousands today. Overall, according to the as of mid-2015 about three-quarters of all suicide attacks occurred in just three countries: Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. These are obvious indicators that military intervention and the logic of retaliation and securitization only amplify the problem. But, I leave that discussion for another time. I return to my question:

Why is suicide bombing so repugnant? Suicide operations do not kill as many civilians as conventional warfare, yet people react to them with exceptional horror (Asad 2009). There are

numerous explanations. For instance, some note that it might be partly due to the "unbearable intimacy shared in their final moments by the bomber and her or his victims […] in a deadly embrace" (Rose 2004). I think suicide bombing is an exceptionally repugnant form of contemporary horrorism because it is an *extreme form of border-defying practice*. Let me explain.

The political theorist Lauren Wilcox (2014) conceptualizes suicide bombing as a practice of abjection. Drawing on her argument, I think the greatest source of our horror and disgust is that suicide bombings generate "abject" bodies. Once constituted as whole and autonomous vessels of the subjects, in less than seconds, bodies become "heaps of meat."

Let me elaborate on the concept of the *abject* for clarification. In her analysis of the psychic constitution of the subject, the feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva (1982) introduces the notion of the abject to refer to the element a subject must disavow in the attempt to secure "the self's clean and proper body." The abject is neither an object nor a subject, but something in-between. It is founded on a rejection of material corporeality. It is commonly associated with waste products and bodily fluids that leave the body through openings or wounds. By expelling the abject, the self creates the boundary between the abject and itself as a necessary step in the creation of the unitary self. In other words, the abject represents a part of the self that must be rejected to become a self. The abject, though externalized, is thus an essential part of the self, haunting the unconscious, rendering it vulnerable to disruptions.

The suicide bomber becomes an abject figure by blurring the boundaries between inside and outside, nature and culture. His/her body is an "amalgam of flesh and metal, biology and technology, it is a cyborg body that refuses the distinction between nature and culture" (Haraway 1991).

Suicide bombing does not only threaten the boundaries of bodies but also that of the sovereign state. It shows the impossibility of the rational control of security. Sovereignty is a border-building practice *par excellence*. Every sovereign space such as the nation state is produced by violence. The sovereign creates territorialized, ordered and hierarchized spaces by the exclusion of the abject (refugees, migrants, political dissidents, etc.). Security discourses have produced violence as an intrusion upon the nation-state from an "other" located outside of state boundaries, rather than stemming from the instability of (political and individual) bodies themselves. Sovereignty involves the simultaneous production of a unified, bounded territory and the production of unified, bounded bodies. *(The space that the sovereign produces is often analogized to the body. The most famous one is the figure of the Leviathan where Thomas Hobbes depicts the people as the land and the sovereign as the head).* By focusing on the practices of state officials and civil societal organizations (e.g., ZAKA in Israel) to reassemble body parts in the aftermath of suicide missions, Wilcox demonstrates how power molds and constitutes the border of the body and state simultaneously.

The suicide bomber is also an anomaly in the de-corporealized contemporary technologies of destruction. In the context of wars with smart bombs, long-distance high-precision war machines "the destructive violence of the suicide bomber, conveyed by the body pure and simple, appears from the perspective of conventional warfare particularly scandalous, illegitimate, and unfair" (Cavarero 2009).

The Body as Weapon or Necropolitical Resistance

There are other instances where the body erupts as a weapon but does not aim to destroy others along with it. For instance, you might remember Mohammed Bouzazi, the 26-year old itinerant

fruit vendor, who immolated himself and triggered the mass protests and popular uprisings in Tunisia. After local officials confiscated his fruit cart and humiliated and insulted him, Bouzazi set himself on fire on December 17, 2010 in front of the government building in the city of Sidi Bouzid. As Bargu observes (2016), although his self-immolation became a catalyst for the uprising that overthrew the authoritarian rule of Ben Ali, his act is at the same time "a testament to the absence of an organized collective movement and the severity of helpless solitude.: Here, the body becomes both the product of "necropower" and the agent of a "necropolitical" resistance.

