

STEPPING AWAY FROM IDENTITY THINKING? NON-IDENTITARIAN APPROACHES TO DANCE ANTHROPOLOGY

In search of possibilities for going beyond easily available and/or overcomplexified identity markers in dance anthropology, the article builds on Theodore Adorno's critique of identity/identitarian thinking, with a focus on applying identitarian and non-identitarian approaches in dance studies. Identitarian approaches are examined in the article through a discursive metaanalysis of Anglophone studies devoted to practicing dance in mirrored classrooms alongside an autoethnography of stage dancing inspired by the traditions of Scottish Highland dancing, with an emphasis on its contested 'authenticity'. Both of these case studies showcase the key epistemological risk of relying on identity thinking in anthropology: an intricate conceptual web of identity labels may become a barrier that hinders a deeper understanding of the (dance) phenomena this identitarian semiotic web conceptualises. Non-identity alternatives proposed in the article thus stem from a long-established tradition of dance phenomenology applied here to make sense of Jean Milligan's vision of 'controlled abandon' in Scottish country dancing. Another non-identitarian technique explored uses Walter Benjamin's concept of dialectical image to envision the constellated chronotope(s) of the Scottish (soft-shoe) step dancing tradition. The article argues that non-identitarian approaches can complement the established identity thinking strategies, allowing a cooperative reader to make sense of various dancing practices. The significance of reader cooperation highlighted in the article underscores the heuristic value of writer-reader dialogue in anthropology.

Keywords: *identity thinking, nonidentity thinking, dance anthropology, epistemology, dance phenomenology, Scottish dancing*

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As the local chieftain announces the time has come for the Sword dance competition finals within the frame of the Highland Games, an outdoor sporting and musical festival in Scotland (Jarvie 2004: 162), two of my dance students get onto a platform designed so that the spectators could better appreciate the dance geometry (see *Fig 1*). I am watching them dance while getting ready to contribute a couple of steps myself immediately after their sequence is over. The situation is both highly authentic and totally fake. 'Fake' because the whole thing is a scene from a family show 'Heather Mead' that premiered in Teresa Durova's theatre in Moscow, Russia, in September 2021 (Lebedeva 2021). This part of the story is set

in May 1902 in Scotland, where technological innovation goes hand in hand with (post-) Victorian traditionalism and patriarchy. Naturally for a Scottish-themed theatre show for family audiences, there will be more kilts, bagpipes, swords, fights, archery and time travel.

It has been convincingly argued that such clichés distort the sociocultural and historical heritage of the Scottish Highlands, retrospectively inventing and antiquating the ‘concept of a distinct Highland culture and tradition’ to be eventually also ‘adopted by historic Lowland Scotland’ in the late 18th — early 19th centuries (*Trevor-Roper* 2000 [1983]: 15–16) and further reinforced in Victorian Britain (*Jarvie* 2004: 164–165). From the 21st-century perspective, however, the time span of this ‘invented’ tradition looks rather impressive. There is documented evidence of a Scottish dance over a pair of crossed swords performed as early as 1778 (*Melin* 2018: 46) and, in a competitive setting, in 1832 (*Flett, Flett* 1996: 21). This may be somewhat less breathtaking than D. G. MacLennan’s (*MacLennan* 1952: 15–17) misinterpretation of Tacitus (*Germ.* 24) as evidence for the Sword dance originating from ancient Caledonian spectacles (*Melin* 2018: 42), but one cannot disregard over 200 years of recorded history of this dance in Scotland.

Antiquating legends notwithstanding, when dancing *The Swords*, I feel genuinely connected to the continuous chain of transmitting the steps and the technique from one generation of dancers and teachers to the other. As a dancer who has learnt from a range of British and North American teachers and performed at various Highland Games in Scotland between 2010 and 2014, I believe that my ‘cameo appearance’ contributes a degree of authenticity to the theatre show in Moscow.

Unsurprisingly, the very concept of ‘authenticity’ has been somewhat suspect in dance studies, being overwhelmingly used in inverted commas (*Kraut* 2010: 36; *De Maaker* 2013; *Siegel* 2010: 189; *Winarnita* 2015). As Handler (*Handler* 1986: 2) puts it in a broad-



Fig. 1. The Sword dance scene from ‘Heather Mead’ at Teresa Durova’s Theatre. Moscow.
Photo by Mikhail Bratsilo, 2021

er anthropological context, authenticity is ‘a cultural construct of the modern Western world’ and thus an example of anthropological discourse as ‘a working-out of our own myths’. When applied by dance ethnographers in modern urban settings, ‘studying what is deemed ‘authentic’ in a community’ may nevertheless have heuristic value, if only in order to ‘unravel complex power relations’ (Winarnita 2015: 497), with a clear emphasis on the negotiated nature of what ‘participants from different backgrounds and generations [...] see as authentic’ (Tallaj 2018: 106).

This (implied or explicit) distancing from even a possibility of an authentic dancing experience reminds me of Sergey Averintsev’s musings about the dangers our readiness to recite ‘ready-made words’ may pose to 21st-century societies (Averintsev 2005: 425). When facing ‘the question of whose authenticity’ (Bakka 2002: 69), a tangible proportion of dance researchers’ accounts do not seem to pursue Averintsev’s ‘significant meaning(fulness)’ as a deeply felt, lived connection to reality going beyond accepted/novel concepts and/or discursive practices (Averintsev 2005: 398–407). The ‘contradictory character of reality and existence’ (Laplantine 2010: 146) thus remains uncaptured and unaccounted for.

