



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

ON THE CAESURA IN DANCE: READING *BLACK WATERS* AS HISTORY AT A STANDSTILL

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In the contemporary dance performance *Black Waters* (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2020), there is an image of soloist Aaron Chaplin writhing on a heavy rope on the stage floor. He dances on this rope with vast bodily strength and tries to brace himself against its weight. But the rope with which the dancer is chained remains wrapped around his ankles; he cannot free himself and will surrender in the deep blue of the stage light. This is a tableau that attempts to depict the drowning of a commodified man, a historical reference to more than 130 abducted and enslaved Africans thrown off board the British slave ship *Zong* in 1781 (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2020). “*Look at me and begin to see me*” is the message Chaplin’s solo expresses through his body language in dance. This reveals the narrative dynamic of this piece, which asks its audience to recognise the Black side of British history. Founded in 1981 by three Black British men, Phoenix Dance Theatre stands as one of the UK’s leading contemporary dance companies with an international reputation for socio-politically relevant performances that shed light on underrepresented and untold cultural narratives (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2021). In collaboration with the Kolkata-based dance company Rhythmosaic, *Black Waters* explores the *Zong* massacre and the incarceration of Indian freedom fighters in Kala Pani prison, two historical moments that differ in time and place and are linked by the common fate of being part of Britain’s colonial history (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2020). Fusing the languages of contemporary dance with classical Indian kathak, co-choreographers Sharon Watson, Shambik Ghose and Dr Mitul Sengupta put constructs of belonging into question to make room for ‘identities for whom home has always remained a contested space’ (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2020). *Black Waters* premiered in February 2020 in Leeds, West Yorkshire, just weeks before the global lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic forced members of dance companies

around the world into each other's physical absence, just weeks before Breonna Taylor was murdered on 13 March (Gupta 2020), and at the beginning of a year marked by the global anti-racism movement Black Lives Matter following the murder of George Floyd by a White police officer on 25 May (Hill et al. 2020).

With this article, I elucidate dance as an evocative, ephemeral art form that interrogates time, space, and the body as its conditions. I raise the question of the (im)possibilities of representing past events by referring to dance as a form of representation that carries with it the value of memory and provides an ethical impetus for an attitude towards the narrative that contemporary spectators like me, reading through my lens as a White cultural theorist, are confronted with when we see a dance performance like *Black Waters*. As one of many possible answers to this question, I propose a consideration of dance by reading it through the lens of Walter Benjamin's historical thinking on dialectics the dialectics at a standstill. In Benjamin's thoughts on history, we face the events of the present and the imminent future without resort to the comfort of a positively connoted development in what Benjamin sees as an illusory detachment from the past. Remembering where we come from in order to understand where we are in the present is an essential aspect of Benjamin's historical materialism (Benjamin 2015, GS. I. 2, 701). For him, matter persists through time because it becomes part of the present time through remembering and thus plays a role in our thoughts moving towards an assumed future. Benjamin's notion of the past bears resemblance to Michel-Rolph Trouillot's understanding of 'pastness [... as] a position' (Trouillot 1995, 15). Trouillot emphasizes past and present as inherently interlinked: one cannot exist without the other. Pastness, as he understands it, can only exist in memory as seen from the present (Trouillot 1995, 15). Thus, 'in no way can we identify the past as past' (Trouillot 1995, 15). What has been—*das Gewesene* in Benjamin's wording (Benjamin 2015, GS V. 1, 576 N 2a/3)—is to Trouillot a question of how the present thinks of it as past. For him, the past is not a bygone time, since it is renewed by the respective present gaze that looks back and remembers:

It is that renewal that should concern us most, even if in the name of our pasts. The so-called legacies of past horrors—slavery, colonialism, or the Holocaust—are possible only because of that renewal. And that renewal occurs only in the present. Thus, even in relation to The Past our authenticity resides in the struggles of our present. Only in that present can we be true or false to the past we choose to acknowledge. (Trouillot 1995, 151)

White people, when thinking about being human, have the privilege of thinking of their bodily existence in purely biological terms and of considering themselves White only in contrast to other identities, but, as Christina Sharpe writes, Black people are confronted with 'blackness's ongoing and irresolvable abjection [...] from the realm of the human' (Sharpe 2016, 14). The historical present for Black people is still marked by the afterlife of slavery, which, as Sharpe argues in her work *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, still fatally affects the way the Black body is socially seen through the White gaze. Sharpe describes Black existence as a state of consciousness that means 'to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved folding' (13–14). This means 'living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of [...] everyday Black existence' (15).

