

## **Visualizing Ethnographic Findings Through Dance Film**

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The *Writing Culture Critique*, originating from James Clifford, and George Marcus' 1986 book, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, challenges the presumed impartiality of textual ethnography. In his famous observation that "science is in, not above, historical and linguistic processes" Clifford dethrones traditional ethnographic prose as the sole, unbiased, medium of anthropology (Clifford, Marcus 1986: 2). Through his acknowledgement that cultural processes are continuously working on scholars even as they study cultural process, Clifford decentralizes the objectivity of the academic. In regards to ethnographic representations, this critique is significant because it suggests that text, the preferred medium of science, is entangled in interpretation. This acknowledgment of texts' imprecision exposes the gaps in traditional prose, opening opportunities for more varied mediums of expression to emerge. However, since this critique "the visual in its entirety was hardly considered by anthropologists" and experimentation has predominantly centered around different types of textual communication (Schneider 2008: 172).

Visual ethnography has partially addressed the question of portraying anthropological findings visually. However, visual ethnography remains primarily representational; photography as a medium is best suited to accurately communicate a still or moving depiction—it less willingly lends itself to the metaphoric and analytical. In contrast, dance functions by abstracting ideas into visual compositions performed with the human body. What is more, dance can succinctly communicate emotion and tone in a manner which is beyond the capacity of, or at least challenging to capture with, words. Thus, by combining the theoretical and expressive capacities of dance with the representational capacity of visual ethnography, Dance Film

Ethnography will contribute to the growing number of mediums for ethnographies which exist beyond traditional scientific prose.

What is more, the field of public anthropology has acknowledged the need to make anthropological findings more accessible to the general public. While visual ethnographic methods have partially addressed this issue of accessibility, visual ethnography as an image alone fails to situate viewers with cultural themes, and thus remains reliant on text to create responsible ethnographic representations. This paper will explore the use of dance in ethnography, and ultimately propose a methodology to express ethnography through dance film. Through the need for a more public anthropology, it will build upon the work of the *writing culture critique* with a new emphasis on utilizing visual literacy in order to communicate ethnography devoid of all textual explanation. By experimenting with methods layering dancing bodies, where the movements represent abstract analytical and emotive cultural themes, over ethnographic film imagery, a fully visual form of ethnography emerges. This Dance Film Ethnography method has the potential to represent cultures through a medium entirely devoid of text—creating an ethnography that can be shared across boundaries of nation, language, and class.

This paper will present the theoretical and logistical considerations of creating dance film ethnographies. By beginning with an analysis of body theory in relation to ethnographers' bodies, and dancers' bodies this paper will establish the viability of the body as a tool of ethnography. It will then continue on to use the case study of the Beekman Street Arts District to provide an example of how an ethnography can be translated into a movement film. This effort will then be assessed using Kirin Narayan's scale for distinguishing if a media is fiction or

ethnography, before concluding with further proposals for the development of Dance Film Ethnography.

### **Body-Theory in Ethnography**

In order to understand dance research methods as an expansion to ethnographic research, it is important to first understand the dancing body's position. The dancing body includes bodies from a vast range of disciplines, each with their own unique value system of aestheticizing, sensing, performing, and participating. However, common among all these forms is an understanding that the body can be used as a medium through which to perceive, and express back into, the world. By understanding dance as “‘finely tuned’ culturally variable sensibilities” which are the “site of inscription” through which “performers invent and reinvent identities through movement” the dancer's body truly becomes the exaggeration of Marcel Mauss' techniques of the body (Reed 1998: 527).

Mauss' “techniques of the body,” uses the concept of habitus to explain the movement tendencies of individuals as culturally-specific, transmitted traits. As Mauss writes in “Techniques of the Body,” “we are everywhere faced with physio-psycho-sociological assemblages of series of actions. These actions are more or less habitual and more or less ancient in the life of the individual and the history of the society.” (Mauss 1973:85). Thus, for Mauss, movement patterns of the individual's body are present embodiments of their past lived experiences. What is more, these patterns are culturally pervasive; the individual moves as their culture moves; the body is infused with the legacy of its social being. Thus, dance is a form of physically exaggerated cultural expressions, and the dancer's body is a medium for these expressions. Though a body is never able to abandon cultural expectations, the dancing body is allowed the flexibility to momentarily perform outside of its “subjugation.” Despite its

limitations as a broad definition, the dancing body as the exaggerated body provides a useful common definition for the vast range of bodies, and attitudes towards the bodies, that encompass the dancing body.

