

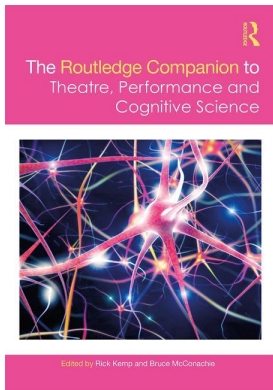
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12

COMMUNITIES OF GESTURE

Empathy and embodiment in Bill T. Jones/Arnie
Zane Dance Company's *100 Migrations**Ariel Nereson*

November 2008 was a historic month in the U.S.A., seeing the election of the nation's first African-American President, Barack Obama. At the University of Virginia, on a campus built by enslaved people belonging to another American president, Thomas Jefferson, work began on a new dance meant to respond to this legacy and comment on the approaching 2009 bicentennial of the birth of yet another president, Abraham Lincoln. In the heady post-election days filled with a hope promised by Obama in his acceptance speech (Obama 2009, 224), the choreographer Bill T. Jones and his company developed a community-based work, *100 Migrations*, that shared this campaign rhetoric: 'It's about a climate of hope wherein we conjure up the means to save ourselves' (Jones 2008a, n.p.). Jones places responsibility for change on the performers and spectators involved with *100 Migrations*, eschewing a top-down process of reform and renewal. *100 Migrations*, involving 90 community members and 10 company dancers, models one such horizontal process, addressing the legacy of a cultural icon whose very name invokes notions of community and its particular formation in democracy. Democratic ideals of freedom and equality (those frequently associated with Lincoln) often feel utopian given the daily lived realities of many Americans, and Jones's scepticism of their achievement via Obama's election leads him to focus on performance, not policy, as the base of possible grass-roots activism. Explaining his desire to work with local community, Jones stated, 'I thought that the question of Lincoln was very much a question of being a part of a society and that everybody who considers themselves an American must have the DNA of that man who we call the greatest president who ever lived. So I wanted to know what that looks like, democracy moving' (*100 Migrations*). Jones's concept of 'democracy moving' asks what it is to move and be moved, engaging the double meaning, kinaesthetic and affective, of 'to move,' a double meaning grounded in the body.

This essay assumes that embodiment is knowledge – namely, it is how we know the world, how we learn our various social roles and how we explore alternatives. I proceed from the theory of embodied cognition articulated by philosopher Mark Johnson (2007), which builds upon the insights of Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch (1991), Johnson's collaborations with George Lakoff (1980, 1999) and Vittorio Gallese's body of research. *100 Migrations* asks how might we move people emotionally towards social change by moving them physically around the stage? Jones develops communities of gesture by asking participants to learn each other's self-generated choreography and to be responsible for fellow

performers' physical safety. These strategies, I argue, can trigger empathic responses that connect moving towards social change with moving around a stage. I position *100 Migrations* as a public historical project, one that utilises the performance to expand the range of subjects towards whom we demonstrate empathy and to embody a democratic ideal of inclusiveness through choreographing the lived, embodied experiences of diverse communities.¹

Johnson's concept of embodied cognition helps us understand the causes and consequences of bodies in motion in experiences both pedestrian (walking down a street) and aestheticised (performing dance choreography). Johnson concludes that far from being a physical limitation that the mind transcends, 'our bodies are the very condition of our meaning-making and creativity' (Johnson 2007, 15). Embodied cognition further encompasses the embodied nature of emotions. Antonio Damasio claims that emotions result in physicalised response 'in the form of actions and behavior,' leading to his development of the somatic-marker hypothesis, wherein rational decision-making is impossible without emotional response (Damasio 1999, 47). Damasio's somatic-marker hypothesis and Johnson's embodiment hypothesis have real ramifications for anyone investigating practices of sense-making, history being one such practice and art-making another that intersect in *100 Migrations*. One such consequence is the realisation that activities usually associated with aesthetics are involved directly in cognition, often foregrounding modes of meaning-making outside of, or in complement to, the linguistic. Dance, in particular, makes explicit the implicit connection between movement and emotion, a word whose definition includes 'to cause to move.'² Drawing upon empirical theories of embodiment does not, however, inevitably lead to positivism or simple determinism, a common critique. While human development of, and reliance upon, sense-making tools, like narrative, are neurologically hardwired, these processes take place within specific material and social environments that profoundly influence meaning-making. For Johnson, material and social worlds are co-constitutive of experience, alongside the biological realities of the body-mind.