History is not only the narrative presented in history books, but also a temporal sequence of violent acts on institutionally subordinated, marginalised bodies. It is the history of the suffering of Black people, people of colour and Indigenous peoples that is still not sufficiently taken into consideration in European thought. In this context, dance offers a form of representation that makes racial discrimination present again as a historical legacy through the embodiment of the dancer. However, *Black Waters* is more than that. It proposes a turning point in thinking about the Black body. Sharon Watson, Shambik Ghose and Dr Mitul Sengupta's piece engages with histories of Black people and people of colour and, more importantly, reverses a narrative that has always been told in a negative and derogatory way from a White perspective (Watson 2022). Their performance interweaves multiple temporalities within the dancing body by reproducing historical events in their social meaning for a present audience. It is thus irreducibly contemporary because it enacts a reported event as 'appearing-to-belong to "our" time' (Lepecki 2007, 121). The gaze of the present, which according to Trouillot constitutes the past, is addressed by this performance and thus contributes to its decolonial historiography. A dance performance, as a re-enactment of a historical past, can be, if it emerges from a critical reading, 'an act of survival, of keeping alive as passing on' (Schneider 2011, 7), as performance theorist Rebecca Schneider posits:

This keeping alive is not a liveness considered always in advance of death nor in some way after death [...]. Rather, it is more a constant (re)turn of, to, from, and between states in animation [...]. (Ibid.)

This modality of remembering, which emerges from a critical gaze that is never just the present, but always includes the past and the future as a threshold, as in Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* (Benjamin 2015, GS, I. 2, 701), denotes 'a critical mode of remaining, as well as a mode of remaining critical' (Schneider 2011, 7). *Black Waters* constitutes a space in which the critical encounter with the past and the transformation of its reading through the present becomes possible.

Choreographer Sharon Watson says of her piece that '*Black Waters* is not about recreating these two events through contemporary dance, but is an exploration of place, worth and belonging, which can often be conflicting for people of colour' (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2020). *Black Waters* does not render the historical references of its narrative as history on which we look back but represents these references in their emotive power as expressions of colonial crimes both in their past as occurrences and in the aftermath as traces that colonialism has left on societies. Its narrative draws on the experiences of subjugation, torture and murder under British colonial power and weaves them together into a narrative whose effects continue to reverberate in multicultural societies to this day. Black presence is made strikingly visible in this dance performance, which calls for an acknowledgement of the Eurocentric cultural image of Blackness as a yet unreflected White construct that still bears what Shirley Tate describes as 'racist affects' that continue to circulate in the institutional thinking of so-called 'post-race UK' (Tate 2016, 73). In her work on the representation of trauma, or the possibilities of encountering the traumatic event, Griselda Pollock speaks of a

passage from trauma [that] might be understood as the move into the narrativity that institutes time, the pause in which memory forms, hence spatializes. Or

perhaps, we should speak of a passage into the temporality of narrative that encases but also mutes trauma's perpetually haunting force by means of a structuration that is delivered by representation (Pollock 2009, 40).

I would like to think of this understanding of the trauma, which is 'a perpetual present' (Pollock 2009, 40), in the context of *Black Waters* as a transformative re-enactment that transfers the traumatic event as a narrative into the spectators' memory through dance. In this act, an event that has not yet been remembered is passed on. This performance doubles as a process of embodied grief that appears choreographically as a progression from the individual soloing to powerful collective movements. It involves the collective in coming to terms with its history. Watson describes her approach to the choreography as having emerged from a rehearsal room where 'nobody felt excluded because they were able to use their own empowered experience to add to the choreographic,' as Watson remembers the development of the piece (Watson 2022). The dance that is ultimately visible to the audience is the result of a conversation about experiences, history, cultures, perspectives and opinions. 'We carry a lot of trauma physically and sometimes we also carry trauma which is not necessarily overtly represented,' Watson says (Watson 2022). She refers to an embodied experience that her work addresses and that goes far beyond language. Her work revolves around the question of 'understanding what we carry in our bodies' and how this can be emotionally expressed through dance (Watson 2022). In *Black Waters*, too, the empowerment of the narrative emerges from the collective physical encounter with trauma. The choreographers thus develop a narrative form that only the body can tell.

Black Waters as crossing

This performance draws attention to Black identity, both as it is lived and as it is seen through the White gaze. Particularly for the latter, which is made conspicuous in its constructiveness through this performance, *Black Waters* intends a rethinking of Blackness and its place in British culture. Its title translates the Hindi expression *kālā pānī*, a trope that has its roots in ancient Hindu culture and refers to the crossing of the sea (Bates and Carter 2021, 37). Although the term signifies a break 'with an orderly social world' (Mishra 2022, 20), it did not necessarily have a negative connotation, as Bates and Carter point out in their article (Bates and Carter 2021, 53). This changed with British colonial rule, under which the term was used to serve British interests. From the point of view of the British interpretation of forced sea crossing, which was closely linked to the banishment of convicts and thus amounted to social death, the term acquired a new level of meaning 'associated with convict punishment' (46). By the mid-twentieth century, *Kala Pani* became widely known as the name of the Cellular Jail on the Andaman Islands (51). This prison, built by the British and completed in 1906, was used by the British colonial masters 'to incarcerate Indian freedom fighters who spoke out against the regime' (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2020). As a metonym, the term then signified colonial oppression in relation to the Indian freedom struggle, referring to the transportation to Cellular Jail (Bates and Carter 2021, 52).

