

“I breathed on their dust”: Protean Memory and Tactile Media

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Presented as part of the ‘Mediated Moves: Popular Dance, Cultural Memory, and Modernity’ Roundtable at *Beyond Authenticity and Appropriation: Bodies, Authorship and Choreographies of Transmission*, SDHS and CORD Joint Conference, Pomona College, 3rd-6th November 2016

Like Danielle [Robinson], my archival research in popular dance has brought me to “think of dance source materials as lively vessels for the kinesthetic memories of the people involved” (Robinson, 2016). However, my journey to reach this point differs from Danielle’s both in the subject matter of the research it involved and in the bodies of theory that influenced my thinking. My interest in popular dance sources as agents of memory arose from my research into the history of the cancan, and from my engagement with writings on cultural memory in memory studies, performances studies and film studies to understand the transmission of the cancan across time. While Danielle was inspired by her own embodied relationship with her sources, my interest was initially piqued by the ways the historical dancers, artists, writers and filmmakers I was researching engaged with texts, images and films of the cancan. Only later did I begin to apply this idea to my own embodied interactions with these media, and thereby converge with Danielle’s line of thought. In this presentation, I’d like to lead you through the process that brought my research into alignment with Danielle’s by sharing with you some archival material and two of the concepts I developed to engage with it, namely Protean Memory and Tactile Media.

Before delving into the archive, I’d like to provide some theoretical context through performance studies scholar Diana Taylor’s distinction between the ‘archive’ and the ‘repertoire’ (2003). While the archive consists of “supposedly enduring materials” such as “texts, documents, buildings, bones” (2003, p. 19), in the repertoire memory is embodied in “performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing” (2003, 20), which change over time. While Taylor notes that “the archive and the repertoire exist in a constant state of interaction” (p. 21), her focus is on “revalorizing expressive, embodied culture” (p. 16) as a corrective to the tendency to “banish the repertoire to the past” (p. 21). Both performance studies and dance studies have engaged with the field of cultural memory largely through this rhetoric of reasserting the value of the repertoire, and understandably so, given the undeniable ways in which the dismissal of various repertoires of knowledge have been used to silence marginalised bodies throughout history. In the meantime, the main body of memory studies research focuses on various archives – the textual, the monumental and the digital, for example. Very little memory studies research considers embodied memory, and that which does tends towards notions of habit and memory conservation (e.g. Connerton, 1989) that are out of step with the dynamic way in which meaning and memory are envisaged in dance studies.

In my recent research on memory in the cancan in a project titled *Dancing with Memory*, the histories I traced could not be fully accommodated either by the dance and performance studies emphasis on the repertoire, or the memory studies focus on the archive. Rather, the trail of cancan memory led repeatedly back and forth across the terrains of repertoire and archive, accumulating traces of each. An extended example from my research will serve to illustrate this point.

The dance form that preceded and gave rise to the cancan in 1820s Paris, the *chahut*, is almost entirely absent from the archives. This is due partly to the destruction of the archives at the Hotel de

Ville by fire during the Paris Commune in 1871, but also, I strongly suspect, to the avoidance of documentation by the working-class dancers themselves, who wanted to leave no trace of what was considered 'indecent dancing' by the authorities. The *chahut* was, therefore, transmitted body-to-body in the *guinguettes*, or working-class dance halls, creating a fugitive working-class repertoire.

The cancan emerged in 1829 as an embodied compromise between the *chahut* and the law, and its mediation between decency and indecency gave it wide popularity across the class spectrum. During the 1830s, a few observers began to document the cancan in writing, but in the early 1840s a flood of French, male, bohemian artists and writers began to take the cancan as inspiration for the texts and caricatures they produced for the emergent mass-produced press. [SLIDE 2] These included short literary vignettes of Parisian life called panorama essays that were published in coffee-table volumes for bourgeois consumption, with titles such as *The French painted by themselves* (1841). [SLIDE 3] At the cheaper end of the market were the Physiologies, pocket-sized books sold for one franc, each focusing on a contemporary Parisian social type, with titles such as *The Physiology of the Student*, or *The Physiology of the Grisette*. French literature scholar, Margaret Cohen, describes how in the panorama essays, "[t]he close attention to external, above all visible, material details (objects, clothes, physical appearance, food, gestures, weather, speech) give the reader vivid access to the sensuous materiality of contemporary Parisian reality" (Cohen, 1995, 231), and the same might be said of the physiologies. The authors of these texts attempted to distil the embodied experience of navigating the complex social world of Paris into short, often humorous descriptions, interspersed with caricatures by artists such as Gavarni and Honoré Daumier. This included their experience of watching, and sometimes participating in, the cancan at the *guinguettes* or the carnival balls. They, therefore, translated their knowledge of the cancan repertoire into archival forms.

