

Choreographing Immersion: Negotiating Borders, Difference and Power By Thea Stanton: Artist Statement/Provocation.

At the beginning of my research into immersive choreography I was asked where I position myself in relation to my work and barely needing a moment to reflect, I answered 'on the borders'. People feel on the outside for a whole range of reasons but being on the borders is something I've particularly associated with my identity. I was adopted at six months, from Chile, and brought to the UK. I have two extraordinary parents who I could not love more, however, they are white British and it took me a long time to accept that I was indigenous, brown and could still belong to them. Consequently, for my childhood and twenties I was confused by a range of different borders manifesting. Negotiating my indigenous heritage and the colour of my skin with my life of white privilege. Multiple continents, multiple sets of parents, multiple identities all entangled on the site of my body.

When I was exploring this question of choreographic positionality in my immersive practice I discovered a pioneering piece of Chicana literature by Gloria Anzaldúa, entitled *La Frontera* which translates as *The Border*ⁱ. Anzaldúa describes a border as 'the lifeblood of two worlds, merging to form a third – a border culture'ⁱⁱ. Scholars influenced by her work describe borderlands as 'sites that can enable those dwelling there to negotiate the contradictions and tensions found in diverse cultural, class, and other settings'ⁱⁱⁱ (Villa, 2003).

Comparably, the negotiation of borders feels relevant when considering immersion, which dismantles traditional performative borders, with audience and performance sharing the same space, whether that be actual, sonic or virtual or any other realisation of space.

Initially, immersion became important to me because it felt like it was about crossing a border, moving from the edge of somewhere to becoming deeply part of something. However, what has emerged from my research into both choreographic immersion and also my choreographic identity, is that a powerful immersive experience can be one that embraces borders, that like Anzaldúa's borderland, can operate as a site to negotiate difference.

My research into immersive choreography began with a question. The pioneering immersive scholar Josephine Machon stated that 'bodies are prioritised'^{iv} ergo why could one not create immersion through the lens of choreography and being a body? Could choreography cultivate those same sensations of being in the moment, present actively engaged that all the immersive productions I had seen to date had invoked?

In parallel to these reflections, through my work at the Independent Theatre Council I became aware of growing sector wide concern, as immersive performances grew in scale and popularity, voiced aptly by Lyn Gardner's question, 'Is immersive theatre growing up or growing too big, too quickly?'^v. With the blurring of traditional performer/audience borders and the sharing of agency and space, I observed issues of access, boundaries and consent emerging.

I began to explore whether an embodied approach to creating immersion might present solutions to the growing problems in this area, which in many ways reflect more broad societal concerns relating the distribution of power. I categorised these into two areas.

1. Boundaries

Returning to that notion of crossing borders in immersion, what if the word border was replaced with boundary? Or personal boundary...?

Suddenly the risks of immersion become painfully exposed.

In her article [‘Immersive theatre may be sexy – but we need to start talking about consent’](#) Emma Burnell describes a one on one performance she experienced as an audience member where a male actor stripped in front of her^{vi}.

Through my work at ITC, in the wake of #metoo we had numerous complaints come in from performers who had been approached inappropriately or harassed by overly emboldened audience members. These performers felt that they had not been properly prepared or protected to navigate the challenging, shifting, situations that immersive productions cultivate.

In *‘Immersive Embodiment: Theatres of Mislocalized Sensation* Liam Jarvis draws a connection between the inappropriate crossing of boundaries and what he coins ‘the paradox of immersion’^{vii}. This is the juxtaposition of the here and now-ness of an immersive experience and there and then of the dramatic fictional situation. What that means is that an immersive audience is asked to deeply engage and become intoxicated with their embodied experience of the present, and at the same time, are de-individuated and transported to a fictional dramatic situation, such as a speakeasy bar to use Immersive Great Gatsby as an example.

Through this structure the fictional situation has the potential to both encourage and shroud heightened inappropriate social behaviour. One incident reported by a number of sources was the sexual harassment of the performers of Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More*, by fantasy emboldened de-individuated audiences wearing masks^{viii}. This example highlights the significant risks around heightened embodied states and shifting boundaries in immersion.