The starting point for writing this ‘self-reflexive’, autoethnographic account is therefore my own ‘state of confusion’ (Savigliano 2010: 237). The article attempts at bridging the gap between my experiences as an active participant in the Scottish dancing scene(s) across the globe since the early 2000s and the conceptualisation approaches contemporary Anglophone dance anthropology tends to offer for (theoretically) making better sense of such experiences.

The ‘process of fitting observations into categories’ (Au 2021: 1165) by dance ethnographers presents a serious challenge if seen in a practical context. For instance, when I enter my Scottish step/Highland dance class as a teacher or a rehearsal as a dancer and choreographer (see Fig. 2), I may be reminded of ‘the existence of mirrors as an ominous and powerful presence’ contributing to ‘physical self-evaluation, behaviour regulation, body objectification, and competition’ (Green 2002–03: 112). How can I possibly move under such petrifying conditions?

One may argue that as a teacher and/or choreographer I hold more power (Zinga *et al.* 2019: 114), but when I demonstrate a move or a step to other dancers, I must set a reliable example. I am therefore both evaluating myself and being evaluated by the students, at least those with enough experience to notice my technical errors (cf. Radell *et al.* 2014: 3). Thus, I am potentially unable to teach or create due to my fear of oppression or, alternatively, my guilt for being an oppressor in an inherently autocratic setting ‘codified by dancing masters’ of the past (Lakes 2005: 15). Such immobilising uncertainty stems from a popular Foucauldian argument that ‘the mirror encourages body surveillance and often reminds the dancer that her body does not match the ideal body type’ (Dryburgh, Fortin 2010: 100). Indeed, mine arguably does not.

Scholarly attempts at capturing an ‘intense relationship which a dancer can develop with the mirror’ (Pickard 2013: 12) allow us to examine where dance anthropologists might be losing touch with the realities we conceptualize.

The constant focus on an **externalised view** of the **body**, as reflected in the **mirror**, **objectifies** the **dancer’s body** and requires **students** to strive to achieve a specific “**look**” while being “corrected” so that the **students** perform “proper” **dance** technique.



*Fig. 2. Practising the 'rocking movement' in front of a mirror. Moscow 2018.
Photo from the personal archive of the author. Photographer — Vladimir Lee*

Mirrors that generally line one wall stand in for **observation** towers, creating a heightened sense of **visibility**. **Countless eyes** could be **watching** through the **mirror** without one knowing it.

Kleiner 2009: 244

Students in the **mirror class** [...] see themselves as **objects** instead of living, breathing, and moving **bodies**. Their **reflection**, which was once an **object**, seems more real than their own sensory selves [...] They often described **viewing** their **body** parts from the outside, a perspective that had little or no connection to their kinaesthetic identities.

Radell et al. 2014: 12

As **dance** professor Clyde Smith states, “the **dance classroom**, with their **mirrors**, **watchful teachers** and self-critical **students**” is an atmosphere of **surveillance** in which **power** produces **discipline** over **docile bodies**.

Berg 2016: 47–48

Chloe noted a ‘love–hate’ relationship with the **mirror**, suggesting that **dancers** are constantly negotiating **power** in the **studio** as they negotiate **seeing** and **being seen**.

Clark and Markula 2017: 448–449

Dancers spoke about how **surveillance** and **regulation** were foundational through the presence of **mirrors** in the **classroom**, corrections in **class**, and **teaching** styles.

Zinga et al. 2019: 112



Fig. 3. Mirrors as a surveillance tool in a dance class. Generated with [WordClouds.com](https://www.wordclouds.com/)

Highlighting some of the key words forming the lexical field of ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault 1995: 135–169) in a mirror dance class (cf. Fig. 3) helps notice the conceptualisation pattern at play here. A somewhat surprisingly uniform conceptual web is used by researchers of ballet training to communicate scholarly ‘precision, clarity and distinctness’ (Sherratt 2002: 137) invoking Adorno’s notion of ‘identity/identitarian thinking’, i.e. a mode of thinking and expression that ‘says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself’ (Adorno 2004 [1973]: 149). In this case, dance students are presented first and foremost as bodies, whereas mirrors are primarily tools of surveillance and (self-)objectification in a disciplinary/regulatory framework channelled and/or imposed by ballet teachers.

This dystopian ‘master narrative’ (Ehala 2018: 10) employs a discursive strategy that Sherratt (Sherratt 2002: 131) terms ‘representational identification’. Establishing a relationship between a phenomenon (e.g., using mirrors) and a concept (e.g., mirror as a surveillance tool), this type of identity thinking subsequently incorporates the concept into a wider conceptual/semiotic web (cf. Geertz 1973: 4–5), e.g., that of ‘systems of oppression and surveillance in dance classes’. As the concept ‘is ‘made like’ the system’ (Sherratt 2002: 131), identity thinking thus allows for radical de- or recontextualisation of practices, events and real-life situations. Herein lies one of the dangers of ‘conceptual fetishism’ (Adorno 2004 [1973]: 49) or ‘being enamoured with concepts’ (Nuyen 1990: 317). When learners striving to improve their dancing are identified as ‘docile bodies’, with the focus on the mirror as a symbol of power struggle as opposed to one of the many tools at the learners’ and teachers’ disposal, such a ‘rigidised coding paradigm’ (Au 2021: 1165) leaves too much of the ‘real-time animated dynamics of lived experience’ (Sheets-Johnstone 2023: 276) muted.