The body/mind division that is superseded by the concept of embodied cognition is not the only divide that shapes this conversation. The flexible division between art and politics frames Jones's career. He is often associated with the culture wars, commenting in 1997 that his company 'attract[s] a number of people who see my persona as being about social change' (Jones 1998, 132–33). By the time of *100 Migrations* in 2008, the company's core interplay between aesthetics and politics was clear: 'Our mantra: What is at stake here?... What's at stake now has to do with what I call the discourse – the ongoing way in which the society attempts to know itself' (Jones 2008b, 104). In the Lincoln trilogy (*100 Migrations* is the middle work), the company focuses on historical discourse – the ways in which American communities attempt to know themselves through endowing the past with particular meanings. They adopt a public historical approach, defined by historian Michael Frisch as a commitment to 'shared authority' wherein the goal is not simply a top-down 'distribution of knowledge' but rather 'a profound sharing of knowledges, an implicit and sometimes explicit dialogue from very different vantages about the shape, meaning, and implications of history' (Frisch 1990, xxii). *100 Migrations* considers the role of the past in the present and future – the evergreen question 'have we learned from the past?' – and how embodiment and emotional response engage with the challenges of intergroup relationships in an increasingly pluralistic democracy. Thus, the work is not simply a choreographic reflection of the universal human realities of embodied cognition; rather, it argues for a particular understanding of embodied emotion, manifested choreographically in touch and gesture, as the potential for actionable empathy, for *moving* people towards social change by moving them around the stage.

Empathy is much contested across the humanities, arts and social sciences but can briefly be defined as an often other-oriented human capacity with the potential to both reinforce

and transgress group boundaries. I look to recent cognitive neuroscience for a working definition, understanding that our comprehension of what exactly empathy is and how it works for humans is far from settled both within and without cognitive studies. Neuroscientists Grit Hein and Tania Singer distinguish between Theory of Mind (ToM) – ‘our ability to understand other people’s beliefs and thoughts’ – and empathy – ‘our ability to share other people’s feelings’ (Hein and Singer 2010, 110). Vittorio Gallese and Hannah Wojciehowski propose ‘Feeling of Body,’ a result of embodied simulation, rather than ToM, as the foundation of empathy: ‘empathy may be conceived as the outcome of our natural tendency to experience interpersonal relations first and foremost at the implicit level of intercorporeity’ (Gallese and Wojciehowski 2011, n.p.). Importantly, empathy is not itself an emotion but rather a capacity of responding to other people’s emotional states. Empathy does not automatically involve other-oriented, or prosocial, action: we can share another’s affective state and know that our affective state was prompted by theirs; however, this response need not motivate us to do anything about their affective state, particularly if it is negative. Group membership influences the likelihood that empathic response becomes actionable, or transforms into what Hein and Singer term *empathic concern*: ‘an other-oriented response congruent with the perceived distress experienced by another person’ (116). Hein and Singer’s experiments suggest that there are neurological, functional differences ‘between judging the mental states of similar and dissimilar others’ (112). Empathic concern is more likely when we perceive someone as belonging to our group. In *100 Migrations*, Jones and company create groups whose social relationships are not shaped by racial, gender or ability identification but rather are based in a shared task.

Alongside the work’s demands on performers, Jones articulates a similar site of growth for the audience as the development of ‘a genius public’ (Bromley 2008, n.p.) Elaborating on the vision of *100 Migrations* as a vehicle for social change, Jones states, ‘I am hoping that there is somebody out there who can see it, and more importantly, as an artist speaking, who can *feel* it – that’s what I believe in, a kind of emotional intelligence’ (Jones 2008a, n.p.). Rather than a genius public composed of members who can recite facts in the proper order, Jones advocates instead for a public with the capacity to move and be moved. Frisch offers ‘historical intelligence’ as the public historian’s target, defined not as ‘a commodity whose supply they [public historians] seek to replenish,’ but rather a search for ‘the sources and consequences’ of our selective remembering and forgetting of the past (Frisch 1990, 27). Empathic response is a potential connective tissue between, in Frisch and Jones’s terms, historical and emotional intelligences. Catherine J. Stevens offers yet another formulation of intelligence as bodily, linking perception-action-cognition to embodiment in an endless feedback loop: ‘perception and action are coupled. The body moves intelligently. Intelligence is bodily. Actions constrain or shape thought. Thought guides action’ (Stevens 2016, 123). For *100 Migrations*, the relationship between perception and action is a reciprocal process of feeling and moving towards democracy in which both performers and spectators can participate.

