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EXPERIENCES WITH *BODYVOICE IMPROV*: DIALOGUES BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

BY

VICTORIA GERTRUD THOMS

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Experiences with *bodyvoice improv*: Dialogues Between Theory and Practice submitted by Victoria Gertrud Thoms in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Dr. Debra Shogan

Dr. Marsha Padfield

Dr. Marilyn Assheton-Smith

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Abstract

This research project is a personal and critical reflection on my involvement with *bodyvoice improv*, a women's dance improvisation collective I originated in the Fall of 1995. As a person who had trained toward a professional career in modern dance, my desire was to found a group that would work to question methods within dominant dance practices that had been personally oppressive. The dominant dance practices I was concerned with questioning were those which asserted the value and elitism of technical training, perpetuated the creative primacy of the choreographer, and sustained and fostered male privilege. Using postmodern and feminist theory I reflect on the experiences that have influenced my understanding of *bodyvoice* during my three year membership.

My examination of these experiences are grouped into five chapters. These chapters chronologically discuss: 1) a historical account of my experiences with *bodyvoice*; 2) a discussion of the problems that arose in realizing a collective say environment because of my hierarchial position as teacher and originator; 3) an examination of the ways in which the workings of *bodyvoice* both disrupt and support dominant ways of knowing; 4) an examination of the discrepancies between postmodern and feminist theory and the practices in *bodyvoice*; 5) a conclusion which indicates the importance of research that crosses and complicates boundaries between theory and practice.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the members of bodyvoice both past and present. I have cultivated a deep regard for my association with its members both in our dance improvisation work and our collective decision making. The importance of this association has at times exceeded my ability to fully describe my feelings in words.

I would also like to thank Debra Shogan for her time and patience in helping me realize and bring this project to completion. Her counsel and advice has been invaluable.

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Introducing the Project

In the Fall of 1995 I started a woman's dance improvisation collective that would eventually become called *bodyvoice improv*. I started this group as a way to question methods within dominant dance practices that I found oppressive. The dominant dance practices I was concerned with questioning were those which asserted the value and elitism of technical training, perpetuated the creative primacy of the choreographer, and sustained and fostered male privilege. I believed that the creation of a group whose members would collectively make decisions and whose experiences with dance and dance movement were diverse would begin to call these hierarchies into question.

Also informing my desire for this type of investigation was my emerging interest in identity and subject formation discussed by feminist scholars involved in poststructuralism and gender theory. My hope was that the group would begin to critically examine through performance how individual identity is intimately entwined with gendered subjectivity through movement - whether in everyday life or on the stage. This creative endeavour was to initiate a questioning of the status quo. In examining these theoretical ideas in a practical setting I felt that we could investigate and create alternative dance situations and in doing so, mobilise an active questioning of dominant representational practices.

My desire to initiate a questioning of dominant dance formations emerged a few years ago while I was involved with technical dance training. At this time I was introduced to a critical theoretical approach called postmodernism. This introduction was very important because it uncovered the possibility to begin to question the oppressive dance practices that I was experiencing.

Postmodern theory is an investigation into, and a critique of, dominant forms of consciousness and knowing. Postmodern theory argues that dominant forms of investigating and understanding the world (such as the sciences, law and justice and artistic production, to name a few) are not ahistorical, original and unique. These dominant forms do not exist as impartial arbitrators and observers of culture and society, but rather structure the very consciousness of society and culture. Similarly, these dominant forms maintain their status because they maintain the guise of impartiality.[1]

An introduction to these ideas led me to explore the social and artistic inequalities in dance which I believed were particularly unfair and restrictive. These inequalities involved choreographic privilege, male privilege and the privilege afforded to technical prowess. For example, it had been my experience that choreographers

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For more information about the different types of aesthetic practices and representations defined as postmodernism, see; Postmodernism: A Reader ed. Thomas Docherty, especially Parts 3 and 5, Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation. Ed. Brian Wallis. , The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture. Ed. Hal Foster. The Politics of Postmodernism by Linda Hutcheon is both an excellent debate about what can be classified as postmodernism as well as a discussion of the aesthetic characteristics that are practised in relation to postmodern theory.

create choreographic images of what they see as artistically and aesthetically worthwhile and for which they receive all the creative credit. This situation has devalued the inclusion and recognition of the creative vision of the dancers working under the choreographer's supervision. More often than not, dancers are valued because of their technical skill in realizing the choreographer's vision rather than creatively contributing to it. This happens even while dancers play an important role in the rehearsal process, sometimes being instructed by the choreographer to come up with their own steps, which the choreographer later incorporates into his or her vision.

Additionally I have felt that dance culture creates an ultra competitiveness between women that perpetuates women's marginalization and oppression. This competitiveness is fuelled by the relatively small number of professional paying jobs available and the large number of women training to be in the profession. Even while there have been more women than men in the dance circles I have frequented, men more frequently hold positions of power, such as choreographer and artistic director. Also, male dancers are given advancement more readily, while usually less technically skilled. This combination has seemed especially problematic to me because my friendships and interactions with other female dancers have been tempered with a competitive edge rather than a cooperative relationship that benefitted our mutual and individual successes.