The tightly-knit conceptual web of ‘docility’ and ‘surveillance’ thus firmly shields the reader from the tangible, immediate, fluid and changeable nature of dance learning and teaching.

An old proverb comes to mind: “Do not blame the mirror if it’s your own mug that’s crooked” (Gogol 2019: 3). Added in 1842 as an epigraph to Nikolay Gogol’s satirical play *The Government Inspector* (1836), this saying can be interpreted as a sample of ‘timeless folk wisdom’ (McKenna 2014: 327) inviting us to be more aware of our own weaknesses. Alternatively, it may be regarded as an anachronistic (or even ‘eerily transhistorical’ — Marturano 2020: 147) example of toxic objectifying negativity and prescriptive cultural normativity when it comes to defining beauty and ugliness. Although both interpretations are arguably justifiable, the latter somehow manages to drain all life from the proverb rendering it virtually pointless, with Gogol, who clearly thought otherwise, coming across as but another ‘dead white man’ (Doja 2020: 864).

Obviously, ‘every identity comes with labels’ (Appiah 2018: 8). The underlying hypothesis to be explored in this article is that only a few of these labels may have a heuristic value outweighing the epistemological limitations identity thinking carries, either explicitly or implicitly. As such, the central research questions to be addressed here are:

Q1: To what extent is identity thinking epistemologically valuable for dance studies?

Q2: Do viable alternatives to representational identification exist or is the ‘to think is to identify’ (Adorno 2004 [1973]: 5) dictum unavoidable in empirical inquiry?

Dance anthropology in general and dance autoethnography in particular can be at the forefront of bringing (back) a subtler balance between conceptual clarity/coherent identifiability of cultural phenomena, on the one hand, and ability to move beyond identity labels/conceptual ‘photographic clichés’ (Laplantine 2010: 141), on the other. Building on lived, tangible experience of a dancer as a ‘situated being’ (Warburton 2011: 69), a dance anthropologist as a participant and an observer can rely on a range of ‘embodied insights’ (Hoppu 2014) to counter and/or corroborate hypotheses and interpretations. No matter how elevated and ‘springy’ the dance style practised, experiences of dancing as a form of embodied or ‘bodily’ ethnography (Hancock 2018; Förster 2022) can help researchers make their analysis empirically and somatically grounded. Dance research thus invites balancing between first-person, second-person and sub-personal (‘objective’) epistemological stances. A researcher’s own dancing, interacting with other practitioners as well as analysing filmed/observed ‘dance realisations’ (Bakka, Karoblis 2010) alongside notated dances are all complementary means of understanding and appreciating the ‘shared experiences’ of dancing in a range of contexts and settings (Buckland 2010: 340–342).

Identity Thinking: Values and Limitations

To address Q1, let us revisit the question ‘whose authenticity?’ (Bakka 2002: 69) that emerged in the context of my own and my dancing team’s choreographic presence on a theatre stage. Identifying possible stakeholders and/or perspectives to address this question is clearly a prerequisite of addressing it. A list of these would include (but not be limited to):

- ‘Contemporary’/historical authenticity: for turn-of-the-century Victorian Scots portrayed in the scene of the Highland games, certain elements of the dancers’ outfits appear inauthentic: Aboyne dress for female dancers (Fig. 4) was introduced in

the 1950s (Hood 2022). Soft leather Ghillie shoes were not yet accepted footwear for Highland dancers either (Ballantine 2016: 142, 146). On the other hand, kilted men dancing over a pair of crossed swords and using motifs such as closed pas de basque or toe-and-heel movement as well as hand positions (Mackenzie 1910: 41–46) would be seen as common practice and thus accepted as authentic.

- Etymological/original authenticity: for the predominantly Gaelic-speaking Highlanders of the eighteenth century and earlier, the era before Culloden and, especially, Highland clearances (Gow 2009), competitive/balletic dancing may not deserve the label ‘Highland dancing’. As argued by Ballantine (2016), an invented tradition that introduced excessively militaristic and masculine overtones to the dancing practices of Scottish Highlands and misrepresented most of the existing repertoire hardly deserves to be called ‘Highland’ dancing.
- Ethnic authenticity: ethnic Russians dancing for a predominantly Russian audience may be seen as not Scottish enough to physically embody the Scottish dancing tradition. Since a primordialist vision of ethnicity is reasonably strong in political and popular discourse in Russia (Streletsky, Gorokhov 2022) and beyond, it can be argued that there must be ‘Scottish blood’ running through the dancers’ veins for them to be accepted as fully representative of the cultural practices they share on-stage. To counter such objections, the theatre released a guided video tour exploring historical connections the Russian capital had with Scottish engineers, military people and merchants in the 17th–19th centuries (Teatr Terezy Durovoy 2021).
- Cultural authenticity: as active participants of the ‘global’ Scottish dancing community, Shady Glen dancers have been participating in dancing events in different countries and settings, getting positive feedback from dancers and teachers from Scotland and elsewhere, both formal (e.g. competition trophies, professional and amateur exam results, invitations to dance/teach at a range of events outside Russia) and less formal (e.g. comments from experienced teachers and dancers on- and offline). Unlike other participants of the show, the dancers are not impersonating the characters they portray, in many respects they are those characters. Our cameo appearance alongside our work on some of the choreography in the show thus helps accomplish what Durova sees as the necessary levels of ‘immersion’ in the target culture by the creative team, ‘so as not to lie’, especially to the younger audience (Telekanal Kultura 2019).