The very ability of performance to offer paths into future action is concentrated when its subject is historical because of our tendency to associate past, present and future as a narrative. Freddie Rokem writes, ‘The theatre “performing history” seeks to overcome both the separation and exclusion from the past, striving to create a community where the events from this past will matter again’ (Rokem 2000, xii). Making the past matter is, as public historians Ray Rosenzweig and David Thelen (1990) found in a survey of Americans’ attitudes towards history, a matter of making the past usable in shaping the future, a task that begins with understanding how the past has been used to make our present: ‘[respondents] assemble their experiences into patterns, narratives that allow them to make sense of the past, set priorities, project what might happen next, and try to shape the future’ (12). In Louis Filler’s concept

of history as the usable past, the past and future were not necessarily isolated points on a progressive continuum, but rather necessary partners in terms of how people conceptualise history as an active, useful endeavour: 'the problem of the "usable" past...is one of determining where we have been and where we intend to go' (Filler 1947, 344). Evidence from cognitive sciences supports the conclusion that humans are not bound to a specific vision of the future, but rather the body-mind's very changeability gives us great agency in the present to causally affect future experiences to multiple ends, not all of them necessarily progressive. From the point of view of embodied cognition, the arc of the moral universe does not inherently bend towards justice, social or otherwise. Understanding and, in many cases, developing new narratives of the past become critical activities in forging community identity.

Dancing through division

The past appears in *100 Migrations* conceptually, in the images, feelings, thoughts and narratives that participants already have about Lincoln, as well as in the use of Lincoln's speech archive as part of the soundscape and as fodder for the choreographic process. The past also appears materially: Lincoln's deathbed, flanked by two podiums, is the focal set piece. The bed is centre stage and performers dance various patterns in groups around it throughout the performance. The performers are dressed in blues and greys, referencing the Union and Confederate uniforms. The choreography throughout suggests that commemorating Lincoln might be a way through past and current divisions towards a future with less conflict. The work includes duets and group sections that choreograph human social behaviours of encountering, appraising and opposing or welcoming the perceived 'other,' behaviours that are expressed and negotiated through movement. It concludes with the entire cast circling and touching Lincoln's deathbed, then dissolving the divisions between the two armies as performers melt away towards the exit.³ Civil War historian Eric Foner notes an urgency around diversifying our knowledge of this particular historical moment, writing 'In public history...a large void still exists when it comes to slavery' (Foner 2002, xiii).⁴ *100 Migrations*, taking place mere days after Obama's election in a centre of the Old South built by enslaved people, invites participants and spectators to reimagine what Lincoln means in a time yearning to be post-racial but deeply tethered to a fraught past. The work's choreographic focus on touch foregrounds embodied emotional response as meaning-maker, connecting past, present and future through practices of moving and feeling together. Donald A. Ritchie defines public history as actions that 'shape public consciousness through the presentation of the past in public places' (Ritchie 2001, 93). In *100 Migrations*, the past, in this case the archival past of the Gettysburg Address text and the object of Lincoln's deathbed, is put in motion through the teaching and learning of gesture, advancing a double understanding of public history as history presented *in* public and history presented *by* the public.

While the primary organising conceit for the 100 bodies onstage is that of two armies representing North and South, many other groupings composed the work. Cognitive narratologist Patrick Hogan writes that when we encounter others in literary narratives, as in daily life, 'the first crucial division...is between us and them, in-group and out-group' (Hogan 2011, 37). This division is based in our experiences of the social world and need not be a hostile division, but is at its root a simple recognition of the myriad differences that liken people to others (or not). The consequences of in-group and out-group identification can be costly, however, to the social fabric, as Hogan notes, 'Our empathy is inhibited with respect to members of out-groups' (ibid.). Recent studies have shown that in-group/out-group identification is a core trait for humans, 'unique among living primates in the extent of their

preference for similar others' (Haun and Over 2013, 84–5). *100 Migrations* uses embodied emotional response to encourage empathy amongst new group formations that circumvent the potentially exclusionary boundaries of traditional group identities.