The cultural anthropologists' body in the act of researching is similarly encompassed by a complex web of physical realities. As author Helen Thomas writes in *The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory* "All social researchers, by the very nature of their enterprise, are to a certain extent participant observers," (Thomas 2003:134). The language of participant observer captures the duality of the researcher to the culture they study; they are both outside of the culture as observers, and enmeshed in the culture as participants. Yet, as they participate in the culture their bodies will also absorb the bodily techniques of that culture. This absorption is often undervalued as a type of data, yet it is in this reality that embodiment becomes paramount as a research method.

The position of the dancer, and anthropologist's body, as discussed thus far, has several distinct implications in defining embodiment. The definition of the dancer's body as the exaggerated body, in addition to the researcher's body as a vessel of experienced data, suggests that the body can learn and potentially translate cultural information. Simply put, this makes embodiment a two step process: absorb physical information through the body, then express what has been absorbed through the body. Though not a full definition, this procedural understanding of embodiment as bodily absorption and expression provides insight into the methodology, and application of embodiment in ethnography. By understanding embodiment as a state of the dancer's body and researcher's body, the potential of utilizing dance to express and enable research emerges.

## **Ethnography Translation**

My first attempt at creating a Dance Film Ethnography stemmed from a translation of a textual ethnography of Kim Vanyo, an artist working in Saratoga Springs, New York. Research was originally conducted through the Ethnographic Research Methods class at Skidmore College in the Spring of 2017.

Kim Vanyo's fashion design studio, Khymany Studio, lies in the heart of the Beekman Street Arts District. Formally utilized as a work-live space, Kim now uses her Beekman Street Studio as her primary workshop location where she creates and sews her products. Like other artists on Beekman Street, Kim is engaged in a perpetual process of change as she seeks to utilize her space in the Arts District to best support her needs as an artist. Currently Kim uses a multi-location approach to her business; Beekman Street is Kim's place of creation however the presentation and business of her work takes place in the context of the greater Saratoga, and upstate New York area. Thus, Kim's artist-business model emphasizes the Art District's role in providing a place to create, rather than a place to display art, for artists.

From 1/29/2017 to 2/26/2017 I conducted a preliminary phase of my field work through participant observation throughout the West Side of Saratoga. During this preliminary phase of research, I took jot notes which I then consolidated into field notes. In my research I also used three unstructured interviews which were all tape recorded. One of these interviews was conducted by me with Kim, and took place in the context of her studio on Beekman Street. The other two took place in Skidmore Anthropology Department, and were conducted primarily by professor Michael C. Ennis-McMillan with assistance from students in the Ethnographic Research Methods course. Professor Ennis-McMillan interviewed Jonathan Haynes, the owner of The Local Bar and Teahouse and architect who has been heavily involved in the creation of the

Arts District, and Cecilia Frettili, who owns a textile studio in the Arts District and is a community leader.

In the course of my research I modeled in a fashion show of Kim's costumes at the National Museum of Dance as part of Saratoga Arts Fest. During my time participating as a model, I took jot notes to the best of my ability, wrote consolidated field notes of my experiences, and used informal interviewing methods speaking with Kim, and other models in the show, which I then took notes on and reconstructed from memory in field note documents.

I used photography to capture the inside and outside of Kim's Beekman Street studio. These images were taken on two separate occasions. During the first occasion I also interviewed Kim. During the second occasion I met Kim at the Skidmore Dance Theater, drove with her to her studio, and then took pictures of her studio. During all these interactions I kept records with jot notes and then created more filled in field notes to document observations. Through this research I identified multiple cultural themes, however for the purposes of creating a Dance Film Ethnography I focused my efforts on expressing the concept of satellite collaboration.

### *Satellite Collaboration*

Though Kim is solo artist, much of her work involves collaboration with various other artists and organizations. Her dual collaboration and isolation can be understood through her use of satellite collaboration which is enabled through her use of multiple distinct work spaces. Her approach is divided into three zones: the working zone of her Beekman Street Studio where objects are crafted, the display zone—a geographically disperse zone where the exchange of ideas occur, and the commerce zone—a geographically disperse area where material exchange occurs.

I worked with three dancers to embody this concept of satellite collaboration. We began

the translation process with an improvisational activity in a dance studio at Skidmore College. We divided the dance studio geographically with the eastern third of the room representing the working zone, the middle portion of the room representing the display zone, and the western third of the room representing the commerce zone. Before the dancers began their improvisational explorations we discussed the key cultural traits of each zone; I read excerpts from my written ethnography to the dancers. The dancers then moved through the three zones individually engaging in movement exploration to express the themes of each zone.