The experience of being imprisoned in a confined space is illuminated in *Black Waters* by Kieron Johnson's lighting design (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2020), which casts narrow squares of light onto

the black stage floor where the dancers, immersed in orange light, dance gestures expressing despair, violence and pain. These gestures take place simultaneously, but not uniformly, which creates the impression of confusion, of being lost in the midst of the dance movements. The dancing bodies appear shadowy and fragmented in their rhythmically erratic movements against a black background. An image of violence is drawn that can be perceived as emotionally painful even without historical background knowledge. In such images, the choreography stages the oppression of Indians by *kala pani* in terms of the experience of dislocation (Bates and Carter 2021, 52), of being torn out of existence as a social individual through isolation in captivity. In the context of colonial subjugation, forcible displacement destroys the sense of belonging and makes the individual disappear behind the racist constructs regarding cultural and ethnic identity. Under this aspect, the term *kala pani* functions as a metonym for a rupture that is 'interwoven with complex shared and individualised transoceanic pasts' (Mohabir 2014, cited in Bates and Carter, 2021, 57). It is this crossing as transformation, in which *kala pani* can be 'evoked as a symbol of remembered pain and servitude' (Amharai 2013, cited in Bates and Carter 2021, 56), that opens up the discursive space in which *Black Waters* is situated.

The choreographers of *Black Waters* make use of this possibility of metonymy by placing the prisoners of the Cellular Jail in a relationship with the victims of the *Zong* massacre about 100 years earlier. The *Zong*, a slave ship captured by the British in 1781, left the African West coast to set out for Jamaica on 18 August of the same year. Although the ship was built to hold no more than approximately 220 captive people, 'the *Zong* sailed with twice that many' (Sharpe 2016, 35). Due to navigational errors, the ship missed its destination of Jamaica. However, the crew did not call at the numerous Caribbean ports along the way to stop and replenish supplies. The *Zong's* logbook reports that, under the pretext of water shortages, the crew decided 'to jettison some of the enslaved in order to "safe the rest of the cargo"' (ibid.). What followed was the calculated murder of 54 women and children thrown overboard on 29 November, followed by another 42 men on 1 December (Lewis 2007, 364). In the next few weeks, more people were thrown overboard, ten of them jumping into the water voluntarily; the total number of drownings was reported to be 142. However, it was not the mass murder of these people that brought the *Zong* case to the attention of a wider public, but the newspaper articles about the subsequent lawsuit in which 'the ship owners (Gregson) were suing the underwriters (Gilbert) for the insurance value of those [...] murdered Africans,' who were considered lost cargo (Sharpe 2016, 35). Insurance claims that treat human individuals as objects whose value can be measured signify acts of dehumanisation and 'are part of what Katherine McKittrick calls the "mathematics of black life", which includes the killability, that throwing overboard' (Sharpe 2016, 35, citing McKittrick 2014).

The assumption that some people are worth less than others underlies all colonialist, racist and anti-Semitic crimes and needs to be actively confronted precisely because it is still embedded in Eurocentric social constructs. I understand these acts of dehumanisation as an abuse of the vulnerability of the individual, reading vulnerability as the kind of relationship Judith Butler describes, a kind of entanglement with the Other (Butler 2016, 25). Butler emphasizes that the persistence of the body 'depends upon social conditions and institutions, which means that in order to "be," in the sense of "persist," it must rely on what is outside itself' (Butler 2009, 33). For

Butler, the encounter with the outside world, the 'coming up against' it, is a modality of the body (34).

[I]t is necessary to consider how responsibility must focus not just on the value of this or that life, or on the question of survivability in the abstract but on the sustaining social conditions of life—especially when they fail. (35)

The sense of responsibility for people who do not conform to the existing norms of socially constructed 'likeness' through which we socialise within our communities can possibly be enabled through critical reflection, as Butler posits (36). *Black Waters* offers such a possibility. This performance shows the body in its vulnerability under the White gaze, in its injuries inflicted by White (colonial) powers. It makes it clear that it is the task of contemporary audiences to address this gaze, and that it is the task of White people to self-critically admit that it existed and still exists—and, above all, to learn how to change it.

