

Dancing through History
Co-teaching History Course with Delicious Movement:
Japan and the Atomic Bomb
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By Eiko Otake and Yusukei Murayama

Editor's introduction to "Dancing through history" and "On movement"

In an effort to contextualize my piece "On movement," I asked Eiko Otake, a visiting dance artist and choreographer who is co-teaching HIST381: Japan and the Atomic Bomb this spring (she will also continue to teach next fall), to submit a piece that explored the unconventional nature of a history course composed of a traditional seminar and an experiential, improvisational movement lab. Eiko, who forms half of the internationally acclaimed collaborative dance partnership 'Eiko & Koma,' brings a unique dimension to the academic experience, drawing on her extensive performance history to inform the point of intersection between experimental movement and academia. While I have asked Eiko to expand on the course itself, and specifically on the role of movement in a class centered on the atomic bombings of Japan, readers will also benefit greatly from exposure to some of the guiding principles behind 'Eiko & Koma.' Outlined in the following is a seed from which not only Eiko & Koma's performance pieces grow, but a point of origin which sheds light on the inspiration behind the formation of a unique course based in the collaboration between history and movement:

Through art making, we desire to affirm life in the context of the flow of time. This is an ongoing desire from our past works such as 'Land', 'Wind' and 'River.' Our lives are one point in time, time that extends as an enormous distance to the past and to the future, much as a river extends from upstream to downstream. The "scenery" people see at a given moment is part of the flow, and so is everybody's life. Devolving in this flow, we want audiences to see a landscape eons older than the one we all occupy. Humans were once embryos and so was every thing on the earth and beyond. Koma and I want our audience members to activate their imagination biologically and artistically.

*Once actively imagined and kinetically felt by performers and audience alike, our unconscious memory brings forth elemental emotions that connect us all. We want to remember that both technological advances and the consequent arrogance of people are but recent products of our history. Throughout the overwhelming part of our common history, to live has been to see others die and to anticipate our own death close by. This still remains so in many regions of the world. While people should of course work to lessen the suffering of others, we should not mask every pain as though it were a blemish to be disguised or swept away quickly. Pain is one of our truths.
-- Eiko & Koma*

Yusukei Murayama

Dancing through history
Eiko Otake

I am a 57 year-old dancer, a working independent artist, and an immigrant who grew up in postwar Japan. After three and a half decades of choreographing pieces and performing them around the world as Eiko & Koma, I arrived at Wesleyan in 2005 as a visiting artist and a member of the Center for Creative Research (a group of eleven experienced choreographers whose bodies of work are based on creative research). There, I met Professor William Johnston who, upon hearing that I had studied artistic representations of the atomic bombings as a part of my creative research and assisted in creating the first course on the subject at NYU, invited me to co-teach a course about the atomic bombings. The idea of a formal historian co-teaching a history course with a dancer was unheard of, and for that reason, I accepted his invitation. As a freelance artist, I seldom say no to an interesting offer.

The dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan remains one of the most controversial events of the twentieth century. People frequently ask whether they were justified. That question, however, is not the main focus of this course. We wanted to look at the subject of the atomic bombing from different perspectives and using a multi-disciplinary approach. Thus, in addition to studying political and scientific history, our syllabus includes literary works and films that describe the human experiences of the atomic bombings. The power of the victims' voices and the weight of their experience overwhelm students, who are often moved by a particular artistic voice. The tremendous distance in time and space between themselves and the bomb victims, however, also makes students realize how impossible it is to "understand" someone else's pain, especially when such pains are so incomprehensible and massive. The fact that the atomic bombs were designed and produced on American soil and were dropped by the U.S. military adds more pain and anger for some American students. Students are also shocked to learn that at and near the epicenter, people and other beings evaporated instantly in the immense heat and the power of the blast, sometimes leaving only shadows burned into the ruins. We then realize that everything we read from the victims were from the people who experienced the bomb at its periphery. At and near ground zero, at the moment the bomb exploded there was only silence. That realization is profound.

Movement study is grounded in the concepts of Eiko & Koma's "Delicious Movement" workshop, which, I believe, is emphatically noncompetitive and appropriate for all levels of ability and training. We move to actively forget the clutter of our lives so that we can fully "taste" both body and mind. The space and time continuum in which we move is not a white canvas that stands alone and empty. The here and now is a continuous part of a larger geography (space) and history (time) and as such is dense with memories, shadows, and possibilities. It is in this body, space, and time that our learning takes place. In a mutually supportive environment, the movement lab provides an occasion for students to develop artistic and emotional rigor by asking the following questions: What is it to forget, remember, mourn, and pray? How do humans transcend violence and loss? How does art respond to violence? Does art help us survive? How does being a mover, a dancer, affect our learning and creativity?