Alternatively, in the technical dance training that I was doing, I began feeling inadequate about my body weight and shape because I could not live up to what was

considered the ideal body. This inadequacy was also felt because I had a difficult time performing some of the more technically oriented steps. This deficiency began to override the feelings of joy and empowerment for which I originally started dancing.

Postmodern theory allowed me to view these feelings of deficiency from an alternative perspective. From this alternative perspective I began to see that I could question and change the things that I found oppressive in dance. This mode of theoretical enquiry suggests that inequality is structured and legitimized through the misconception, both within dance disciplines, and in a larger cultural understanding, that dance is 'natural', intuitive and unintellectual. This is perceived to be the "truth" of dance. The normalization of this perspective means that dance then becomes unchangeable and outside the realm of critique.[2]

From this perspective, the "truth" of dance helped to consolidate the creative dominance of the choreographer and the value of technical excellence. This "truth" devalued the inclusion and recognition of the creative vision of the dancers working under the choreographer's supervision. More often than not, dancers were valued because of their technical skill in realizing the choreographer's vision rather than creatively contributing to it. In this way, the value placed on technical skill and virtuosity created both a disregard and marginalization of those that could not

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For more specific analyses of postmodern theory as it relates to dance see; Bodies of the Text: Dance as Theory, Literature as Dance. ed. Ellen Goellner and Jacqueline Murphy, Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, Culture and Power. ed. Susan Foster, "Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies" by Jane Desmond.

correctly perform the steps and the impression that the skilled dancer was valued because they were only bodies.

Further exploration of the impact of these "truths" led me to literature dealing with feminist theory as influenced by postmodernism. This postmodern feminist theory suggests that there are no essential or universal truths. Rather, what is proposed is that a judgement of truth is provisional, dependent upon individuals' experiences with gender, race, class and social grouping. Notions of what constitute "truth" are therefore created through social and cultural experiences rather than preexisting them as something universal and unchanging. "Truth" then, is social and culturally 'constructed'. With this added perspective I began to see how "truth" claims in dance have also been propped up in a complex way by popular opinions about femininity and masculinity.

Through these processes I began to recognize that if "truths" are constructed then the dominant practices within dance could be changed. I felt that understanding and advocating social theory within dance could create a dance practice more willing to analyse and transform itself - both through its social interactions and through the artistic production that dance created. [3]

These ideas synthesized when I began to examine the works of choreographer

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For a more thorough discussion of these ideas see; Judith Butler "Contingent Foundations" and Gender Trouble, Jane Flax "The End of Innocence" and Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West, Diane Fuss Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference Peggy Phelan Unmarked: The Politics of Performance and Joan W Scott "On Experience."

Pina Bausch. Pina Bausch is an avant garde modern dance choreographer working out of Germany. Her choreography is largely known for the way in which it disrupts and questions dominant representational practices. A piece by Bausch might include: the presences of a live hippopotamus on stage, dancers moving into the audience to perform, music supplied by a portable radio on stage that dancers will turn off and on randomly, and nudity. In his analysis of Bausch's work, David Price blends social constructionist arguments with Judith Butler's concept of performativity. Butler suggests that gender is constructed through a repetition of stylized, genderized movements. The body is not born into a stable identity or locus of agency from which it acts but is manufactured into an identity, constructed by those very movements and actions (Butler, *Performative Acts*).

Bausch echoed these ideas in her work. Using socially inscribed systems of movement, such as walking, greeting, embracing and waiting, Bausch manipulated accepted temporal and spatial conventions, juxtaposing them with simultaneous, presumably incongruous, movement activities. Through these manipulations the movements lost their perceived authenticity and their coded social meanings, exposing them as manufactured rather than 'natural'. In using these choreographic devices, Price suggests that Bausch's choreographic representations opened up ways of exploring gender as socially created, rather than as natural and abiding. Because these movements are created rather than natural, they are implicated within the power structures from which they arise. As he writes, "the writing of the politics of gender reveals itself in performative and expressive acts"(324). Bausch's choreographic

representations politicized the movements the body "performs." This theory driven analysis about the potential to undermine dominant practices suggested to me that the practical application of theoretical ideas could be an important tool for initiating social change.

Price's positive assessment of the socially transformative potential of Bausch's choreography led me to believe that the process by which Bausch worked could also be socially transformative. Therefore, I investigated her directorship of the Wuppertal Dance Theatre in Germany. I looked for the same subversive and progressive relationship in her process of creation as I had found in her choreography. I was disillusioned when I discovered that Bausch worked from some of the same normative and restrictive processes that I felt were unfair and oppressive. Bausch did not problematize the socialization process in dance which focuses on aggrandising and worshipping the choreographer as 'genius', and disallows the recognition and contribution of the dancers to the creative process. I felt disheartened and became sceptical of Price's positive evaluation of Bausch. Was he aware of the process under which this 'subversive' work was created? Did the inequitable nature of the process matter to him? Can one condone status quo processes when it makes ground breakingly subversive representations possible? Can there be a symbiotic relationship between critical production and critical products?