If identitarian thinking is further applied to the facets of ‘authenticity’ identified above, an evaluative cline can be generated in an attempt to pinpoint in what ways the dancers’ presence in the *Heather mead* show may be deemed ‘authentic’ (see Fig. 5). An epistemological value of such an approach would be achieving a degree of certainty by applying a conceptual checklist to dissect the authenticity claimed by the dancers. Especially if such a conceptualisation manages to refrain from ‘excess in descriptive and theoretical ardour’ (Marcus 2015: 36) and stay reasonably clear, it may offer a practical way to identify and analyse a range of generally tangible issues linked to an otherwise vague umbrella term ‘authenticity’.

A clear limitation, however, lies in the pinpointing strategy itself. Even when a seemingly straightforward concept such as ‘a Highland dancer’ is used as an identity label, the risk is twofold. Firstly, representational identification may lead to an unnecessarily static (pinpointed) positioning of dancing within a chosen conceptual framework (in this case,

‘authentic–inauthentic’). The fluidity and situated nature of dancing experiences may thus be muted or even lost (cf. *Alferov* 2021: 185–187). Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, identity labels, when neatly organised, tend not just to misrepresent but to ultimately substitute the reality they are aimed at helping analyse (cf. *Finke and Sökefeld* 2018). This substitution means that a semiotic web of identity labels makes it significantly harder to see beyond the label itself, harder to use ‘the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives’ of dancers (*Geertz* 1973: 16). Even a quick glance at Fig. 5 is enough to acknowledge: under very few if any circumstances would it be possible to revisit or get a feeling of immersion into a ‘life-as-lived’ (*Toren, de Pina-Cabral* 2009: 3) experience of onstage Highland dancing by examining this cline.

Overreliance on referential identification is thus likely to hinder the epistemological procedure of turning ‘that which is initially only sensed and felt [...] into that which is clearly known’ (*Gow* 2009: 34). Leading to ‘over-complexifying a situated and lived social world’ (*Au* 2021: 1162), conceptual labelling runs a significant risk of firmly isolating our analysis from what is being analysed. Such disconnectedness does not only stem from ‘theoretical efforts at fixation and typification’ (*Desjarlais, Throop* 2011: 92) but is also due to the sheer density of the conceptual web identity labels can create, even when trying to verbalise the changeable and fluid nature of dancing contexts and experiences.

Non-Identity Approaches

One of non-identitarian approaches to ‘set reified objects in motion’ is centred around a concept of ‘dialectical image’ (*Benjamin* 2002, *Pensky* 2004), i.e. a way of presenting and contemplating phenomena through a ‘constellation’ of ‘what has been [...] in a flash with the now’ (*Lynteris* 2018: 162). This approach was quite common in mediaeval historiography in Scotland and beyond. For example, when the *Chronicle* of John of Fardun or *The Bruce* by John Barbour talk about the turbulent life and fate of Robert the Bruce (1274–1329 CE), this Scottish leader is presented alongside his Biblical counterpart, Judas Maccabaeus (*McKim* 1989: 14–18), whereas one of Bruce’s loyal supporters, James Douglas (c. 1286–1330 CE), explicitly resembles a famed Roman political and military leader Fabricius (*McKim* 1989: 25–29). The Biblical and classical allusions thus help mediaeval authors in transcending space and time to communicate the significance of loyalty and readiness to overcome hardship when fighting for one’s own people in a struggle against oppressors. What these allusions and parallels do not do is make the First War for Scottish Independence (1296–1328 CE) identical to the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucids in Judaea (167–160 BCE) or the Pyrrhic War between Epyrus and the Roman Republic (280–275 BCE). Aimed at highlighting the significance of the Scottish experience, such ancient ‘flashbacks’ may be regarded as ‘an anachronism of mediaeval historiography’ (*Briggs* 2012: 393; cf. *Spiegel* 1983: 43). Alternatively/additionally, they represent ‘a powerful sense of the past as present’ (*Briggs* 2012: 393) and, more broadly, a thinking strategy that allows for noticing links and parallels without automatically assigning an identifying label.