In the two-hour movement session I try to give a “workout” that is thematically guided, often using seemingly inane exercises such as “sleeping,” “logging,” “dreaming,” “resting while moving,” “partner work,” “invisible partner,” “remembering,” “survey,” “flower,” “egg,” and “surrender,” just to give a few examples. I choose not to explicitly link the movement study to the content of the course or reading materials. But I do aim to create a gray zone in which students are aware of what they are experiencing, but are not as critical, purposeful or product-oriented as in our daily lives. Often the aim is just learning how to reside in our body with simple movement instructions or a few imaginary suggestions to position where we are. I hope to provide students a place where they can find support for their sense of selves. Doing this together also creates a bond and personal connection between students themselves and students and instructors, that is hard to attain while just sitting in a seminar or lecture room. Sometimes I lead a workout that seems to be very specific in its relation to the reading material, such as “maggots,” an image that often appears in atomic bomb literature. Asked to embody the movement of maggots, the purpose here is for students to explore different points of view. Maggots are disgusting from a human’s perspective, but in a broader sense they also have individual lives and are watching out for their own survival. In this way I want to give different dimensions to the students’ understanding.

As an artist, I feel my job in a university is to contribute to the artistic and emotional rigor of a student’s education. Atomic bomb literature, particularly the works by the bomb victims, poses challenges. Whether feeling too much or feeling not enough in response to the material, students have to struggle to understand what humans are capable of doing.

In all, it is beautiful to struggle and question one’s empathy. It is beautiful to be moved by a small sentence here or a big thought there in the midst of the ruins. No matter how difficult the materials are emotionally, when moved by the artist’s work, the students are left feeling positive about themselves. In addition, in shared movement and moments of suspension (lingering in non-movement, discovering), students explore the space of our shared humanity...our bodies, breath, warmth, and time. These bodily realizations help students extend themselves further in grappling with an atrocity so far removed from their temporal space.

Many students wonder how movement studies would relate or contribute to more academic study. My answer has been, “I do not know. It is an experiment.” This is my way of encouraging students to give the maximum effort in finding his or her own connection. However, I kind of know how important it is for a young person to *rediscover* a body and strive for his/her own voice. It was important for me. As a dancer who taught movement classes all over the world, I also *know* that movement cannot lie and that a dancer (in the widest definition) can be extremely articulate in her wanting, learning, and expressing. I also am truly interested in discovering what each student can make of “delicious movement.” Teaching thus is my research.

Below is an excerpt from one journal entry submitted by a student about the first movement lab:

In our everyday life, it is very rare that we perform an action that is purposeless or lacking a goal. However, the elegantly simple “sleeping” movement, where we moved as if sleeping, forced me to abandon my normal mindset, allowing me to concentrate on how I was moving, and most importantly, made me focus on what that movement felt like. These motions were meditative

and relaxed me in an unexpected way. For whatever reason, it flushed away thoughts that would normally clutter my mind and this helped me become more attuned to what my other classmates were doing and saying. Most notably, the mindfulness I gained did not simply slip away the moment the class was over.

I have attempted to apply a similar type of mindfulness and awareness that I experienced in the movement lab to Dr. Hachiya's diary and the other course materials. I read Dr. Hachiya's harrowing account slowly and thoroughly. I resist the temptation to research the prognosis of radiation sickness because I try to be as mystified about its development as Hachiya himself was. I read his diary day by day – the same way Dr. Hachiya experienced it.

The other thing that surprised me was how natural the lab movement felt. I have never been in a class that requires its students to interact so intimately with one another and in a manner that is not strictly academic. During the movement lab, while I was lying next to my partner who was a classmate I had never talked to before and telling him in a hushed tone what I noticed about the way he moved, I was surprised that I did not find the interaction strange or forced. It felt perfectly comfortable. We were both calm and I felt a simple, but solid bond form at that moment.

On Movement

Adapted from journal submissions for HIST381: Japan and the Atomic Bomb
Yusukei Murayama

During the “sleeping” exercise in the movement lab for HIST381: Japan and the Atomic Bomb, I felt incredibly whole and present. My body had a weight of its own not measured in the scales of my mind, and my consciousness was no longer trapped in my head, wrapped in ideas, drowning in abstraction, kicking, biting, scratching, swelling, bruising against an externally influenced but internally constructed conception of self. Lying on the ground, feeling each point of contact, feeling my body's weight, the weight of my arm, my elbow, fingertip...then feeling just weight, not confining it to a knuckle, not defining and limiting by breaking apart whole into anatomical parts, not succumbing to the dictates of structure, but understanding the sensation of weight as an affirmation of presence, of being...I forgot that I could feel this way.