Jones and company disrupted habitual patterns of group formation from the beginning of the creative process. One of the first steps was the division of the 100 performers into groups of ten. Prior to breaking off into these small groups, performers were randomly assigned a word or phrase from the Gettysburg Address. Groups were organised solely by where members' text fell within the original speech, crossing lines of age, race, gender and ability. Jones's mission was to adopt an unbiased method for generating choreography: 'trying to be as inclusive as possible, it says loads about what the promise of Lincoln was' (*100 Migrations*). And indeed the work's most atypical inclusivity is across the boundaries of age and ability; it features several performers who make modifications to choreography based on what their bodies can achieve. Performers were instructed to 'make a shape with the sense of that word,' a gesture that could be easily repeated not only by a particular performer but also by the entire cast (*A Good Man* 2011). These gestures became 'The Hundreds,' with each group responsible for mastering its set of gestures. The gestures themselves tend towards simple abstractions of the participants' assigned words or phrases – 'battlefield,' 'unfinished,' 'devotion' and so on. Many involve a change in level, such as lunging towards the floor, accompanied by an arm gesture, such as the action of wrapping one's arms around a large basket. In teaching their fellow performers their gesture, participants specified the body parts, initiation, direction, and so on of the movement, and also its qualitative aspects, such as whether or not a given gesture should reach, flick or embrace. 'The Hundreds' demonstrate the foundational role of embodiment in making meaning, by filtering 'sense' – 'make a shape with the sense of that word' – through the body (Figure 12.1).

For local participant Lyn-Dell Wood, the group identification through gesture became a way to find belonging in the piece, signing her correspondence with the company 'Lyn-Dell 10 in group 1 w Tonio' (Lyn-Dell Wood, personal communication to Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company). Wood identifies herself by her group number but also her gesture number – 10 – and with the group's leader – company member Antonio Brown – suggesting that embodiment, emotion and social relationships intertwine within Wood's sense of participation, making a seemingly arbitrary numerical designation meaningful. In her signature,



Figure 12.1 The cast of *100 Migrations* performs 'The Hundreds' gesture sequence. Image courtesy of Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company.

Wood offers one possible response to a fundamental challenge of public history: ‘where is interpretive authority located? How are we to understand interpretations that are, essentially, collaboratively produced...whether the relationship is one of cooperation or tension?’ (Frisch 1990, xx). Her blended signature parses the multifaceted and atypical group membership fostered by this process, locating Wood as an individual making meaning in collaboration.

Touching the past, valuing the other

The other half of Hein and Singer’s formulation for empathic concern, valuing the other’s welfare, is enacted in *100 Migrations* through choreographies of risk that rely heavily on touch. During a recitation of Lincoln’s 1858 ‘House Divided’ address, groups perform phrases that include a member of the group being supported and lifted into the air. In some groups, the individual takes a flying leap into the clump, is caught and then lifted. In others, the individual simply falls backwards into the group, who catches and supports them. In a third variation, the individual, walking through space with the group, is touched by others and yields their weight, allowing them to be lifted continuously as the group moves. Group members become responsible for the physical welfare of one of their own, performing actions to secure that person’s safety that enact empathic concern. Significantly, these actions are accomplished through contact, through an embodied connection between group members that requires them to literally support each other through touch. The House Divided choreography centres on sequences of prosocial behaviour within the company groups, groups which embody public historian Richard Ned Lebow’s claim that ‘individuals are likely to belong to multiple memory communities, making contact and cooperation across these communities more feasible’ (Lebow 2008, 38). Contact across communities is literal in this section, as performers touch and share their weight regardless of their distinctions across age, ability, race and gender. Their choreographies counter the narration of Lincoln’s House Divided speech: the divisions structuring the groups are not based on any salient social rubric, and are porous. As performers run through the space, they cross paths with other groups, momentarily join their ranks and then return to their home group. This choreography proposes that maintaining division is a choice – the opposite choice, to seek union, is equally possible and does not require ignoring real distinctions in the human experience (Figure 12.2).



Figure 12.2 Cast members of *100 Migrations* perform a supported lift. Image courtesy of Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company.

Generating ‘The Hundreds’ involved participants’ memories of their encounters with the Gettysburg Address, with Lincoln broadly, and with the legacy of slavery in the U.S.A.. The performance foregrounds these memories when community members make their private histories public at the podiums flanking Lincoln’s deathbed. Including these individual stories is both an aesthetic choice and a strategy of public history, designed to ‘generat[e] from within...the authority to explore and interpret their own experience, experience traditionally invisible in formal history because of predictable assumptions about who and what matters’ (Frisch 1990, xxi). One participant, Doris, shares the story of her great-grandfather Paul, who served as a freed black soldier in the Civil War. Her narrative is paired with Jim Respass’s familial history, which centres on the Baltimore Plot, an assassination conspiracy headed by white supremacist Cipriano Ferrandini, later revealed to be Jim’s great-great-grandfather. Doris and Jim’s histories represent opposing sides of the conflict, and it is fitting that their stories take place within the context of the House Divided speech. During the House Divided recitation, company dancers Paul Matteson and Antonio Brown perform a duet, their racial differences mirroring the historical context for Lincoln’s speech. Collectively these choices respond to, though do not resolve, a common difficulty in public history, that of the public’s resistance to the historian’s reality that ‘there often exists more than one legitimate way of recounting past events’ (Foner 2002, xvii).