My response to the seemingly incommensurable rift between a traditional production and critical product was to set about getting a group together that would explore these issues. My hope was that this group could create an effective political

questioning both in terms of our process as well as our product. First, the group would question process. We would seek to challenge unequal social interactions in dance relationships through the creation of a movement improvisation group dedicated to collective decision making and collective authorship. Second, the group would create subversive representations. We would investigate how it was that we are socially constructed by the movements we do. By implementing postmodern ideas we could transform artistic production thus creating more socially and politically transformational performance situations.

In order to solicit members for the group I approached Orchesis, the University of Alberta Modern Dance Club. Orchesis boasts a large and varied constituency of dancers, ranging from the professional or semi-professional to beginner or lay people. The commitment to the club is also varied; while some people only come for recreational reasons, others come as a means to maintain their training or develop further. I had worked with Orchesis as both a teacher, a dancer and a choreographer and, while I felt that Orchesis worked toward making the experience of dance more accessible, the hierarchies I wanted to question were still, to a certain degree, in place within the workings of the Orchesis dance group. For example, the classes that Orchesis provides for the community are tiered according to technique. There is a beginner, intermediate and advanced modern dance class, which are taught by a teacher who is recognized as an expert in dance. Technical dance expertise is valued and cultivated in this setting, normalizing and categorizing participants according to their technique level. I felt, therefore, that an improvisation

group that would work equitably might avoid this type of categorization and dance technique prescription.

I selected members for the group based on individuals whom I knew might be interested in exploring improvisational movement and with whom I enjoyed working. This was my only criterion because I did not want to limit the field of possibilities. I announced it in several places to solicit people I didn't know. The members who did join the group comprised white heterosexual women from middle class backgrounds. All were or had been students at the University and, therefore, we were all more or less familiar with the workings of the academy. Additionally, we met at the University on Saturdays in the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation.

The women who finally joined the group, while having danced with Orchesis, were largely novices at technical training. At that time, I felt that this was a wonderful development. Working with people whose experiences in dance were diverse and recreational would already be an affront to the elitism of technical training and its call to virtuosity. I felt that the lack of training would assert more "truthful" exploration of the issues the group would work to explore because the group members would not come into the group with preconceived notions of what improvisation or dance should be or with an already established muscle memory of technique. As Judith Butler has theorized, the body is the site of an acculturated and historicized knowledge and it performs these knowledges in its everyday movements (*Performative Acts*). Consequently a trained dancer, whether in modern dance, ballet, or folk comes to the experience with a predetermined bodily understanding or

knowledge of what dance should be.

We met weekly through the next six months and, although we maintained a core group of five women, a lack of working parameters affected our process. We faced problems, such as a lack of commitment to coming to every meeting and on time, attrition, too much discussion and not enough movement, and a lack of organization or structure. Through the process of dealing with these difficulties, it became more evident to me that introducing postmodern theory into our representational framework was the least of my worries considering both that we had almost nothing to represent and that my involvement in the group seemed to deter the collective decision making process.

While I attempted to maintain what I thought was essentially an equal position in group arbitration, I felt that I was influencing the workings of the group because I was frustrated with our inability to stop talking and start exploring movement. This seemed to create a vicious circle in which I was constantly trying to undermine my authority and yet also assert it. This was the way I engaged in our first year of functioning.

The most recent experiences of the group have been more productive, because we have been able to both discuss important issues and work on dance improvisation, without having discussion subsume the importance of movement exploration. We have organized and planned workshops to which people outside of the group come. We meet consistently and are committed to attending. When we meet, we work on movement ideas and, while we discuss and communicate our problems and concerns,

we primarily use dance and movement as an alternate means to communicate and to achieve an understanding between group members' that somehow exists outside of traditional ways of communicating.

I feel the group does vitally important work advocating and reclaiming bodily movement as a way of knowing. We celebrate a way of knowing that has been marginalized and could be potentially disruptive of hierarchical norms. We seem to do this within an equitable, collective framework which, while still problematic or inconsistent at times, focuses more on the group member's individual subjectivities rather than on one discrete problem or limitation such as technical dance or movement ability. The physical and governmental processes our work has initiated this year have important and positive advances for questioning dominant ideas about the composition of knowledge and identity. These include surfacing subordinated ways of bodily knowing and refiguring ideas about equality and unity through collective interaction.

Yet for me this potential to undermine oppressive situations is problematised by the understanding that members still embrace a type of essentialist and naturalist ideology about the work we do even if outwardly we seem to question it. Many members conceive of our movement explorations as originating from a more natural and truthful place which uncovers the 'truth' about dance. I worry that we are generating a type of naturalism that reinstates the naturalism and universalism of the dominant dance formations that I wished to contest in the first place. From the emergence of this problem I have begun to ask these questions: Is an underlying belief

in naturalism a problem for generating a political practice which critiques oppressive dance processes? Does theory count in matters of practice? And, if theory counts, where does it count, in what ways does it count and for whom does it count?