Trauma as a 'radical and irreducible other of representation' (Pollock 2009, 42) cannot be represented, but it can be transformed through representation, Pollock suggests, as a 'passage away from trauma [...] into memory' (43). *Black Waters* makes clear that 'we are all subject to one another, vulnerable to destruction by the other' (Butler 2009, 43). Through the emotive power of this choreography, which, through the fusion of different cultural dance styles, creates the impression of a cultural exchange against the background of the shared experience of colonialist subjugation and its effects, this performance evokes what Butler calls 'shared precariousness' (43). According to Watson, the choreography was inspired by intercultural relationships and the similarities of experience that come with these crossovers (Watson 2022). The performance brings these shared experiences together to open up a space where cultural identities are explored in both their commonalities and differences. I read *Black Waters* as the kind of 'radical dwelling in and with dehumanization' that Julietta Singh proposes in her concept of dehumanism as 'a practice of recuperation, of stripping away the violent foundations [...] of colonial and neocolonial mastery that continue to render some beings more human than others' (Singh 2018, 174). This performance 'opens us toward forms of cohabitation and being with others that have been lost, suppressed, or have yet to be performed' (ibid.). It unfolds a performative space between the dance ensemble and the audience that has the potential to house a critical discourse through which the human can be read differently, and to begin 'a cohabitation that acts on and through us in order to imagine other forms of political allegiance' (ibid.).

In line with Patricia Mohammed's analysis of the concept of *kala pani*, *Black Waters* is also an attempt 'to move these societies beyond the literalness of any single group's narrative to the melding of the historical experience which of necessity contains both the agony and ecstasy of survival' (Mohammed 2009, cited in Bates and Carter 2021, 56). In this context, the performance functions as a 'counter-memory' (Schneider and Ruprecht 2017, 109) in which an event of the past is not remembered in its social relevance as it happened, but colonial history is re-documented from a decolonial perspective. The Eurocentric silence about this part of history, which is thematised in *Black Waters*, inevitably creates the invisibility of African, Caribbean and Indian

identities. With the expressive images of the performance, which function like puzzle pieces to a larger picture that appears in the context of historical knowledge, the choreographers illustrate the responsibility to inform and critically reflect on the past that lies within each individual. It confronts its audience with a historical counter-narrative that engages with the lived experiences of Black people and people of colour and, moreover, critically addresses the White gaze on the Black body. *Black Waters*, I argue, has the power to change the way we think about this encounter of seeing and being seen.

The performance presents images that emerge as hitherto unseen tableaux from the historical narrative. Aaron Chaplin's solo (described at the beginning of this article) is such an image, as are the above-mentioned dancers in their squares of light. Moments like these have a clear expressive power when it comes to translating emotional meaning into the language of dance. It becomes clear that the intention of the narrative is to evoke emotions and work with them physically (Watson 2022), to let them pass through the dancers' bodies. Other elements of the choreography make use of the rhythmic dynamics of a collective and trace movements that seem to refer to forms of movement that have emerged from collective lived experience. They show that intercultural identities and experiences such as enslavement and displacement create a certain form of bodily engagement with the world and thus produce culture and history. The value that results from this for subsequent generations is made palpable through *Black Waters*.

In this context, I read the rope that binds Chaplin not only as a shackle on the slave ship. In the repetition of the rope within the choreography—in which the dancers rebel against it, slap it on the stage floor, and collectively pull on it—I see a powerful engagement with the history of enslavement and displacement. The emblematic use of the rope is also an exploration of the traces of history in the present, where the rope not only stands for captivity and objectification but also, through its transformation into a recurring symbol, stands for the empowerment of claiming this past as family history and origin, thus representing a connection between generations and cultures that share this history. Benjamin says that the moment the past meets the present, a dialectical image emerges in which one can recognise the interweaving of time levels (Benjamin 2002, 462). I apply this interpretation to *Black Waters*, whose temporality is a simultaneity of represented past and the spectator's present during the ephemeral duration of the dance. However, this moment of a historical standstill is not felt in theory, but through the physicality of the dancers, through their liveliness, their breath, which, as I will explain in the following, becomes tangible through the pauses in their movements.

The caesura in dance

There is a brief moment when a dancer does not move, a still point between movements. I call it the caesura of the dance. It is the moment when we wait to hear the heartbeat of the dancer, when we listen into their stillness as an unlocatable place from which the dance emerges. The gesticulations of a dancing body are not extinguished in the stillness of their pause but come to a halt in the transition from one dance movement to the next. The caesura, a term derived from the Latin *caedere*, meaning 'to cut' (Merriam-Webster 2022), signifies an interruption. In prosody, it

marks the break in metrical verse, the form-giving pause that brings rhythm into poetry and, through its connection with a speaker's articulation, the vitality of breath. It thus creates the pulse of a work. Caesurae in Benjamin's thinking signify interruptions that force us to pause and evoke contemplation in the reader. In the silence of the caesura, we wait for the return of perceptible matter. This waiting signifies an anticipation of what might come, resulting from the resonance that the intelligible matter of the art form has left reverberating in the viewer's inner imagination before the pause. Interruptions, as a form-giving element, are designated by Benjamin as 'the mother of dialectics' (Weber 2010, 100). From a more Hegelian perspective, the structuring force would be 'attributed to negation' (ibid.), but in Benjamin's thought, interruption is one of the most fundamental procedures of giving form, as Samuel Weber points out.