I have been thinking about the intersection of history and movement, especially in light of the readings and the difficulty associated with communicating experience through language. Language's capacity to transmit experience rests on several assumptions: one is that participants recognize and adhere to accepted structure, and another is that words, functioning much like the Jungian 'archetype,' have meaning precisely because they connect to a shared experience/understanding of the thing expressed. However, this 'shared experience' is inextricably bound to language and its structural limitations. An idea or experience which attempts to travel from one person to another through this medium must express itself through

this 'shared experience' and is thus necessarily transformed to a degree. As such, the inherent confines of language alter the substance of initial experience.

What I am gathering from class readings is that the initial experience of the blast is fundamentally incomprehensible; those at the center disappeared, leaving behind shadows burned into the ruins, while those on the periphery were exposed to a force so powerful as to make a mockery of shared experience. Not only is this event so far removed in a linear timeline, but the unfathomable scale (the bomb over Hiroshima exploded with the force of over 15,000 tons of TNT) renders an incomplete conception of the blast at best. The prospect of being able to reach through *hibakusha* writing and touch the essence of their initial experience seems impossible given the transformative influence of language.

However, as I move in lab, language falls away and my conscious, critical, analytical mind takes a deep breath and exhales into slumber. My body opens and I begin to feel my own physical humanity reflected in those around me. On this most basic plane of shared bodily awareness, the limitations of my rational academic mind are simultaneously exposed and complemented. Movement fills the gaps with the understanding that the body has the potential to give form and depth to the letters on a page by revealing a more fundamental plane of human experience. In this manner, movement gives limitless dimension to the common ground of shared understanding upon which so much of communication rests. In moving and reconnecting not only with my own body but with a shared humanity, I feel that I was able to access greater depths in the readings. Confined to language, the meaning which can be transmitted should, by virtue of the fact that language is a product of structure and therefore subject to its constraints, be similarly essentialized and limited; however, by establishing an understanding of the commonality of human form (which transcends time and space) as the common ground upon which to give voice to and receive *hibakusha*'s words, it felt as if the words were able to attain so much more meaning by resonating in that shared physical space of the human body.

The movement section of the course gave form to a feeling I have been having over the past years of an undefined and yet growing feeling of tension in my body, of something non-physical in origin, and yet physically existing and non-existent, an absence that somehow weighed heavily. During the "kindergarten" exercise (where we started moving with each fingertip as a distinct entity with wants that were at times independent from the body), as I became aware of my fingertips and relinquished cognitive control, it felt as if the blissful physicality of existence and motion allowed a slow trickle of pain to escape. While I recognize that this form of movement is a means to express and feel things that cannot be contained by rational structure, I did not realize at that moment that my conscious structure, so weakened, would begin to allow things to escape which I have struggled so hard to contain. I will attempt to explain.

I have always felt a certain tension between the flow of emotion and the rigidity of structure, of rationality, reason, cognition, academia, society, relationships *et cetera*, and to a certain extent I feel as though participation and inclusion in society (structure) is predicated on being a social being, which I have traditionally understood as something necessarily contained, a social contract in the vein of Rousseau, which holds that inclusion is contingent upon relinquishing certain rights and controls to an external body (state, society, *et cetera*). Ignoring the specificity of Rousseau's application to the State, I understand this relationship as a more fundamental

tension between an abstract/archetypal conception of self (which I would argue is forged largely by social expectations, values, *et cetera*) which, driven by a hammer of “shoulds” (I should do this, I should be this way) struggles to erect a constructed self, while the vast undefined expanse that this structure necessarily excludes by virtue of its walls, a swirling, pulling, engulfing mass, always succeeds in slipping through the fingers of the hand my mind built. My father always said there is no place for emotion in rationality, so I think I have placed so much faith in my rational structure because of him and the way I was raised. However, I am starting to realize that this raging, undefined mass cannot, and in fact should not, be contained by the structure I have built. But at the same time I feel that I absolutely need some form of structure to survive. What am I (or humanity for that matter) if not the being I choose to express? Neither extreme in a spectrum of rationality on the one, and emotion on the other, is the answer. But I don’t know what to do with the feelings that the movement class is letting escape. One of my best friends growing up, Ari Brown-Weeks, was killed in Iraq on September 10, 2007, and when we read excerpts from the *hibakusha* writer Tamiki Hara’s “Summer Flowers” and “The Land of Heart’s Desire” aloud during the lab, those words were connecting to that pain, which is close to the worst I have ever known, and therefore what I have tried the hardest to contain. I realized after Tuesday’s class that this process of dealing with pain has its limitations, and in fact might have reached a critical mass; I hold so much pain in my body, and I am afraid of letting the trickle grow into the torrent I know it can be.

Movement for me is an outlet, an unnoticed gap in the wall, a previously undefined space in which I feel truly connected, where the weight of my being is shared and reflected in the bodies around me, where I can feel intimately aware of a shared humanity and almost primal belonging which gives a much needed human dimension to my academic studies.