These questions have created tensions in my attempt to determine the political effectiveness of *bodyvoice*. These tensions lie in the different meditations of what one might consider useful and legitimate forms of political engagement or social critiques. Feminist postmodern theorists have suggested that radical political projects should not rely on naturalizing identity as the platform for effective politics. Yet, I feel *bodyvoice*'s practical political initiatives are vitally important because we do question dominant, possibly oppressive practices.

I feel these tensions have been exacerbated by having to deal with being both a participant, who holds a stake in the development and future of the group, and an academic engaged in analysing the group according to theoretical constructs. This situation has made it difficult for me, both mentally and emotionally, to separate speaking as part of the group consciousness from, speaking as an individual within the group from, speaking as the researcher or from, speaking as the academic. I have invariably felt the traitor in different situations and in different roles. Similarly I need to acknowledge my apprehension that, in giving my perspective, I will omit or misrepresent ideas that are of crucial importance to the theorists I cite and the members comprising *bodyvoice*. It has been a process of constant self-critique, which again becomes clouded, because each critique is embedded within the terms that make it a critique. As Judith Butler writes, " . . .the "I" that would oppose its

construction is always in some sense drawing from that construction to articulate its opposition; further, the "I "draws "agency" in part through being implicated in the very relations of power that it seeks to oppose" (*Bodies That Matter* 123).

Having been involved with the *bodyvoice* project now for more than two years, I look back with the advantage of hindsight and reflect on what was perhaps an over simplistic view of feminist postmodernist theory and its relationship to my original desire for creating the group. With perhaps a false sense of clarity, I would like to revisit my question asked in response to David Price and his examination of Pina Bausch's choreography: "Can one condone status quo processes when it makes ground breakingly subversive representations possible?" Being involved with *bodyvoice* has reworked this question into "How and with what effects can one condone status quo beliefs when it makes other perhaps subversive and critical representations and practices possible." This thesis has been a way for me come to a point where I can ask this question and also attempt a critical reflection about this question.

Before I embark on a synopsis of the thesis, I would first like to clarify the terminology I use in describing the theory that fuels this investigation. I have identified this examination as informed by feminist postmodern theory yet this is potentially contentious. For example, some feminists feel that a strong belief in the anti-foundational ideas in postmodernism is antithetical to feminism and political agency. As Seyla Benhabib suggests, "A certain version of postmodernism is not only incompatible with but would undermine the very possibility of feminism as the

theoretical articulation of the emancipatory aspirations of women"(29). Additionally, postmodernism has been criticized by some feminists sympathetic to anti-foundationalist ideas but who view postmodern theory as male biased and uninformed about feminist ideas in this area. As Margery Wolf writes, " On both sides of the debate [postmodernism vs. feminism], as well as in the spectator gallery, one can find feminist social scientists who are indignant and at the same time wryly amused to hear the critiques they have levelled for years now being translated into postmodern terminology and taken *very* seriously" (6-7).

Alternatively, the term "postmodernism" has been criticized for oversimplifying and standing in for a multifarious and possibly contentious group of critical discourses. The diverse forms of social critique that could be grouped under the umbrella of "postmodernism" include: poststructuralism, cultural studies, Marxism as characterised by the works of Althusser, Gramsci or Adorno, psychoanalysis both in the works of Freud and Lacan, feminism, the work of Michel Foucault, the work of Jacques Derrida, postcolonial theory, and queer theory.

I name the theory I use, "feminist postmodern," attempting to remain reflexive to problems associated with it usage. I use feminism because of the way certain women working under that name have focused on the specific and interconnecting way gender, race and class can be oppressive. I appreciate Nancy Hartsock' s counsel which resists totalizing oppression and raises the importance of social and cultural specificity. She considers feminism as "a mode of analysis, a method of approaching life and politics, rather than a set of political conclusions

about the oppression of women" (*Money, Sex* 130). In this way, it is the individual's engagement with specific sets of social and cultural foundations that must be taken into account to formulate how and in what way oppression exists. This specificity is an important resistance to generalizing about the political aspirations of feminism or the makeup of lived experience. This feminism is, as Mary Russo suggests, a celebration of ". . . the ordinary, the everyday life in the public and private sphere. An ordinary feminism (as opposed to the standard or normal variety) would be heterogeneous, strange, polychromatic, ragged, conflictual, incomplete, in motion, and at risk"(vii).

Even while it is a problematic simplification, I use postmodernism because of how the term critically reflects on the universalist, progress oriented narratives or metanarratives of modernism, while at the same time acknowledging its complicity with those metanarratives. As Ihab Hassan suggests, "The word postmodernism sounds not only awkward, uncouth; it evokes what it wishes to surpass or suppress, modernism itself. The term thus contains its enemy within, . . . postmodernism engages a double view. Sameness and difference, unity and rupture, filiation and revolt"(148-149). This project while informed by the contentious relationship between feminism and anti-metanarrative viewpoints, which I frame as postmodernism, does not try to evolve a specific argument about that relationship. Rather, I use both feminist theory and postmodern theory as a lens through which I reflect on the *bodyvoice* project.