[SLIDE 4] Among the future audience for these books and images was a cancan dancer of the next generation, Marguerite Badel, nicknamed Rigolboche. In her memoir of 1860, possibly co- or ghost written by Ernest Blum and Louis Huart, Rigolboche explains how she sought to improve her dancing:

Shut in my room, I consulted all the books that talked about the cancan.
Being estimably good in practice, I was searching to complete myself with theory.
These studies took me six months.¹ (Blum and Huart, 1860, p. 68, trans. Claire Jones)

A few pages later, she talks of Gavarni as "our history painter", and comments "I must admit that I got hold of a few attitudes from him. I wanted to realise his dreams" (Blum and Huart, 1860, p. 70). These lines suggest that in the 1850s, Rigolboche attempted to re-embodiment the cancan of the 1830s via the words, images and perhaps the fantasies of its male, bohemian documenters of the early 1840s. In other words, she sought to convert the cancan archive back into a repertoire. However, aware of the authority of the printed word, Rigolboche simultaneously archived her embodied experience of cancan dancing through her memoir. Although much of this memoir may have been ghost-written by male writers Blum and Huart, French literature scholar Courtney Sullivan's (2013) analysis of the memoir concludes that Rigolboche probably dictated the section on cancan dancing from which the previous quotations were drawn. This section also includes a long passage describing her phenomenological experience of dancing the cancan, of which I will just read a short section:

I immobilise myself and I let the music invade me and envelop me.
For a few moments I breathe it and inhale it.
Then I sense that, little by little, it enters into my veins through my eyes, my mouth and my ears.
While I am thus so to speak impregnated by the lively music, I experience a general vibration.
The notes come to me urgently, confused; they invade me furiously.
That's where the fight begins.
I sense my reason struggling and fleeing, idea by idea, under this pressure.
I experience the same shuddering and the same injuries as a sleepwalker that has been mesmerised.
The music condenses itself in my breast and climbs to my brain like champagne fumes.
At the last note of the refrain I am drunk.ⁱⁱ
(Blum and Huart, 1860, p. 73-74, trans. Claire Jones)

This passage conveys a tangible sense of Rigolboche's embodied experience of cancan dancing, just as the spectatorial and sensorial experiences of the male writers and artists of the 1840s permeated their texts and caricatures. And just as Rigolboche embodied their words and images, her own dictated words inspired men and women across the class spectrum to practice the cancan, attempting to embody her high-kicking style. In other words, Rigolboche's contribution to the *archive*, her memoir, promoted the widespread embodiment and development of her *repertoire*. [SLIDE 5] A series of prints by Charles Vernier entitled *Rigolbochomanie* (1860), captured both the broad reach of the Rigolboche craze across different classes, ages and genders in both public and domestic settings, and also the many different ways that Rigolboche-esque dancing was utilised and perceived in these distinct social environments.

I have traced here a pathway through the transmission of cancan memories. My intention is to demonstrate that cancan memory is not held in either its repertoire or its archive alone, but in the continuous transformation of one form of memory into another. I coin the term Protean memory to refer to these transformations, drawing my terminology from the Greek myth of Proteus, the sea god who changes form to avoid revealing Menelaus' future. [10 mins]

The concept of Protean memory has implications for the way we interpret popular dance sources. In tracing cancan memory back and forth between repertoires and archives, I noticed the way the mediated qualities of the archival sources became embodied by later dancers, and conversely, the embodied qualities of the repertoire became embedded in the archive. This is particularly apparent in Rigolboche's phenomenological account of her own dancing, for example, but it is also evident in the bodily nuances, textures and gestures inscribed in the panorama essays, Physiologies and caricatures. In this sense, the archival sources act to convey the embodied experience of the author or artist, as a flaneur, an occasional participant, or in Rigolboche's case as an expert practitioner of the cancan, to the bodies of their future readers or viewers. Each of these sources might be considered a 'medium', not only in the sense of a means of communication, but as an "intervening substance through which sensory impressions are conveyed" (oxforddictionaries.com). Such sources bring the body of the author or artist and the body of the reader or viewer into intimate contact. As such, I call these sources 'tactile media'. This concept echoes Marshall McLuhan's (1964) assertion

that many media forms are not just visual but also tactile (Mitchell, 2005, 261). It also draws on research in a number of fields on the transmission of affective memory across time through mediating forms, including work on visual images by Aby Warburg, Roland Barthes, Jill Bennett, Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby and Marianne Hirsch, and on cinema by Walter Benjamin, Tom Gunning and Alison Landsberg.

Tactile media are the conduits that transmit embodied experiences between bodies and repertoires separated by time and/or space. In each translation of a memory into a new form it is altered; the dancer, writer or artist repositions it according to their perspective leading to erasures, additions and mutations. But elements of the memory and its previous incarnations remain in the new form, either overtly or covertly. It is the covert remnants of the past in a memory that have increasingly interested me. This interest arose from a recurring word I noticed in texts on the cancan, sometimes used as a metaphor and sometimes a physical description: the word 'dust'. Dust raised in clouds by dancing feet on floorboards, dust shaken off skirts and costumes in the act of preparing to dance and dancing itself and dust settled in abandoned dance halls. [SLIDE 6] Sometimes there was an echo in these texts of a seditious popular song written in 1821 by Pierre-Jean de Béranger called *The Old Flag*, in which a veteran from the Napoleonic wars finds a revolutionary flag in his cottage that he had hidden after the Bourbon kings returned to power and replaced it with the white royal flag. He asks: "When will I be able to shake out the dust / That dims its noble colours?". These fugitive revolutionary sentiments were subtly referenced years later in descriptions of cancan dancers shaking the dust from their skirts. Dust here evokes political ideals, passions and actions that are repressed but not forgotten.

