

Presentation for 'Dance Research Matters'

(<http://danceresearchmatters.coventry.ac.uk/>), hosted by the Centre for Dance Research, Coventry University (27th May 2021).

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Hi everyone,

So I wanted to think through this question of how we are making dance research matter today.

Perhaps most obviously, is through days like this: lobbying events to funding bodies, such as the AHRC[1], on our value as researchers and as a discipline. But I don't think that this strategy, in itself, is enough.

I'm doing my PhD at Roehampton, where over the past year senior management have sought to cut up to 50% of staff across the Arts and Humanities – including the Dance and Drama departments, which are leading in the university in their research. These cuts sit within a wave of attacks in universities around the country against arts, humanities and critical thinking.[2]

If we want to fight for a future of Dance Research – to protect jobs and departments – then we also need to organise, as workers. So we need our unions. And we also need strong student organising; that can find ways of strategically working with and beyond our unfortunate position as a 'customer' within the financialised university.

At Roehampton, I've been part of a student collective which formed in response to the cuts.[3] One of the things we did was to host a series of open forums across the year; inviting all at the university into open discussion, as well as alumni, and cultural and political leaders. These forums felt potent – challenging management's tactics of isolation and intimidation – and transformed our sense of permission and possibility within the institution.

But. The cuts went ahead. We lost some brilliant people, and staff and students are now dealing with the consequences of that on their already-strained working conditions. And the student collective is now thinking through how we move forward.

Times are tough. How do we work from the particular capacities and urgencies of the people in the room, and organise ourselves into action that are effective and sustainable within an ever-changing context? The group is now trying to figure out how we can maintain a legacy and infrastructure for student organising in Roehampton, to support future waves of action. We're also just trying to realistically assess our prospects as PhD students within the ever-increasing precarity of the university. And so we seem to be transitioning into something that essentially looks like a reading group. Is that useful? Is

it “enough”? I don’t know. But it does strike me that some of these questions about organising have a particularly ‘choreographic’ quality – or that choreography, as a practice and a lens, might have a lot to offer here.

I don’t think I could have made it through this year at Roehampton without the company of others equally outraged and moved to action. But a number of us kept finding ourselves circling back to the same question: why fight to save the university at all – this structure seemingly so inhospitable to experimentation, to thinking, to so many of its staff and students? What future are we working toward?

I want to finish by addressing another way that I’ve heard Dance Research being made to matter over the past couple of years: a repeated claim that practice-as-research holds some ‘decolonizing potential’[4], often made with reference to theorists like Walter D. Mignolo. That it might open up the university to ways of knowing that it has otherwise marginalised and excluded.

Which is all well and good. But I get concerned when these claims get entirely divorced from the other kinds of imperial or neo-colonial structures that constitute UK universities today. I’m drawing from Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui’s move from Mignolo’s ‘geopolitics of knowledge’ to a ‘political economy of knowledge’[5] – which asks for the recognition of both material and economic structures within the university itself, and its function within broader operations of power. Which in our British context might include: Prevent’s aggressive policing of Black and global majority students; how we collaborate with or resist the Home Office’s monitoring; or the estimated £1.3 million that Coventry University has invested in companies found to be complicit in Israeli human rights abuses against Palestinian people.[6]

Again – I am not suggesting that how we should organise is simple or straightforward. But rather than resting on dance’s readiness to acknowledge diverse forms of knowing, or on some inherently liberating quality of ‘embodiment’, I hope that our use of the term ‘decolonization’ can remain tethered to the persistent imperialism that pervade the university. Because otherwise – and this is Tuck and Yang’s argument[7] – the risk is that it merely becomes a metaphor to secure a future for Dance Research that remains business-as-usual, and happy to leave these structures intact.

Is the university worth fighting for? I don’t know. But following Mick Wilson[8], I’m not ready to condemn an institution as unsalvageable – and thereby disavowing my responsibility for it – while continuing to reap the benefits of my position there.

I’ll leave it there. Thanks.

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[1] The Arts and Humanities Research Council, the principle funding body for dance

research in the UK. The day was co-organised with the AHRC in an attempt to boost the profile of Dance Research – and to better understand its particular needs – as it is a comparatively underfunded discipline

[2] E.g. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/may/06/plans-for-50-funding-cut-to-arts-subjects-at-universities-catastrophic>

[3] 'Roehampton Students Saving Arts and Humanities', now 'Rethinking Roehampton': <https://roessah.wordpress.com/>

[4] e.g. Middelw, Vida L. (2019) 'Sensuous and decolonised knowing: Making a difference in the Doctoral Space'. Keynote of 'Future Manifestos', Friday 30th August, Kiasma Theatre, Helsinki. Available at: <https://www.artisticdoctorates.com/2019/09/20/sensuous-and-decolonised-knowing-making-a-difference-in-the-doctoral-space/>

[5] Cusicanqui, Silvia Rivera (2012) Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization. *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 111:1, Winter. Available at: <http://www.ativasiresurgence.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Silvia-Rivera-Cusicanqui-Chixinakax-Eng1.pdf>. A big thanks to all at the 'Intersections' reading group for introducing this text to me, and the complex and rich discussions which have significantly supported my thinking here.

[6] <https://www.palestinecampaign.org/university-complicity-database/>

[7] Tuck, Eve. and Yang, K. Wayne. (2012) Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1), pp. 1-40. Available at: <https://clas.osu.edu/sites/clas.osu.edu/files/Tuck%20and%20Yang%202012%20Decolonization%20is%20not%20a%20metaphor.pdf>

[8] Wilson, Mick (2015) 'Artistic Research between Inquiry and Revolt: Artistic Research, the University, and the Trajectory of a Deleuzian Motif' at The Dark Precursor, International Conference on Deleuze and Artistic Research. DARE 20115, Orpheus Institute, Ghent, November. Available at: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/224029/224030>