This project in which I critically reflect on the question, "h ow and with what

effects can one condone status quo beliefs when it makes other perhaps subversive and critical representations and practices possible" is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter, I introduce *bodyvoice*, giving a short history about our progress over the last two and a half years. In the second chapter, "Hierarchy" I discuss the hierarchical tensions in my role as a member in *bodyvoice improv*. At times this role has detracted from my original goals for collectivity and equality especially when I was regarded as the expert. This situation created hierarchies of importance which disrupted the collective decision making process.

In the third chapter, entitled "Disrupting the Dominant", I begin examining the practical workings of *bodyvoice*. I provide examples of some dominant dance characteristics and compare them with the workings of the group, exploring how we engage with and critique these dominant characteristics both in dance and larger societal practice. In pursuit of this understanding, I explore how collective interaction and movement improvisation has uncovered the potential to disrupt dominant understandings in dance and elsewhere. Reciprocally, I examine ways in which we support the normalization of these dominant characteristics.

In Chapter four, entitled "Ambivalent Territory", I take up and examine the tensions that are created for me in the group's normalization of the 'natural' or essential. For me this tension has evolved from attempting to negotiate the relationship between politically motivated social theory and the actual practice of political critique I have experienced in the Dance Improvisation Group. What is it that constitutes political action or agency? Even while I embrace feminist postmodern

accounts about the composition of political projects, I question the usefulness of postmodernism with its highly theoretical representation as a means to raise questions about political agency for those who are unfamiliar with its jargon. Similarly, beginning to deconstruct the category of 'woman' (or other identity categories) seems problematic for me in the context of *bodyvoice*, especially when other women in the group may derive an important agency from the very fact of 'being' a woman. It is my impression that there are important critical representations and processes emerging in *bodyvoice* that are politically useful even while embracing and asserting the power of natural identity categories. In an attempt to resolve these problems I suggest that the tensions between theory and practice cause an ambivalence that should not be viewed as detrimental to political effectiveness but rather as a way to see political effectiveness as contingent and context specific.

In the last chapter, "Dancing on Boundaries", I examine the transformative potential in crossing or moving between disciplinary boundaries. By working through the several boundary tensions in this project I am able to better understand this person that I call "I." In this sense, "I" am the data I am collecting which is not to suggest that there is an "I" that can be a complete reference point to knowing or that this "I" can be separated from the social and cultural setting it is within. This project has suggested to me, both through theory and through practice, that "I" is formed through its very engagement with specific social and cultural formations that construct subjectivity and personal value systems. This undertaking sets in motion an understanding that there is always a "beyond" to one's social framing (Cornell).

My hope is that this writing, this 'discipline' of putting words on paper, is a practice which continually interrogates my practice of being a member in *bodyvoice*. Reciprocally, I hope that the tractable and changing understandings of what it means to be a member of the group will guard against any desire I might have for finite answers especially given the privileged position, both in my own subjectivity and in larger social practice, created by the written word.

Chapter One - Introducing *bodyvoice*

bodyvoice was originally my idea. But this idea has become an entity that keeps on unfolding through the collective efforts of the ten women now comprising the group. A group of six women interested in exploring what it meant to create dance movement collectively improvisational dance first met in fall of 1995. The name *bodyvoice* emerged over a period of two and a half years.

Our first year can be described as process hell. The first six months were spent discussing rather than moving. In December 1995 we lost our first member due to out of town school commitments and in late January 1996 we lost our second member because she no longer felt the group was productive for her. We were aware that in March we would lose another member due to prior travel commitments. Because of this we decided to hold an informal performance event we called a gathering. This gathering would, in part, solicit new members and also serve as a goal of sorts to bring the group together. It was during this period that the greatest amount of anxiety was present in the group. This anxiety was connected to questions about the continued existence of the group and to the event we were planning.

Two weeks before our gathering, the four of us that remained in the group distributed invitations to five other people whom we thought would be interested in

joining or had supported us in our endeavours. The criteria we set for asking new members to join us was based on our personal understanding of what the group was about rather than in a common theme.

The day of the gathering we met early to transform our rehearsal space, a converted racquetball court located in the campus Physical Education and Recreation building, into an exotic performance/gathering space. We danced in the middle of the room, putting pillows and low tables around the perimeter of the room so that each audience member would see the performance from different angles and also see other audience members across the room watching. In order to make it more festive and celebratory, we invited our audience earlier for tea and snacks, chatting with them before we started our performance. Lighting was created by fifty-odd tea-light candles and a slide projector shining onto one of the walls.

Although the theme and movement we had developed for the performed aspect of the gathering were thrown together quite quickly, our connection during the performance reinforced the importance of our collaborative energies. This same opinion was voice by several of the audience members in the question and answer section we had after we danced. From this gathering experience we collected three new members who are still in the group today. In my opinion, if the event had not been held, the group would have disbanded. The event was also a success because it helped us achieve a sense of accomplishment and importance about the work we were doing. I recall being very emotionally high both from the reception by our audience and from the way one of the members of the group described the empowerment and

elation she felt during and after the performance event.