To Benjamin, referring to poetry, the caesura denotes a necessary interruption of words that marks a clear place within language and makes visible the ideas presented (Benjamin 2015, GS I. 1, 181 - 182). In this pause, a stillness arises, and for Benjamin it is not so much the poet who decides to make the break, but an existence beyond the writer that interrupts poetry (182), whose imperceptible matter calls for space and finds it in the caesura, where it appears to our sensual perception as a silent presence. With this philosophical consideration of the caesura, Benjamin anticipates Jean-François Lyotard, who, with his interest in an artful aspect that eludes full comprehension, makes a similar approach to a particular silent entity that lies outside the work and is inherent in all the arts (Lyotard 1997, 218). For Lyotard, the 'art of the work of art is always a gesture of space-time-matter, the art of the musical score, a gesture of space-time-sound' (217). Similarly, the gesture of dance is a matter of space-time-*body*. According to this reading, the caesura of the dance as an interstice is not exactly in the dancer's body, but somewhere around it and is evoked by it. It haunts me as a spectator. If there is a resonance point in the dance, it unfolds through its caesura.

The choreography of *Black Waters* develops out of stillness. Narratively, this stillness sheds light on the historical silence that this piece addresses. Figuratively speaking, the dance movements develop visually from the black stage background in images whose sequence does not tell a linear story but makes moments and movements visible like tableaux. In the changes between the images, there is space for stillness, which becomes physically palpable in these transitions from one movement to another. There, the encounter with traumatic themes such as enslavement and displacement under colonial rule, which is a physical history, becomes comprehensible through the gesture that emerges through the caesura and helps the ideas presented to become visible. The stillness within the narrative signifies the moment before a voice begins to speak. This beginning, which is only made possible by the caesura, represents for me the significance of this performance: it is the overcoming of silence through which previously unheard voices are given space. It is a memory of Black history that cannot be easily retraced because it is not linear, but riddled with traumatic interruptions (Watson 2022). Making the emotional and physical effort to go there and pay attention to it is an act of recognition of Black voices that *Black Waters* performs. It unfolds in a physical space that expresses what language has not yet been able to convey.

André Lepecki has discussed the still point in dance in his text *Still* and has questioned what can be found there (Lepecki 2000). According to him, 'a tension between still figure and moving image' takes place in this still point, from which the 'dancing body derives expressivity' (342). This aspect of stillness in dance goes beyond its structural function as a pause, as it addresses the 'dance's ghostly other' (340). Stillness appears in the semiotic and physiological caesura of dance and falls, in Lepecki's words, 'outside of the motions and gestures considered as dance proper' (340). If stillness in dance was initially understood as a 'disturbing element,' in modern dance it was interpreted as the origin of dance itself (340). From this point of view, the caesura is the 'dance's invisible, generative matrix' (342). The still point as a caesura marks 'passage into the temporality of narrative' (Pollock 2009, 40) that makes the expressive power of *Black Waters* possible.

The contemplation of the fleetingness in which dance stands still is a reading of opposites that are not sharply delineated. Transience has a structural conditionality of presence and absence of which we become aware in the caesura of forms that marks the threshold where the constituting binaries of matter meet. The dancer, who moves around the boundaries of their corporeality during the performance, emphasizes dialectical epistemes that produce each other. Namely, the vibratile and paralyzation, visibility and invisibility, incorporation and 'excorporation' (Brandstetter 2000, 102) evoked in the (dis)appearance of dance (Lepecki 2016, 129). For dance scholar Gabriele Brandstetter, what I refer to as caesurae are 'fissures of movement [...] cut into the memory process – transitional zones, intervals between individual sequences of movement' (Brandstetter 2000, 110). These ephemeral moments strike dance at the core of its (in)tangible form. However, the still point of the body in dance does not mean pure stillness, but layers of microscopic movements, as Lepecki points out (Lepecki 2000, 344). This leads to an experience of 'perceptual thresholds' that draw attention to the body in its stillness (346). This gives us a new perspective on the body itself, which is particularly important in the context of decolonising the ways of how we think of the body. Attention to the subject and its body through stillness addresses 'the problematics of the body's stance regarding the world and regarding the self' (348). In dance, moreover, the subject's encounter with the body extends to the spectator, who becomes aware of the dancer's corporeality. Through this art form, a reflection on bodily identities and their position in society is made possible. Dance offers a possibility of encounter based on the dissemination of embodied knowledge and experience through its inherent physicality.