Applying such a ‘dialectical imaging’ strategy to Scottish dancing, in particular the step dance repertoire associated with the Hebridean Isles, may assist in further exploring the epistemological opportunities this mode of non-identitarian thinking provides for a dance anthropologist. To this end, let us examine a dance experience that presents itself as a ‘constellation’ of stage performances in Moscow, Pyatigorsk, Arisaig, St. Andrew’s, Vyborg

and the Isle of Skye; online and offline dance learning, teaching and rehearsing; browsing through dance instructions and academic publications; discussing avenues for transmitting the Hebridean dancing tradition and technique with colleagues and learners — as well as liaising with amazing dancers and musicians from Moscow, Inverness, Aberdeen and elsewhere. The experience in question brings together the smells of the sea and the river, wooden floorboards and old stone walls, theatre backstage and a concert hall auditorium, several community halls and, possibly, a pub. It evokes the sounds of Highland bagpipes and a vintage Scottish button accordion ('buttonbox'), the gentle shuffles and brushes of leather 'Ghillie' pumps and a more pronounced beat of harder leather dancing shoes on a range of surfaces, from a riverboat deck to a professional vinyl performance flooring.

The timing somewhat subjectively stretches from the 1950s to the 2020s, but through the glimpses of written record it can go as far back as the 1840s, with explicit sociopolitical references to 1745–46. Kinaesthetically, the dancing experience is a dialectic of elevating into the air, rhythmic landing and an occasional feeling of floating along the dance floor, where slower motifs are combined with quicker moves. The step sequences are danced solo and in coordination with other dancers alongside formations requiring all the dancers' interaction, including eye contact and use of hands, together making up a choreography piece called *A Dance Tribute to Flora and Charlie* (Shady Glen Dancers 2022).

The description above is the result of me reflecting together with the other participants of this display dance on the possible 'flashbacks' the piece may entail. We have danced the *Tribute* in the Moscow International Performing Arts Centre twice: in December 2021 and March 2022, once accompanied by a live piper, Anatoly Isaev, and once using a recorded original set of tunes, *Shady Glen Jig*, composed and performed by a buttonbox player from Inverness Graeme MacKay. All the dancers agreed that when performing, we all prefer staying in the moment, being 'here and now'. However, looking back at the experience or



Fig. 4. A dancer wearing the Aboyne dress outfit and soft leather Ghillie pumps. Moscow, Teresa Durova's Theatre, September 2021. Photo by Mikhail Bratsilo, 2021

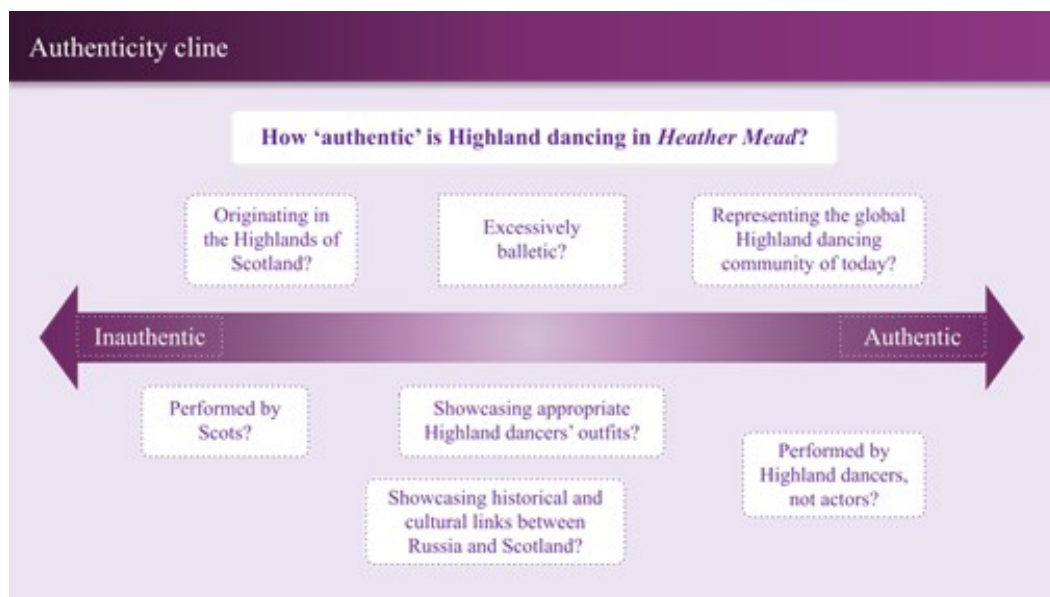


Fig.5. An 'authenticity' cline. Created by the author using Google Slides™

while preparing for the show, we acknowledge that our performance builds on and/or is linked to a range of prior events, 'past leaking into the present' (Franko 2019: 155). What can be achieved if we notice and explicitly acknowledge our ability to blur some of the 'basic questions of documentation', namely: what, where, when and how (Felföldi 1999: 63)?

When? As discussed with my fellow dancers, our 2022 and 2021 displays bring back the memories and/or sensations of our much earlier performances: 2006, 2008, 2011 and 2016. Most of these we are reminded of *post hoc*, possibly due to similar musicality, especially in the case of Highland bagpipes played for us by Anatoly Isaev in 2022, 2016 and 2011. One of the dancers said that she tries to invoke the sensation of her very first 'big-stage' performance when just about to go onto stage, in order to intentionally revive the feeling of 'energy swap' between the performer and the audience and thus get 'into the zone'. Whether conscious of that 'in the moment' or not, when dancing in front of an audience, we rely on our prior performances no less than on rehearsing a particular piece in the dance studio.