As Achille Mbembe (2003) argues, in spaces of coloniality, enslavement, and occupations, as well as the spatial actualizations of a permanent *coup d'etat* that he calls "terror formations," whole populations are destined to death. He calls the power that renders some populations disposable as " necropower," reducing them to "death-in-life." One can find the same tendency also in Western democracies, revealed in the wake of exceptional events and natural disasters. For example, the way the state dealt with the contingency of hurricane Katrina exposed how entire populations are considered as an unnecessary burden and left to fend off for themselves. Similarly, the prison itself has become a tool for governing the poor and disposable populations by assuming a "warehouse" function. That is, the disposability of populations is not limited to the new colonies or sites of military occupation, but rather a constant feature of neoliberal governmentalization.

The unequal distribution of vulnerability, the differential assignment of disposability does not merely produce some populations as closer to death than the rest but also leads to new forms of resistance that emerge from these populations. We also find forms of necropolitical resistance such as hunger strikes or other forms of self-destruction. As Mbembe argues, under

conditions of necropower, "the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred." Perhaps, in the contexts of horrorism and necropower, bodies are the only means left to individuals whose lives are systematically reduced to biology.

Resistance *to* Vulnerability, Resistance *Through* Vulnerability

The body, as something that is both acting and acted upon, is at the center of many political movements and public assemblies today, such as the right to food and shelter, the right to work, health care, protection from injury, violence, incarceration, authoritarianism, and inequality.

In her recent work that directly addresses the concept of vulnerability, Judith Butler (2015) contends that our modes of resistance should be based on recognizing the chains of dependence that govern human existence, and to unite in vulnerability. Here, it becomes crucial to advance the conception of the body as not entirely distinct from other bodies. By theorizing the human body as relational and dependent, we foreground the way in which we are vulnerable to disappearing or withdrawing infrastructures, networks of support and sustenance, and social relations.

There is certainly an ontological, corporeal dimension of vulnerability. But, it is not merely an existential condition, but the result of the social, economic, and political forces that impinge upon us. What is imperative is to address the conditions that render some more vulnerable than others and to recognize vulnerability as a moment of resistance. Butler contributes to our understanding of vulnerability as a position of strength rather than weakness.

We see especially in moments of non-violent protest that bodily vulnerability becomes mobilized for purposes of resistance. These instances mobilize vulnerability for asserting existence, claiming the right to public space, equality, and oppose violence, militarism, and the

police. *(Slide 9)*

So, there are two senses of resistance and vulnerability implied here. One is resistance *to* vulnerability, induced by certain modes of politics and power; and there is resistance *through* vulnerability, to injustice, and different distributions of vulnerability, which mobilizes vulnerability as its own exercise of power.

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Obviously, my intention is not to conflate artistic representation with spectacles of violence. I do find comparisons of body as weapon/protest with performance art problematic. Sometimes, however, the proximity of the dancer's body with horrorism is literal: For instance, as when dancers' bodies erupt in moment of social/political protest, exposed in their utter vulnerability to the sheer force of actual or potential violence:

(Slide 10) We see here a group of young people dancing the *halay*. Ankara bombing was the deadliest terrorist attack in the history of modern Turkey with 109 people dead and more than 500 wounded. The bombing targeted a peace rally organized by the "Peace Block." The rally was held to protest the growing conflict between the Turkish Armed Forces and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) guerillas. The bombing occurred before the scheduled November 1 general election. Allegedly, the attack carried out by ISIS. However, the ISIS never claimed the attack.

Then, the Brussels attacks took place just three months ago. As you know, Brussels is not only home to the European Parliament and the highest number of journalists, ambassadors, and lobbyists, but also the greatest number of contemporary dancers, choreographers and dance organizations. Furthermore, people have been recently massacred in dance clubs and concert halls.

So, how to keep on dancing in times of horrorism? What infrastructures of support—in all senses of the term —do we in the dance field take for granted and for which ones do we struggle? What are some of the ways in which the dancer and the dance are rendered vulnerable through political, psychological, and social forces?

The central theme of the Dance Congress this year is "being contemporary." If we follow Agamben's (2009) image of the contemporary as the one who has a dissonant relationship with the present, as the one who can perceive not the light but the darkness of her time as something that concerns and never ceases to engage her, we are all contemporaries. It has become impossible not to discern the darkness. The challenge now is how to see in the dark, which means "means being able not only to fix one's gaze firmly on the darkness of the epoch but also to perceive in this darkness a light that, while directed toward us, infinitely distances itself from us. It is like being on time for an appointment that one cannot but miss" (Agamben, 46).

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