Reading about dust *in* my sources, started me thinking about the dust *on* my sources. And not only on my sources. When working in the archives I found dust under my fingernails, lodged between the pages of my notebook, in my nostrils. Sometimes gloves were provided to protect the sources from acquiring an additional layer of dirt from my fingertips, but mostly my body and the particles of parchment, paper and perhaps the skin of others who had touched their pages were able to mingle and dance together.

My engagement with these sources was tactile, like Rigolboche's engagement with the books and images she studied, and popular engagement with her memoir. Attending to the materiality of the sources drew my attention to the stories they whispered to my body, the covert remnants of the past, rather than the narratives they proclaimed. The dust carried fragments of numerous bodies: the bodies of archivists pencilling catalogue numbers, ordering documents, sorting into folders; the bodies of prior readers, leafing, re-ordering, marking; the bodies of collectors, ripping out cuttings, highlighting words, folding and hoarding; the bodies of printers, typesetting, cutting pages or not cutting them, leaving pages never opened; and the bodies of writers and artists, dancing, watching, sketching, forgetting, reworking, sweating, signing, delivering. As nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet wrote in 1833 of the Frenchmen's lives he read about in his early days researching in the Archive Nationales, "as I breathed on their dust, I saw them rise up" (Michelet cited in Steedman, 2002, p. 26). The materiality of the archive brought Michelet's body, like mine, into contact with past bodies, but those Michelet encountered in the archive were specifically *male*, albeit of different classes. For me, dust draws attention not only to the bodies ostensibly present in the archive, but to those working-class, black, female, and sometimes male bodies, whose presence is marked perhaps

only by the dust between the pages. I draw here on Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer's reading of historian Carolyn Steedman's writing on dust, defining dust as "the ephemeral affective dimensions that persist in the interstices of the [...] archive" (Hirsch and Spitzer, 2011). Reading this archive requires a bodily sensitivity to minute traces that have evaded detection in the writing of official histories.

In practice, bringing a tactile methodology to the archive might mean asking questions about the materiality of the source itself: is it pocket-sized or ledger-sized? Which sections are well-thumbed and which pristine? What markings, notes, stamps have been added to the source and why? And what has been removed, obscured or corrected? Importantly, to consider tactility is to question how my body relates to this materiality. What can be discerned about the bodies that have shaped it over time by the way my body responds to it? By the way I hold it, by the actions needed to read or view it, by its smell, by the way my musculature adjusts for its robustness or fragility? Which of my senses are stimulated by the source? What affective qualities does it have? Does it impel me to movement or stasis and how? A tactile reading of sources also questions their content. How are the bodies of the authors and their relationships to other bodies made present, or indeed absent? Whose bodies and which parts of those bodies are foregrounded and backgrounded? What sensory experiences does the content reveal or conceal? Lastly, a tactile approach considers which repertoires and other media the source has been in contact with, and those from which it has been distant. This situates the source in relation to the wider flows and eddies of Protean memory. Does the source interact with concurrent repertoires, run counter to them, or replace them? Does it allow a memory to retreat 'underground' or to enter public circulation? What affective cultures and histories does the source partake in or resist?

This is a methodology that evolves in dialogue with the sources themselves and with the people whose bodies pressed on them. The way they touched, shaped and moved in response to these objects moves us. In this sense, a tactile methodology is not the preserve of historians. It has already been cultivated by individuals like Rigolboche and communities like those who read her memoir, whose identities rest on memories written not in ink, but in dust. Our job is to learn from them.

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Notes

ⁱ "Enfermée dans ma chambre, je compulsais tous les livres qui parlaient du cancan. D'une force estimable sur la pratique, je cherchais à me compléter par la théorie. Ces études me prirent six mois." (Blum and Huart, 1860, p. 68).

ⁱⁱ "je m'immobilise et je laisse la musique m'envahir et m'envelopper.

Pendant quelques instants je la respire et la hume.

Puis je sens que, petit à petit, elle m'entre dans les veines par les yeux, par la bouche, par les oreilles.

Lorsque je suis pour ainsi dire imprégnée de mélodie entraînante, j'éprouve comme un frémissement général.

Les notes m'arrivent pressées, confuses; elles m'envahissent en furieuses.

C'est là que commence la lutte.

Je sens ma raison se débattre et s'envoler, idée par idée, sous cette pression.

J'éprouve les mêmes tressaillements et les mêmes douleurs que la somnambule qu'on magnétise.

La musique se condense dans ma poitrine et me monte au cerveau comme les fumées du champagne.

A la dernière note de la ritournelle je suis grise." (Blum and Huart, 1860, p. 73-74)

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