We then moved to a second phase of improvisation where the dancers moved through the same three zone, but actively worked to find interpersonal interaction with each other in their movement in the display and exchange zones. Based on these two improvisational scores I worked collaboratively with the dancers to extract the movements that most clearly expressed the ideas of creation, exchange of ideas, and exchange of material goods which categorize the three zones.

These movements were then filmed in the Skidmore College Dance Department dressing rooms. Though, the original intention was to film at multiple locations where Kim's satellite collaboration takes place, as well as on Beekman Street, and in Kim's studio, repeated snowstorms during the filming period prevented this initial plan from coming to fruition. However, Kim has a sewing space in the dressing room, and these dressing rooms act as flexible spaces where both the display and exchange zone intermittently and simultaneously exist. Thus, using the dressing room we were able to capture the work zone with dancers moving individually with a piece of fabric (fig 1., fig 2.), the display zone with dancers watching each other shape clothing (fig 3., fig 4., fig 5), and the commerce zone with dancers expressing physical exchange through an exploration of the traditional business movement of shaking hands (fig 6., fig 7.).

Through filming these three zone in the dressing room we created a preliminary prototype of Dance Film Ethnography.

### **Assessment of Dance Film Ethnography**

In order for dance film to function as ethnography, it must be assessed in its ability to operate as nonfiction. In concert dance it is common practice to begin a process with an idea anchored in concepts from the reality of events, ideas, or images from lived or researched experience. However, once put through the procedure of reinterpretation through artistic process, these movements and the stories are generally understood as fiction in that they are assumed to *not* communicate a literal experience. Though the language of fiction versus nonfiction is rarely used in dance settings, where the method of delivery—ballet, modern dance, contemporary—defines the genre, an assessment of the fictive nature of ideas expressed through movement is essential before it can be seriously considered as ethnographic method.

By utilizing Kirin Narayan's scale to assess the divide between fiction and ethnography in a dance context dances' capacity for nonfiction can be interrogated. Narayan begins by acknowledging that both ethnography as nonfiction and fictional texts can communicate universal truths (Narayan 1999: 134). Thus, the burden of determining a medium as fiction, or nonfiction, cannot be the truthfulness of the product because truth can be communicated in fiction just as readily as in nonfiction. Therefore, the process of conception becomes paramount. Narayan has devised four distinctive measures through which to assess if a process has produced a piece of fiction, or an ethnography: "(1) disclosure of process, (2) generalization, (3) the uses of subjectivity and (4) accountability" (Narayan 1999:139). While Narayan applied these four categories to audit written works, in her essay "Ethnography and Fiction: Where is the Border?" the same criteria can be applied to dance film as a media.

A “disclosure of process” includes both a clarity in communicating how information was discovered, as well as explicitness, often aided by repetition, in stating the main ideas and themes of a work (Narayan 1999: 139). As a medium dance is best able to communicate broad, emotionally driven moods, or specific spatial information. However, disclosure is ultimately the process of showing process. By creating movements in the spaces of the research process, thereby showing the research site, Dance Film Ethnography communicates how information was gathered by visualizing research and analysis simultaneously

Generalization refers to a medium’s ability to communicate patterns from accumulated evidence (Narayan 1999: 140). While both ethnography and fiction seek to represent pattern, nonfiction as ethnography uses the accumulation of moments, whereas fiction explicates singular moments. This is not to say that ethnography does not describe particular moments, but rather that those moments are presented through themes, whereas in fiction the individual moments are not given context. Dance can certainly depict small intimate moments of fiction, but can just as easily use patterning and full body movement to suggest at more abstract concepts to evoke ideas about relations rather than present a particular relation. The improvisation process acted as an analytical in which patterns of behavior were generalized into movements. Thus, dance can effectively use generalization if it is devised within a process that provides a research base of analysis.

Narayan’s third criteria for ethnography questions a pieces use of subjectivity. In ethnography subjectivity, though to some extent inevitable, is endeavored to be avoided. In this attempt ethnographers use specific research processes to make observation and analysis two separate parts of the research process (Narayan 1999: 141). While in fiction empathy, and the imagination regarding how a subjects feels or views the word can suffice as method, for a piece

to be considered ethnography, reasoning must be backed up by observable observations. As with generalization, the measure of subjectivity is thus to some extent more concerned with the ethnographic methods than with the ethnography itself. If methodology with clear evidence was used to determine the information that will be expressed, then presumably, the ethnography will have adhered to its ethical duty to present as objective of a truth as possible.