I was an absent member of the group during the summer of the first year and I feared that in my absence the group would cease to exist. Yet the four members who were not out of town for the summer continued to meet and explore movement ideas and improvisation.

In the Fall of 1996, we repeated another search for members, based again on our individual thoughts about whom we felt would be beneficial to the group. In this way, we cultivated a group comprising women not all previously known to all of us or with whom we would otherwise not have had an opportunity to work. We also stipulated that, as a courtesy to the new people and the old members, we would have a trial period of three weeks to get to know each other. At the end of three weeks we had a coffee session to see how things were going at which time we dealt with concerns created by this new incarnation. One of the potential new members was a woman who is very technically proficient in dance and movement. There was concern that her past technical experience could possibly work to undermine the workings of the group. This woman was aware of this concern and eventually joined based on mutual comfort.

In September of 96 we consisted of nine members. I left for an academic conference in England where I presented a paper about *bodyvoice*. During my time in England I began wondering about how the story I was telling to the conference attendees left out the important contributions of the other members of the group. It seemed to me that talking as an individual about the collective decision making

process was in some ways quite antithetical to the collective decision making process. When I got back, I presented the possibility to the rest of the group of going to another conference in England in the summer. While we had concerns about how we would represent what it is we do in *bodyvoice* at an academic conference, we decided to submit an application to be involved. The abstract we submitted consisted of each member's impression about what the group meant to her. We felt that it would be useful to attempt to represent ourselves at an academic conference because we might provide alternative perspectives for understanding and/or questioning the stories that theory or academia tells.

During the fall we did a lot of movement work during our weekly rehearsal sessions, experiencing and discovering some very interesting movement ideas and relationships. This process involved: examining following and leading exercises either using bodily touch or sight, improvising relationships that occurred when we overlayed movement pathways of our own making, and playing with the interrelationships between the positive and negative spaces our bodies occupied when we moved from one shape to the next.

In December, when we found out that we had been accepted to the conference in England in July, we began to seriously discuss what we wanted to do at the conference. In our deliberations we alternated between wanting to do a workshop or a lecture/demonstration. In order to help us decide, we made plans to begin work on a series of workshops in the new year. We felt structuring a workshop would be useful to give us a sense of what a workshop would look like and that this would help

us decide if we were self-confident enough to lead a workshop. Also, we named ourselves *bodyvoice impov.* We had been "The Dance Improvisation Group" for more than ten months. Although we feared taking on a name we would later hate or be labelled by, we also felt remaining anonymous would not help our chances fundraising and promoting ourselves.

January was a busy month. On top of planning workshops and becoming immersed in the problems of fundraising for the trip to England in the summer, we did a mini-performance at the yearly show held by Orchesis, the university dance club. This piece took place in the lobby during the show's intermission. When the intermission was called, some of us formed a shape, waiting in the lobby frozen in position until other *bodyvoice* members who had been in the audience came and started moving with us. By the time these other people had joined us we already had many audience members looking at us rather puzzled. Our dance focused on partner work and was slow and deliberate because we were dancing very close together. We performed for fewer than five minutes ending the piece by slowly leaving the group and dispersing into the audience. The last person ripped a piece of cloth we had taped down on the carpet to expose another piece of material on which we had our logo *bodyvoice* written on. In later discussions we examined how this had been a scary endeavour for some people but it had also been fun and useful because it helped our confidence.

Fundraising was an enormous task considering that we all needed to go to England. It was decided that as many of us as possible should go because we wanted

to include, bodily, intellectually and emotionally, the individuals who make up the collective group, rather than have an individual or a few individuals talk about the collective process. Through the next five months our fundraising efforts were various and sometimes humorous. These included processing elaborate grant applications to art funding councils, seeking out charitable donations from community businesses with which we were familiar, cleaning one of the member's parents' house, pooling all our old unused clothing to sell to resale clothing shops, applying for federal government funding, garage sales, making contracts for teaching workshops the following fall and winter, and working to raise our own personal funds.

During the month of March we needed to come up with a concrete plan for our presentation in England. We had held two trial workshops. While our workshops normally lasted 3.5 hours, we had been assigned a 1.5 hour time slot at the conference. When we discussed this, we felt that we would not have enough time to fully develop what we wanted to get at and this might create feelings of incompletion or confusion in the workshop participants. We felt that speaking and showing our story might better get at the importance of our collaborative process, so we informed the people in England that we were going to do a lecture/demonstration.

Because of prior work commitments I had to leave the group until a few days before we made our trip to England. At the time I left we were dealing with some hard realities regarding our trip to England. We had been turned down for one of our major grant applications and were faced with the reality of having to send only a few people. I left, giving up my responsibility to the other members of the group who

were looking into travel arrangements and conference fees. During my absence the group did another performance at "Eye rhymes" an interdisciplinary conference hosted by the university's visual arts and English department. Three weeks before our tentative departure, while still out of town, I learned from another member that we received a very large grant from the federal government which would make the trip possible for everyone.