2. Whose body?

Whilst immersion is an artform that foregrounds embodied experiences it’s important to question which bodies? And whose bodies?

Many immersive sets are elaborate, multi-layered, designed to fully transport the audience and give them freedom to roam about. Except, not everyone can. Having attended a multitude of immersive events with my father who is a wheelchair user, I have some understanding of the limitations that these elaborate sets can bring with them to anyone who does not fit a narrow concept of an ‘able body’.

Likewise, extreme use of sound and lighting as immersive tools can alienate neurodiverse audiences. Furthermore, if as immersive scholar Adam Alston states, ‘Immersive theatre is ‘distinguished by the sensory acts that it demands of audiences, such as touching and being

touched...'^{ix}, surely one has to be mindful of the individuals one is touching? It is not the audience engaging in sensory acts, it is different people, with different lived experiences.

Looking at bodily encounters in immersion through a feminist and post-colonial lens there are important questions that need to be asked, to quote Ahmed and Stacey, 'How does this inter-embodiment involve the social differentiation between bodily others?'^x Meaning if difference is not acknowledged and embedded in the immersive practice then how can one truly negotiate and care for the 'boundaries' of the individuals passing through the immersive experience?

I decided to focus my practical research on immersion of 'the here and now' and not to add the extra layer of the fictional 'there and then'. Linked to this engagement with the 'here and now' is the immersive notion of Praesence, a term referred to by a number of immersive scholars and described by Machon as a state of 'meaningful embodied attention to presence'^{xi}.

Decolonising immersive scholarship also rejects a fictional world in favour of remaining in the present. Royona Mitra argues for the need to envision immersion beyond physical interactivity on the part of the audience, focusing instead on embodied states that can be triggered through the use of non-western Cultural forms, an approach that potentially is more accessible for different types of bodies, brains and cultures, and allows us to rethink the definition and manifestation of borders in immersion.^{xii}

Reflecting on both the decolonising approaches and the concept of Praesence, I concluded that my choreographic approach should use an embodied sensation of the 'here and now' as the transportive immersive element.

Holding onto those ideas I began working with two dancers individually

We started by asking to two questions.

1. How might we generate the immersive here and now through movement?
2. How might a dancer generate a state of that is porous in such a way that an audience watching feels invited to cross borders to share in that embodied experience?

To explore these questions, we developed Here and Now scores that had three intentions for the dancers within them.

1. Come into or arrive in the here and now
2. Open your borders and become porous
3. Embrace a reaction back and forth between environment and the inside of the body.

The first thing we learnt from our explorations was that the here and now is not an isolated vacuum. Asking someone to engage deeply in the here and now means for them to engage in all the here and nows they have experienced up to that moment. This emphasised the responsibility I carried as a choreographer working with dancers holding their embodied histories and allowing their borders to become more available to the environment and potentially other bodies. The practice of being able to actively but gently hold someone else's truth or experience became essential.

The next learning point brought the notion of borders back into the foreground. We observed that a lot of our discoveries happened through the periphery of the skin. We began to perceive it as the outer covering of the body that to quote Sue Cataldi's 1993 book *Emotion Depth and Flesh* both 'protects us from others and exposes us to them'^{xiii}. Thinking through the skin allowed us to reflect on the dancer's bodily engagement not as an object or a product to be sold as an experience, but as inter-embodiment, inter-corporeality, a mode of being-with and being-amongst.

As we worked more deeply into these discoveries, we observed that the immersive 'here and now' didn't work as a state, or as a fixed product or aim. Whenever we tried to this approach both the dancers moved either as if they were in slow motion or wearing heavy clothing. It was as if the exertion or focus to hold the here and now was weighing them down.

To try and resolve this I returned to the notion of inter-embodiment.

The etymological root of inter is means into or of the earth...