Our faculty of proprioception, of sensing where our bodies are in space and how to move them, is neurologically intertwined with our capacity for empathic response. Learning others’ gestures is a tangible way to empathise with their emotional states. A study by Antonio Damasio of persons with severe brain trauma found that ‘patients with damage to body-sensing regions of the cerebral cortex would not be capable of [empathy],’ and further, that ‘In the absence of this region [right somatosensory cortices], it is not possible for the brain to simulate other body states effectively’ (Damasio 2003, 116). Because of the embodied nature of emotion, body simulation (both purely neurological but also physicalised simulation, as in the repetition of gesture) is a primary conduit through which we sense others’ feelings, and the foundation of *100 Migrations*’ communities of gesture. These communities encourage empathic response for performers and spectators alike through their formation based in an aesthetic task rather than on neurotypical in-group, out-group distinctions. The choreographic process rejects traditional in-group, out-group distinctions as they often stymy attempts at engaging our capacity for empathy across lines of social identity. These activities occur within the event of performance, and may function as an intense rehearsal for the empathic exchanges that happen in the ‘real’ world.

The *100 Migrations* residency was one of many initiatives at the University of Virginia (UVA) that would revise and literally excavate its own history and the role of slavery therein.⁵ Directly preceding the residency, UCARE (University and Community Action for Racial Equity) was formed with the express goal ‘to further understand the legacy of slavery and segregation in the university’s history as well as in the Charlottesville community...to help the university and adjacent communities come together to identify actions that could improve their relationship and lead to reconciliation’ (Faulkner 2013, 5). Revising UVA’s history and repairing its relationship with the Charlottesville community were articulated as parallel goals wherein acknowledging past wrongs, specifically racial offenses, was a key strategy – and a necessary one, as several town-gown hall meetings revealed that many in the Charlottesville community referred to UVA not as the lofty ‘Academic Village,’ but rather as ‘The Plantation’ (ibid., 6). *100 Migrations* became part of this initiative, designed to help bridge ‘the gap between Charlottesville and UVA’ (Turner 2009, n.p.). Involving community members in generating, rather than responding to, formations of inclusive community found

its expression in making dance. *100 Migrations* choreographs the task of forming a more perfect union, and offered a democratic vision of community wherein embodied emotional response is routed towards inclusion and concern for differential others.

Notes

- 1 Johnson's 2014 book *Morality for Humans: Ethical Understanding from the Perspective of Cognitive Science* defends an interdisciplinary approach to explanatory frameworks, arguing that 'our best strategy of inquiry is to look for converging evidence generated by different methods' (22). See Bruce McConachie's "Reenacting Events to Narrate Theatre History" for the argument that historiographical approaches of reenactment and simulation are empathic experiences, and that empathy is stock-in-trade for the historian.
- 2 The notion of emotions as a causal force, inciting us to literal action, is explained by the neuroscience of emotions summarised by Johnson in chapter 3 of *Meaning of the Body*. Johnson states that emotions function to appraise specific situations an organism finds itself in, 'often initiating actions geared to our fluid functioning within our environment. It is in this sense that emotional responses can be said to move us to action' (61).
- 3 The work was initially to be performed on the famous UVa lawn; on the day of the performance, it was rained out and relocated to the basketball stadium.
- 4 Critical studies of the relationship between slavery and UVa are few: an unpublished 2003 paper by Charlottesville, VA historian Gayle Schulman and a senior thesis from 2006 by UVa student Catherine S. Neal. See Faulkner, *Slavery at the University of Virginia: A Catalogue of Current and Past Initiatives* for these references.
- 5 Initiatives included archaeological excavations of Pavilion 4 (one of the University's original structures used as slave quarters) and of 67 grave markers near the University Cemetery, likely those of slaves. See Faulkner (2013) for details on these projects.

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