In his reflection on the role of the spectator in this encounter, Jean-Luc Nancy recognizes in the glance at a dancer the reproduction of the Other in oneself, proposing an Other that in its otherness is another body, that remains at a distance, the one with whom we cannot put ourselves on a par, that reverberates in our thoughts, and that recreates us in our perception of it (Nancy 2017, 41). In the perception of dance, the body is no longer that one body, but refers to a collective bodily experience that passes into our thinking. When we engage with the agency of the dance, we can allow ourselves to be transformed by the performance. I come to the dance unfolding before me with my past, engage with it mentally and physically, and take that experience with me into my future contemplation of the world. In this sense, the encounter with the dance itself is like an interrupting caesura that stimulates consciousness. At the still point we can become aware of the

dancer before us as a human body, staged in their vulnerability when exposed to the gaze of others (Butler 2009, 33). Then, we may perhaps fear for them.

Perhaps the affective potency of stillness derives from our pre-linguistic experience as children. For Siri Hustvedt, the human ability to produce and read narratives is 'rooted in the prelinguistic, sensorimotor, emotionally charged dialogical experiences of timing in infancy and the learned patterns of those early exchanges' (Hustvedt 2018). She points to the fetal experience of sounds and rhythms to explain the human capacity for narrative imagination. This imagination, derived from the memory of the maternal body and the learning of language, leads to sensory thinking in relation to time as rhythmic and space as corporeal. In this context, dance as a form of fiction expressed in body language derives both its genesis and its understanding from the mental images we have gained in our own bodily development. We understand narrative meanings in their similarity to the way our memory patterns emerge (Hustvedt 2018). 'Unlike time,' says Hustvedt, 'rhythm is sensually experienced in the human body; [...] we are subject to rhythms [...] and we also create rhythms' (Hustvedt 2018, 00:08:43–00:10:46). Rhythm creates the beat of a narrative that evokes aliveness through which the embodiment of experience can be formulated in the language of art, as 'rhythm is repetition and remembered repetition creates meaning' (11:00). As children, we begin our encounter with the world not through language but before language, experiencing our first encounters with the movements and sounds of the world through our mother's body. In these pre-linguistic experiences, we absorb information through the body. We observe how others move and can reproduce this in our bodies. Physical movement thus arises in the individual developmental phase from observation and stillness. Pre-linguistic knowledge is embodied knowledge. When we have grown up and learned to speak, we can perhaps find embodied memory only in the experience of music and dance, whose rhythms we experience on a physical level within ourselves.

In the instants of the still body, two forms of memory, the procedural and the anticipatory memory, are reconciled, so that one overlays the other (Brandstetter 2000, 112). By remembering the dance, we reconstruct its movements through our thought patterns, since '[t]here is no mentality without motility,' as Marc Franko points out (Franko 2017, 92). So if contemplative thinking is inevitably linked to continuous pauses that make it possible (Benjamin as cited in Franko 2017, 96), then movement also grips historical thinking or is rather formative for 'how we perceive history to move on stage' (Franko 2017, 93). In this approach to a historical consideration of dance, I follow Benjamin, who was concerned with thinking as a form of movement:

To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions – there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought. Its position is naturally not an arbitrary one. It is to be found, in a word, where the tension between the dialectical opposites is the greatest. (Benjamin 2002, 475)

Beyond the prosodic effect in works of art, the pause has an important function as a rhythmic condition for physical and mental development. At this point it should be mentioned that in German-language historiography one speaks of a caesura when it is a noteworthy historical

epochal break whose aftermath has significantly changed or will change the future. History presents itself to us through its periodisation as a rhythmic narrative, which we perceive through its interruptions. Pauses that create rhythms thus make us aware of time. If the truth of an event can only be grasped through immersion in the smallest details of an object, as Benjamin assumed (Franko 2017, 96), then contemporary dance, through its form, offers us a view of historical atrocities that enables critical contemplation.

In the encounter between a dancer and their spectator, perception and representation meet at the same moment, emerge from each other and consequently designate that environment which Benjamin called 'body- and image-space' (Benjamin 2015, GS II. 1, 309). Dance, when it is political and socially relevant, is a speaking, writing act in pre-linguistic images that address spectators in their cultural identities. There, in this space, historical and 'political materialism' meets with the bodily existence of the audience (ibid.). Dance catches us in our view of the body. It hits us in its emotional power in our inner experience. The pre-linguistic images that dance evokes thus have a physical effect on the audience, who are immersed in the performance. In the moment of its stillness, dance gives birth to the social as an aspect of perception beyond purely aesthetic enjoyment. It is the moment when the art of dance makes a gesture. Through it, we become aware of ourselves as spectators. This awareness implies an alienation effect in the Brechtian sense, in that we feel disturbed in our usual perception and thus as audience can step out of our immersion in the narrative and critically question our own subjective reality of life through the performed narrative.