The trip to England was a whirl wind trip. We left on a Tuesday, got to Lancaster University, UK for the conference on Wednesday afternoon, spent Thursday rehearsing until late at night, and Friday morning we presented our work. We had about twenty people at our session. Our presentation consisted of introducing and then performing exercises and choreographed pieces that we had worked on throughout the year. Each member in the group took turns introducing an exercise by giving a small monologue about why the group is important to them and what she thought was important about the exercise we were about to demonstrate. At one point, something happened that was totally unplanned. The member who was facilitating one of the exercises departed from the script and got the audience to stand up and actually try one of the exercises. This exercise consisted of getting into partners, facing each other, touching hands and closing eyes. Focusing on each other's breath, mutual movements occurred giving a sense of connection in the partnership.

While people really enjoyed the partner work, others felt threatened by it. One person mentioned that we were very tentative about using the term "dance" and

suggested that we should think more about why this is. She mentioned that our work reclaimed the word "dance" to mean movements the body does everyday rather than a highly specialized and codified way of moving. She also suggested that we look more carefully at our performance venues because the reclaiming we do may be contradicted by the traditional "dance" performance conventions we used in the session.

We started working together again this fall, three members short. We had been expecting this. Of the departing members, one member wanted to stay in Europe and the other two were going away to school. There was apprehension about replacing these members because of the closeness and trust we had cultivated. The experience of labouring to realize our plans of going to England, then performing and supporting each other there, was a very strong bond. Some people did not want to give this feeling up so easily by inviting new members to join. Yet other members felt that their absence had already changed the group and we needed to introduce new members. We finally decided to invite new people and there are ten members in the group again.

During the fall of 1997 we have held workshops every month and have performed twice. One performance was in a shopping mall and one feature segment on a local TV station. We continue to meet and explore movement on a weekly basis but have also included an extra rehearsal time during the week to work on specific movement and choreographic ideas. We have also submitted an abstract for a conference at the University of Alberta in the Spring of 1998 which is focused on

sexual assault and violence against women. At this conference we would do both a lecture/demonstration and a workshop.

In writing about *bodyvoice*, I am only telling one story about who we are and what we do. I feel there are and should be many stories about *bodyvoice* by many different people. These other stories should come from many perspectives. They could be written, or spoken or danced, they could be positive or negative, just as long as they get told. This is my story about *bodyvoice*.

Chapter Two - Hierarchy

In this chapter I address tensions I believe my role as a member of *bodyvoice* created. These tensions came about in the attempt to undermine dominant dance practices by organizing a group of women who were interested in operating collectively. In the initial year of group operations, my hierarchical position as teacher, researcher and originator of the group created a situation in which collectivity or equal say became difficult to realize. These tensions arose out of an attempt to reconcile how we were to initiate movement exploration in a collective fashion when all the participants were not at the same level of technical expertise. Contributing to these tensions was my desire to investigate the relationship between theory and practice as a means to augment political agency. This desire faded as I became more preoccupied with my role in the group and my oversights in not more fully understanding the character of collective group dynamics prior to our group commencement.

The group that I envisioned in the Fall of 95 was to use the medium of dance and movement improvisation as a process oriented investigation to examine and call into question privileged domains of influence in dance practices, including the power of the choreographer, the importance placed on technical ability, and the maintenance of male privilege. In an attempt to resist the rigid and hierarchical structure of dance

that I was attempting to critique, I consciously did not impose a distinct definition on how the group would work to explore. Working collectively did not appear to me to be explicitly problematic when I first thought about forming the group. My belief was that the group could meet as equals and work as a cooperative and mutually informed assembly without stringent rules of government. Yet, as we began to meet, I realised that problems arose from not having more explicit rules of conduct.

In the first few meetings, as the person with experience in the practical aspects of facilitating exploration, I presented different exercises that would draw out and facilitate exploration. After this, I attempted to draw back from my 'teacher' position and relinquish this privileged position in favour of letting other people have the opportunity to suggest ways of working. This did not happen so easily. We became entrenched in discussion rather than movement exploration and, when we attempted to explore movement, others would defer to me to facilitate the investigation. I often felt that I was prompting the group to get up and explore rather than talk.

As I suggested earlier, I felt that working with people that had varied skills in dance technique would undermine the dominance of technical dance training. Instead these differences in experience and dance technique asserted the importance of my dance training. I did not consider how my experiences with dance would identify me as superior and impact on how the other people in the group related to me. My desire to have a group based in collectivity was impaired because I incorrectly assumed that people who lacked technical dance experience would feel equally comfortable contributing with a more technically experienced person.

The ethical question of decision making and my role in the group have plagued me to varying degrees and at varying times since our first group meeting. Early, however, I began to realise my implication in constructing a situation in which it was virtually impossible for equal say to be achieved. My prior experiences necessarily shaped the choices I made both in my interaction with the group and in the importance I placed on the creation of this group in the first place. My interactions with others in the group were not disinterested. They were replete with the shadings and prejudices fashioned through my experiences with the dance world; a dance world that privileges certain modes of operating.