On a more romanticising note, the music of the piece, especially the sound of the buttonbox, transports at least two of the dancers back to the late 1940s — early 1960s when Scottish dance music was regularly featured on British radio and, from 1952, television (Hood 1980: 114, 120–121), reflecting 'the national enthusiasm, almost mania, for Scottish country dancing' (Shoupe 2008: 115). As the title of the piece suggests, the core of the choreography relies on the competitive version of a solo dance *Flora MacDonald's Fancy* (UKA 2020) and two 'versions' of another solo dance *Over the Water to Charlie*: one from the Hebridean repertoire (Melin 2019: 72–73; Flett, Flett 1996: 66–71), the other from the Scottish step repertoire as taught by Mrs West and Wendy West (RSCDS 2013: 58–59). These 'versions' are so distinct in terms of the movements used as well as the technique that they may well be seen as two different dances set to the same 6/8 tune. Regardless, the names of the dances refer to the heavily romanticised Second Jacobite Rebellion, 1745–46

(Trevor-Roper 2009: 84), with Flora MacDonald helping Bonnie Prince Charlie escape mainland Scotland, getting ‘over the sea to Skye’ (Melin 2018: 49–53; cf. Emerson 1972: 128). Unlike Shady Glen’s other Flora-themed production (Shady Glen Dancers 2011), the *Tribute* does not directly invite the spectators to revisit the legends linked to the events of 1745–46. It does not aim to fully transport the audience in time, but rather provides a range of overtones, thus potentially creating a ‘dialectical image’ of either ‘time frozen’ and things unchanged, as in the case of the 2020s blurred with the 1950s, or, alternatively, time transcended by freely going back and forth through the moments of dancers’ own experience or Scottish historical memory in search of informed inspiration.

Where? To further outline the *Tribute*’s chronotope, the locations corresponding to the above-mentioned dates may be added. Most locations are in Russia: 2022, 2021 and 2008 — Moscow International Performing Arts Centre, 2016 — Stavropol Opera and Ballet Theatre in Pyatigorsk, 2011 — The Yauza Palace Concert Hall, Moscow, 2006 — Vyborg Castle. 2006 corresponds to yet another memorable performance, this time in the Younger Hall of the University of St. Andrew’s in Scotland, where I was part of the Scottish (ladies’) step dance display team, the first male dancer to do that in the history of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society (RSCDS), according to my dance teachers’ feedback. For me, one of the key factors of what forms the geographical constellation merging the 2021–22 shows with some of my prior performances is the geometrical composition of the dance team, with me as the tallest dancer (and the only man) positioned in the centre. The use of space within a given choreography thus creates or rather highlights continuity that allows me to feel as if I am revisiting a range of locations, going beyond the geographical identification.

According to my fellow dancers, the constellation of spaces invoked by the *Tribute* also includes their travelling experiences: the sounds of Highland bagpipes bring back the memories of hiking on the Isle of Skye whereas the buttonbox transports us to an indoor venue for informal social dancing, often happening after an outdoors Highland dancing competition (for me this is associated with Arisaig Highland Games on the West coast of Scotland back in 2014, for one other dancer — a post-competition event on the Isle of Skye in 2012). For one of us, the sound of the buttonbox connects to the Outer Hebrides and their nature creating a ‘time capsule’, where things seem to remain as they once were.

For me as a dance learner and teacher, another important set of locations that forms the chronotope of the *Tribute* are spaces and venues for transmitting the steps, formations, technique and musicality. Some of them I have been to: several Helen Russell’s step dance workshops in Moscow between 2006 and 2019, Moscow 2021 summer course devoted to three different ‘versions’ of *Over the Water to Charlie* attended and/or co-taught by all the participants of the *Tribute to Flora and Charlie*. Other spaces for and/or means of learning are part of the constellation as well: reading book pages with dance descriptions (Melin 2019; RSCDS 2011; UKA 2020), watching Sabra MacGillivray’s online dance tutorials and reflecting on what ‘moving naturally’ means in Francis Peacock’s *Sketches* (Peacock 1805), to name a few.

How? As performers, we often find ourselves in a situation where one 3-minute display is everything that is required for an event, meaning that a few of our

display dances aim at unifying diverse styles and traditions, linking steps with different provenance, building on a wide range of learning contexts and locales to weave together glimpses of what we know and can do, potentially allowing uninitiated viewers to make sense of the Scottish dancing tradition as a whole. The dialectical image of our dancing in this context means we tend to make our performances short and ‘compact’ while dancing reasonably slowly in terms of the tempo to allow for nuanced footwork and flow of the movement. We showcase variety alongside similarities, common motifs and overlapping features of various aspects of the Scottish dancing repertoire. We value complexity yet aim at a ‘natural’ style of movement. We dance in synchrony, still appreciating each individual dancer’s approach. We create new displays building on the well-established motifs/dancing ‘vocabulary’.

Epistemologically, the strategy of dialectical imaging thus allows a dance anthropologist to acknowledge the complexity of lived dance experiences in their sociocultural contexts while maximising our awareness of the multiperspectivity ingrained in dealing with long-established dancing traditions and repertoires. The benefits of this awareness are nevertheless highly dependent on the anthropologist’s readership/audience. If read within the identity thinking paradigm, the ‘Where-When-How’ sketch above can be perceived as a sample of relativising discourse that tries to undermine the tangible reality of Scottish dancing. What cannot be pinned to a certain space, time and manner of dancing may thus be seen as an arbitrary construct to be renegotiated depending on changing circumstances.