I take the question of responsibility towards a social reference presented in the narrative from the concept of attitude, an ethical intention introduced by Brecht in his epic theatre: In its lack of a 'final meaning' (Barthes 1977, 72) in the message of the interrupted narrative presented to us in the performance, the social gesture is dispersed (Brecht 1964, 187). Gestures are within and beyond our perception of the construct of continuous time because they are inscribed in the work and 'make no progress in the course of history' (Lyotard 1997, 218), they 'are neither contents nor forms but the absolutely emotive power of the work' (ibid.). Consequently, gestures can interrupt and alienate the audience's perception of this temporal continuum, but they do not change with what we call progress. It is precisely through this that dance makes possible what philosophy alone cannot: to create a multifaceted place of encounter where the ethical impetus of a work is passed on across temporal and subjective differences.

Dance in time

In *Black Waters*, we watch the ensemble and see through their movements all the people the dancers themselves are not, but for whose memory they dance. '[T]hey had to go there physically,' says Watson about the work with the dancers in the approach to the narrative, in which the emotional connection of all participants was paramount (Watson 2022). This physical approach to vulnerability through dance evokes emotional responses that we do not get, at least not in this depth, in discursive discussions about race, as history has shown. *Black Waters* offers a story that will grow through the emotional resonance it evokes in the audience. Our gaze always sees 'from

somewhere' (Barthes 1977, 76), that is, from the socio-cultural standpoint from which we make our experiences. The collection of a comprehensive meaning in the social gesture draws its sense directly from the experiences we know as social beings from our cultures. The social relevance of the performance addressed to a critical audience thus extends far beyond the staged meaning into the social implications within audience realities. It needs to be understood by us as an audience in our self-critical consideration of how we have seen the dancing bodies and as a social reference in the way we have interpreted them.

Through their bodies, the remembrance of the victims of the *Zong* massacre and the prisoners in Kala Pani is not only transmitted but actualised within the decolonial thinking of Black presence that becomes visible through the dancers. The representation of these events presented in the choreography is an embodiment of mental relics of the past and thus part of a past world (Franko 2017, 97), which we tend to forget in the present and thus can no longer see the relation of our learned ways of thinking to this past. The collective of the dancers' bodies functions as an archive, a critical theory of dance to which André Lepecki pays attention, emphasizing that 'every carrying of work to an afterlife beyond the work's original limits [...] also reflects back into the original, changing it, forever' (Lepecki 2016, 116). *Black Waters* signifies an act of translation that acts out 'figments of potentiality not expressed' in the original narrative from which it derives (Lepecki 2016, 115). As a source, it is radically incomplete, not only in its conditionality as a work of art (Benjamin 2015, GS IV. 1, 9 - 21), but also in the historical dimension that this dance performance carries.

Part of the choreographic process, Watson told me in our conversation, is working with the dancers' physical reactions as they engage with the (historical) story to be danced (Watson 2022). For her earlier piece *Windrush: Movement of the People* (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2018), she had contemporary witnesses speak to the dancers, as such encounters evoke those emotions that are then translated into movement, she says (Watson 2022). In this process of choreographing, memories relating to lived experiences are passed on to the dancers, and then through the dancers' bodies, which absorb this information, to the audience (Watson 2022). In this way, an archive of memories is created, passed from person to person, that goes deep because it is embodied. Transferred to embodiment in dance, the lived histories are translated into an act of remembrance, i.e., 'carried across' (Lepecki 2016, 115) into every iteration of this performance on stage. In the afterlife of the work, survival is inherent in the memory of veritably lived lives and is passed on to the 'extemporal futurities' (Muñoz 2009, 97) of the performance.

Black Waters represents the fragmented identities that emerged from the trauma of commodification and subjugation during colonialism (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2020). I read this representation of a part of history that is subject to historical oblivion and is made visible through this performance as a form of non-violent resistance through vulnerability, as Judith Butler describes it. For Butler, vulnerability can be mobilised to assert existence, to claim the right to public space and equality (Butler 2016, 26). In this context, '[v]ulnerability can emerge within resistance and direct democracy actions precisely as a deliberate mobilization of bodily exposure' (ibid.). Butler describes this form of vulnerability as resistance in the context of bodily political activism. I want to address the possibility of this vulnerability through the dancer as resistance to

social constructs that are historically conditioned but still there in the discourse of the present. Performances like *Black Waters* can create a resistance to the historical narrative via the vulnerability of the dancer on stage, which as a practice corresponds to a critical line of vision as proposed by Singh in her above-mentioned concept of dehumanism (Singh 2018, 4).