However, subjectivity could also refer to the precision with which information is communicated: to what extent will the audiences' understanding of the information be subjective? This second question proves more of a challenge for dance because the interpretation of movement lacks the formalized standardization of language. Though no guarantee of audience interpretation can be assured, the use of repetition in movement can create distinctive movement syntaxes. Thus, if utilized effectively, composition can enable a more standardized reading of movement. Especially in the context of Dance Film Ethnography where movements will be layered over images of a culture, repetition and composition will be able to address subjectivity because the context of the film setting as the field site will allow for a more direct reading of movement.

Finally, it must be explored if dance can maintain accountability—can the medium maintain its standards and represent without “[imaging, elaborating, or distorting]” (Narayan 1999:142)? Of all the standards of nonfiction, accountability is the least related to the media. Any process can maintain accountability if the creator is invested in accuracy, and accountability. Thus, Dance Film Ethnography has the potential to fulfill all of the requirements of nonfiction, and in conjunction with visual ethnography, dance has the potential to represent the analytical themes of ethnographic field work with images from the field-site.

### **Proposed Methods for Dance Film Ethnography**

Though the first translation attempt stemmed from a textual ethnography, in order to fully utilize the intelligence of the researcher's body as an embodied piece of data, and the dancers body as a representation tool, unique field work methodology must be developed in order to expand on the potential of Dance Film Ethnography. Thus, the following is an outline of a proposed research method based on the theoretical queries discussed previously, and the experience of attempting to create a dance film ethnography without body focused data.

As the root of any ethnographic inquiry, participant-observation will maintain a primary role as a field method. Though this method aims to distance itself from textual representation, during participant-observation taking textual field notes will allow for accurate documentation of observations. However, during times of observation, a greater emphasis will be put on using visual and auditory recording devices when possible. Additionally, mapping will take a precedence as a visualization of use of space separated through cultural zones.

Furthermore, in order to utilize the data from the researcher's body, directly following field research video journals with movement improvisation based on a translation of the embodied research experience will be recorded. This tool will enable the body to be utilized as "site of inscription," providing valuable cultural information, key to a holistic understanding of the culture through a bodily perspective (Reed 1998: 527). In addition to organizing notes through coding procedures, images, in including the improvisation journals, will also be processed into analytical categories which will inform the themes expressed in the Dance Film Ethnography.

Once the analytical themes have been established through coding, a series of movements will be developed in correspondence to these themes in order to create a movement syntax. These movements will both be generated from the themes, and the improvisation journals. Furthermore, these movements will be constructed around the spatial configuration of the field site, and thus specifically develop the relationship between how the space is used, and the social values governing the space. In order to effectively convey the context of the meanings expressed through the dancers' movements, shots of the space as it is used daily will be interspersed with shots of the dancers moving through space. Thus by layering images of dancers highlighting aspects of the space with images of the field site in traditional use, specific anthropological findings regarding how the culture of the field site functions will be expressed in a Dance Film Ethnography. A sound score pulled from the sounds of the field site will further create a context for the themes. Therefore, by creating a dance film in a field site location through the paradigm of communicating specific themes derived from participant-observation methods, an Ethnographic Dance Film will emerge.

Dance Film Ethnographies have the potential to create an accessible form of ethnographic communication. The utilization of the body has the potential to transcend the barrier of foreign language, as well as the jargon of academic vernacular. However, this accessibility of this medium relies on the assumption that visual literacy—the analytical assessment of images—is a universal skill. This assumption in and of itself requires further discussion and research. All the same, the embodied research practices and communicative medium of Dance Film Ethnography are worthwhile procedures to invest in developing in order to reinvigorate the relevance and accessibility of anthropological finding in the twenty first century.

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## Image Appendix



**Fig 1.** Kim Vanyo in her workshop on Beekman street.



**Fig 2.** Dancer representing the work zone creation process.



**Fig 3.** A display that Kim Vanyo uses to share her designs.



**Fig 4.** Models in Kim Vanyo's fashion show at the National Museum of Dance. An example of the display zone in a satellite location from Beekman Street.



**Fig. 5** Dancers representing exchange of ideas in the display zone.



**Fig 6.** The street view: an aspect of the commerce zone



**Fig 7.** Dancers representing exchange of material goods in the commerce zone.