The importance of ‘reading’ — or, broader, interacting with — dance-related discourse in a non-identitarian way can be illustrated by responses to Dr Jean Milligan’s concept of ‘controlled abandon’ (TAC 1963; RSCDS 2011). The concept refers to a dialectical relationship between ‘achieving correct and beautiful technique’ and dancing ‘with ease and flight and happy abandon’ (Milligan 1956: 28). For critics, the ‘controlled style promoted’ by Dr Milligan and the (R)SCDS has been seen as ‘a degenerative refinement’ contrary to ‘the obvious Scottish taste for vigorous movement’ (Emmerson 1997: 148). The idea of reaching the state of letting go (‘abandon’) through a degree of control over one’s execution of steps and formations thus sounds like an oxymoron. As Flett and Flett (Flett, Flett 1957: 162) put it, ‘the emphasis throughout traditional dancing in Scotland was [...] much more on enjoyment than it was on technique’.

Indeed, on the face of it, Scottish country dancers...

either:

- control their footwork, use of hands and deportment through self-surveillance while constantly double-checking whether they are in the right place at the right time in coordination with the other members of the ‘set’

or:

- let go, relax and enjoy the moment.

Appreciating how ‘abandon’ can be ‘controlled’ requires going beyond this apparent dichotomy. Dialectical imaging outlined above may help see the claim that ‘controlled abandon’ is possible and desirable by examining it as one of the core beliefs inherited by the RSCDS from professional dancing masters of 18th-19th-century Scotland. Milligan (Milligan 1956: 29–30) explicitly credits Francis Peacock’s *Sketches* (1805). Her understanding of the role ‘preliminary training’ plays in acquiring ‘easy spontaneity [...] in the practice of any art’ (Milligan 1956: 106–107) links very well with Peacock’s articulation

of the role ‘cultivation’ plays in developing ‘natural’ dancing (cf. *Alferov* 2019). Linking mid-20th-century standardised technique and early-19th-century approaches to dance teaching is a risky enterprise, however: if approached in an identitarian way, as an indication of ‘traditional evidence’ to corroborate the RSCDS interpretation of the dance steps or music tempos (*Flett, Flett* 1957: 161), such linking will be seen as antiquating Scottish country dancing as a project to the point of falsifying its claim for ‘continuity with a two-hundred-year history of dance-music practice’ (*Shoupe* 2008: 116).

And yet, despite all the drastic sociocultural change the 20th (and indeed the 19th) century brought about, a degree of continuity is almost tangible in the day-to-day teaching and learning of country dancing in Scotland and elsewhere. If we allow for a ‘constellated’ chronotope, we may appreciate, for example, that Helen Russell’s workshop ‘with emphasis on good phrasing, sociability, rhythmic movement [...] good energy and posture’ in April 2018 in Helensburgh, Scotland (TAS 2018: 5–6) entitled ‘Controlled Abandon’ is Russell’s homage not only to Miss Milligan’s vision and career between the 1920s and the 1970s in Scotland and way beyond but also to that of Francis Peacock of Aberdeen between the 1740s and the 1800s. This does not mean Russell follows either dancing teacher blindly or replicates exactly what they did. Rather, it points to the dialogic nature of Scottish dance teaching and learning as a reflective reexamination of past practices of dance teaching in Scotland, with experienced dancers and teachers literally embodying the transmission and production of knowledge, skills and approaches, thus bridging the gap between continuity and change, technique and enjoyment, control and abandon.

With reference to diverse forms of Scottish dancing, the concept of ‘control’ links the issues discussed in this article so far: internalised and external surveillance, (in)authenticity, and the contested chronotope(s) of the dancing tradition(s) of Scotland. As Ballantine (*Ballantine* 2016: 268) put it:

The creation of a single style of Highland dancing by an authoritative board of control [SOBHD] meant that the variety of traditional styles that had been practised for many years had to be reclassified as *inauthentic*. The standardised style became the ‘true’ style particularly when it adopted fictional histories to support its supposed authenticity.

Somewhat similarly to the RSCDS, (R)SOBHD control over competitive Highland dancing thus entails ‘supposedly authentic’ standardization of technique, which itself emphasizes, especially for an outside observer, ‘tight control as in sharp extensions or snapping a foot to a position’ (*Melin* 2019: 30). Curiously, Ballantine seems to distinguish between somatic control as part of the aesthetic promoted by Francis Peacock: ‘grace, elegance, control and confidence’ (*Ballantine* 2016: 52) and authoritative control over Highland dancing by the (R)SOBHD (*Ballantine* 2016: 32, 34, 149, 154, 268). For Melin, however, 20th-century regulatory efforts by dance teachers and organizations appear closely related to the increased technicality and somatic control over each dancer’s movements. Opposed to ‘lightness’, ‘stiffness, or tight control’ was ‘not part of the aesthetic’ within the dancing repertoire of the Hebridean Isles, Melin (*Melin* 2019: 30) argues.

A tool to reexamine the complex relationship between lightness, stiffness and somatic control in various styles of Scottish dancing is offered by dance phenomenology. Offering ‘immersion through selective disengagement’ (*Kozel* 2007: 144), phenomenological

bracketing ‘may not be epistemologically reliable’ (Rothfield 2010: 316), especially if engaged with from an identitarian standpoint. What follows is an attempt to examine the role of readership in adding epistemological value to examining somatic control in Scottish dancing phenomenologically.