It was at this point that I began to turn towards my own roots and the cultural borders in my body, looking towards indigenous theory. Broadly speaking, Native American and Indigenous knowledge and experience is fundamentally procedural. As an example, indigenous language tends to be verb-based. In *Braiding Sweetgrass* Robin Wall-Kimmerer speaks of Saturday not being a noun, but that their native translation of Saturday was 'to be Saturday'^{xiv}. Native American scholar Shay Welch in *The Phenomenology of Performative Knowledge System*, elaborates further, 'it's language is verb-based because the worldview is fundamentally grounded in dynamicism. So coming to know another entity is best approached as an inductive process'.^{xv}

Perceiving the immersive here and now as a process, as opposed to a product was the breakthrough the research needed.

Interestingly shortly before this breakthrough I introduced an exercise in our rehearsals where I asked both dancers to amend the scores. What was significant was that certain words began to appear in both dancers' amended scores. Words like with, amongst, next to, around, through, alongside. Additionally descriptive verbs were introduced such as trickle, gush, skip and flow. Subconsciously the immersive here and now was already moving towards becoming a dynamic process.

This shift in turn affected my perception of the role of the choreographer. As we moved towards an immersive choreographic language that was process oriented, my need for control became less. Instead, supported by a framework of indigenous philosophy and critical theory, I have turned towards movement principles that embrace a decentralisation of decision making, such as Contact Improvisation and Passing Through^{xvi}.

Continuing my reflection on 'whose bodies?', I have begun to expand the notion of an immersive process spreading beyond the borders of the performance and rehearsal. I believe one's practice as a choreographer should begin as soon as one approaches a performer – not once you get in the dance studio. If I claim to be interested in democracy, embracing difference, care, and inclusivity with my immersive practice, but don't act on these values with how I advertise work, how I contract, transparency and fairness with pay, risk assessment and pastoral care – then I believe the practice is incomplete.

Through all this research I have begun to develop the role of a fluid choreographer, a figure who embraces the potential of borderlands, who can cross onto both sides of the performance (audience and dancers), who's most important job is to nurture and cultivate a framework of respect dignity and a balance of power to support border experiences in an immersive process.

ⁱ Anzaldúa, Gloria, (1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera*, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.

ⁱⁱ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Naples, Nancy, (2010). *Borderlands Studies and Border Theory: Linking Activism and Scholarship for Social Justice*, *Sociology Compass*, 4, 505-518. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2010.00290.x>

^{iv} Machon, Josephine, (2016). *Watching, Attending, Sense-making: Spectatorship in Immersive Theatres*. *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 4, 34-48. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2016-0004>

^v Gardner, Lynn, (April 11, 2018). *Is immersive theatre growing up or growing too big, too quickly? The Stage*.

^{vi} Burnell, Emma, (28 May, 2018). *Immersive theatre may be sexy – but we need to start talking about consent*. *The Independent*

^{vii} Jarvis, Liam (2019). *Immersive Embodiment: Theatres of Mislocalized Sensation*. London: Springer Nature, 7.

^{viii} Jarvis, *Immersive Embodiment: Theatres of Mislocalized Sensation*, 9.

^{ix} Adam Alston, (2013). *Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value: Risk, agency and responsibility in immersive theatre*. *Performance Research*, 18, 128-138. ISSN 1352-8165.

^x Ahmed, Sara and Stacey, Jackie, (2001). *Thinking Through the Skin*, London: Routledge, 6

^{xi} Machon, Josephine, (2016). *Watching, Attending, Sense-making: Spectatorship in Immersive Theatres*. *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 4, 34-48. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2016-0004>

^{xii} Mitra, Royona, (2016). *Decolonizing Immersion*, *Performance Research*, 21, 89-100, DOI: [10.1080/13528165.2016.1215399](https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2016.1215399)

^{xiii} Cataldi, Sue, (1993). *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh: A Study of Sensitive Space: Reflections on Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Embodiment*, New York: State University of New York Press, 145

^{xiv} Wall-Kimmerer, Robin, (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass*, London: Penguin, 54.

^{xv} Welch, Shay, (2019). *The Phenomenology of a Performative Knowledge System*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 47.

^{xvi} Passing Through is a movement composition technique developed by choreographer David Zambrano. In the making of movement compositions, Zambrano focuses on creating and developing the dynamics for complex systems to present leadership in the form of a group web. The “passing through” takes students through various exercises to manifest that same philosophy. The group moves constantly, transforming the environment of the dance.