For Gabriele Brandstetter, '[c]horeography is a form of writing along the boundary between presence and no longer being there: an inscription of the memory of that moving body whose presence cannot otherwise be maintained' (Brandstetter 2000, 104). Because choreography is the writing of what is not permanent (namely movement), she proposes that it is a work of remembrance, like a requiem (ibid.). Choreography, according to Brandstetter, operates 'the setting and erasing of memory traces' (ibid.); therefore the body itself evokes mnemonic images that are buried in the individual's memory and come to the surface during the perception of dance (Lepecki 2000, 354). Perception of dance thus moves in two directions: outward to the layers of the bodies as which they are seen in their dance movements, and inward to the layers of memories we remember in watching the dance. This form of memory is always already directed towards the future, is 'movement memory into the future that deletes images and replaces them with others' (Brandstetter 2000, 110).

Dance appears as an art that 'exists as a perpetual vanishing point' and in its form addresses its own disappearance 'in the very act of materializing' (Siegel 1972, 1), as the dance writer Marcia Siegel remarks. In its ephemeral quality, the dance 'disappears into memory' (Phelan 1993, 148) as soon as the dance movement is danced. This assumption points to a subtle difference between the craft of dancing and dance as an art form, which has already disappeared by the time we begin to think about it. For the contemplation of dance, this medium is never present, an assumption that points to the temporal dimension of transience. To think of the dance is to work with its resonance as a consequence of perception, and we give meaning to dance in order to find out what the performance means to us and what we think we know about the presence of the dancer when we remember the dancing body. This flow of variations in the dialectical imagery always distances itself from what it is not, no longer or not yet. As a temporal threshold, dance, in its function as 'evocation between the past and the future' (Brandstetter 2000, 112), carries the past as a form-giving, thought-provoking force into every other constellation of the development of ideas (Benjamin 2015, GS V. 1, 576 N 2a/3).

By understanding the traces in the choreography as mnemonic, the perception of a dance performance marks the standstill of a historical memory that awaits its futures in the reflections of the audience. For Watson, *Black Waters*, as a representation of Black history, is 'just the beginning of how you can unlock something that you can own and you can take all of this as your narrative, as your story. And you give that back in years to come' (Watson 2022). In their ephemeral (dis-)appearance, the dancer marks a passage, a caesura in thought, in which we can take hold of what their dance wants to tell us. The temporal ephemerality of dance indicates that the dancer can be read as a dialectical being in themselves, in whose appearance both the rediscovery of the past and the anticipated arrival of the future coincide, marking the momentum in which movement emerges in the thinking of the body. We have to come to terms with dance as a form of

representation in its Western function as an art form that reaches out to the substances it traces but in which it will never be fully present. Lepecki proposes an 'altogether different understanding of [our] own immanence' (Lepecki 2016, 88), in light of a narrative shift in which the dances of human beings should strive in their movements 'by dancing what humanity is: defective lack, affectionate being, anxious flesh, hysterical animal' (ibid.). This defectiveness, however, signifies the drive of dance as art in its endless search for what it can never be.

By reading dance without deciphering it, we precede the boundaries of language, as dance captures the stories that are too ineffable to be expressed in the language of any other medium, or that are simply not told anywhere else. Dance can never fully represent the subjugation of Black bodies, can never be their suffering and death, but it can express what it means to be Black in a multicultural society, as *Black Waters* shows. The performance opens up a multi-voiced discourse as a different approach to Black pasts. It provides the starting point for an intercultural conversation based on the 'trust that is built through physicality,' as Watson words it (Watson 2022). For me, *Black Waters* is a recognition that marks an act of belated mourning that comes through the resonance of the performance. This collective mourning is important to face the trauma, 'not to fix it but to come to terms with it,' as Watson expresses it (Watson 2022). Through dance, lived realities become visible as an act of resistance against hegemonic structures of (hi)story-telling, passing on what would otherwise be lost. In its enactment, *Black Waters* calls for White viewers to recognise Blackness as a lived identity and to rethink our view through the White gaze in order to decolonise cultural knowledge based on constructed prejudices. For a British audience, it reminds us of how our inner imagination constitutes Britishness and for whom Britain means home (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2020). This performance brings an apparently neglected part of European history to the stage to remind the audience where the socially constructed inequality between Black and people of colour and White people comes from, and to initiate a critical reflection on our own understanding of Blackness and its place in society.

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Biography

Santhia Velasco Kittlaus gained her master's degree in Critical and Cultural Theory at the University of Leeds. Addressing Walter Benjamin's thinking of dialectics, her research emphasizes the significance of the pause as a form-giving, philosophical element which facilitates thought. Her work elaborates on the encounter with performance as a possibility of critically engaging with socio-cultural constructs.

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