I’m dancing together with our advanced class in a studio with a mirrored wall in late October 2023. Or performing in a duet to a recorded tune on a small stage in a local community centre in early February 2019. Or on a bigger stage alongside three other dancers performing to live music in April 2011. Or back in 2009 in my room counting to myself practising a sequence I just learnt from clear written instructions prepared by Ron Wallace. I’m practising/performing Wallace’s *Dancer’s Dream*, a balletic soft-shoe step dance that is rhythmically and technically intricate and, when danced with enough control, smooth, graceful and flowing.

Here the ‘constellation’ of chronotopes can be bracketed — ‘I’m dancing on an even floor’ would be an adequate opening. However, for a reader to be able to retrace my steps, they may need to position themselves in space if not in time. The context is meant to transport the reader to a space they may not have been to, initiating an immersion in a lived experience of dancing: looking afresh and possibly empathising with the dancing subject (‘I’), whose gender, age and nationality are likewise ‘bracketed’. The details provided are not meant to be clung to as identity labels or provide definite answers to the reader. Rather, they are to facilitate getting access to the immediacy of dancing experiences embodying ‘controlled abandon’.

‘Walk — two and three, and one — walk — walk’. No matter how many times I have danced step 5, I voice the rhythm inside my mind. The rhythmic cues allow me to follow the music and almost always get me through the step even after a long time without having practised it. Am I in control? Are the musicians? Or is the dance deviser still pulling all the strings as a remote puppeteer? When starting the step, I cannot be too sure. Not knowing if I will dance every motif including the entrechats exactly where they belong, I just allow myself to follow the rhythm and rely on the basic technique: turnout, pointed toes where necessary, clear extensions, positions as neat and tight as possible — the things I have been gradually improving for years. When dancing alone or in a team, I feel we are all in this together: the choreographer from North America relying on the Scottish musical and dancing vocabulary with its links to classical dancing, the musicians, the dancers wherever we may be, the spectators, if not too focused on their meals. Whose control? Whose abandon? Whose authenticity? Ours, theirs, mine. When dancing, I am shifting between enjoying the flow of my/our movements; sharing my enthusiasm with partner(s), learners and/or spectators; doing our very best so that the choreographer’s concept gets embodied well; enhancing everyone’s appreciation for the musical piece our movements visualise and the rich dancing tradition we represent. Is a certain Aberdonian dancing master promoting the social significance of walking with dignity and grace (Peacock 1805: 137–151) a member of ‘our’ team in this situation? Naturally. How can he not be?

If read critically, the account above can be easily dismissed as an example of romanticising, overcomplicating, relativising or even avoiding the initial question. If read cooperatively, however, with a willingness (and a certain effort) to shift perspective, this

phenomenological vignette can serve as a springboard for dialogic reflection.

With reference to Q2 above, it is clear that non-identitarian approaches to dance anthropology should complement rather than replace corresponding identitarian tools. In the case of applied phenomenology, Burch's (Burch 2021: 287–288) interdisciplinary framework offers a good example: it invites a researcher to 1) outline a problem lacking 'a monodisciplinary solution'; 2) apply 'core phenomenology' to zoom in on 'features of subjectivity' characterizing the problem and 3) further explore these features using non-phenomenological tools and techniques. If practiced as a cycle rather than in a linear way, the framework invites both the writer and the reader to shift between clearly delineated issues, on the one hand, and features that must appear 'blurred' for them to be noticed and/or appreciated, on the other.

* * *

As can be observed, this article's initial premise is somewhat identitarian in nature. Certain discursive practices in dance anthropology such as 'Foucauldian' analysis of power dynamics in mirrored classrooms or critique of 'authenticity' in 'traditional' dancing are labelled here 'identitarian', whereas other techniques such as dance phenomenology or the much lesser used by anthropologists dialectical imaging are deemed 'non-identitarian'. Using this distinction as a springboard for discussion is essential for this research project. This alone signals that stepping 'away' from identity thinking, as the title of the article suggests, may not be viable or indeed recommended. Rather, we as anthropologists and/or dance practitioners should be better able to step-dance *around* identity labels in order to examine what those reveal while minimising the risk of staying fixated on the labels themselves.

As pointed out by a Russian poet Fyodor Tyutchev in 1830, 'a thought once uttered is untrue' (Tyutchev 1830). In the context of dancing this often implies that 'the body knows more than words can say' (Welch 2019: 170). Consequently, for a (dance) anthropologist as a reader and a writer, a higher 'tolerance for unending ambiguity as an aspect of understanding' must complement and sometimes replace 'a satisfying explanation of a fixed object of analysis' (Marcus, Cushman 1982: 45). As Adorno (Adorno 2004 [1973]: 166) emphasised, we may want to 'attempt to express what that concept aims at, not to circumscribe it to operative ends'. Reader and writer awareness of non-identitarian approaches to interpreting observable phenomena can enhance this epistemological stance. The reader's willingness to go beyond conceptual labels allowing for some space in between 'identities' is at least as important here as the rhetorical and methodological strategies employed by the writer of (dance) anthropology.

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