Subjectivity is intricately tied to the experiences that form it. One cannot divest oneself of one's experiences in order to create a new form of understanding that exists outside of one's world view. Experiences form one's sense of one's reality. As Teresa de Lauretis explains,

> . . . I use the term [experience] . . . in the general sense of a *process* by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is place in social reality, and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to, even originating in, oneself) those relations - material, economic, and interpersonal - which are in fact social and, in a larger perspective, historical. (On Experience, 159)

Louis Althusser understood subjectivity to be constructed by virtue of "interpellation"

into a set of experiences.

> . . .ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals, or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing . . . The individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e., in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection. (55)

An individual is 'free' insofar as he or she subscribes to an ideologic formation, which, while granting agency, also subjugates that individual to the terms of that agency. Once framed within the terms of that ideology, the individual becomes the subject of that ideologic formation. Ideologic formations work by constituting the (subjected) subject through his or her experiences. The very constitution of the experience, constructed by the place, the time, the circumstance, creates the praxis by which ideologic formations operate. For example, I can only seek to question the subject (dance hierarchies) by using the very language or agencies of the subject (dance) I wish to subvert.

One's negotiation of the world is mediated by the exposure to specific areas of knowledge that have been formulated through and by experience. Engagement with social structures is not an extrinsic relationship of reacting to social structures outside of one's own subjectivity (Scott *On Experience* 27) but formulated by that very engagement with the ideologies of those social structures. This experience "is

produced not by external ideas, values or material causes, but by one's personal, subjective, engagement in the practices, discourses and institutions that lend significance to the events of the world" (de Lauretis 159). One makes sense of the world through a set of experiences that also at the same time construct and manufacture that world view. This process is ongoing for as long as one is alive, one never stops having experiences. Experience cannot be construed as originating from some truthful or authentic "starting point of knowledge" (Scott *On Experience* 27) but as an ever interrelating engagement with the social structures in one's experience. Similarly, this unending negotiation resists a naturalised simplistic closure of what constitutes a human subjectivity.

This troubling of assumptions about authentic and immediate nature of experience was revealed in the problems I and we had in negotiating the parameters of which exercises we would use in order to facilitate our movement investigation. Practical exercises that would facilitate our investigation existed, by and large, outside of the experiences of many of the other members of the group. How and in what ways members of the group could and could not speak or facilitate the meeting process was necessarily linked to their experiences. An individual who lacked "experience" or "knowledge" about dance practices was placed in a position of remaining silent or speaking at the risk of having her ignorance uncovered.

The parameters that I had envisioned did not take into account the value assigned to experiences with dance improvisation. Prior exposure to this way of working privileged certain people and marginalized others, an effect I did not expect

at the onset of our meetings. In making the focus of the group an examination of dance processes (processes that were my so called experiential speciality), I was already constructing the mechanisms of a value system that by in large lay outside of the experiential realm of the different members of the group. This served to situate my subjectivity above the other members of the group. It was impossible for members of the group to be involved equally in the group because our experiences with dance could not be equally valued.

In *bodyvoice*, our initial interactions were complicated by my assumption that we were all equally situated as autonomous agents and that we were value-free. I felt that we could come together and work as individuals reacting and working toward changing a certain set of societal values. I failed to realize that these objectives were produced from my experiences and that my experiences permitted me certain 'rights' to have more say in this context. As Sara Ahmed suggests, "rights become productive of the very process of group differentiation, whereby the legitimate subject of rights . . . is always already the subject of a demarcated, stratified social group that is exclusive to others" (74). Certain members of the group were necessarily silenced about the things they valued because the means of the articulation, the "institutionally defined rules"(Young 25) existed outside their realm of experience. I had unwittingly already set up a hierarchy even as I was pursuing the objective of breaking down hierarchies. I failed to realize how being the originator of the group and having experiences with theory gave me more 'rights' to name the group. This now seems quite ironic given that the group was supposed to make mutually informed decisions

about whom and what we are.

In my initial formulation of the dance group, I decided, before the onset of our meetings, to call our assembly "The Fissure Group". This was my attempt to articulate the break with hierarchial conventions of professional dance that the group would work to enact. Over the course of several months this name became a point of contention with the other members of the group who felt that this name did not represent what the group was to them. They felt that it was far too pretentious, wordy, and not in touch with the material workings of the group. As time went on, I was in agreement with them and began to feel embarrassed at my own presumption that I was able to name the group and that I felt the necessity to be so theoretically lofty. This, I feel, was also an instance of not realizing the impact of my experiences with highly theoretical academic language and of considering my own subjectivity as true and authentic. From these problems, the group decided to reject the name in favour of remaining nameless until we could all decide on a suitable name. We remained "The Dance Improvisation Group" for almost a year until we agreed on the name "*bodyvoice*" in January of 1997.

How and in what ways we value certain methods and ways of thinking and doing is constantly mediated by the different view point that each person brings to the group situation. What one might say, how one might say it, or whether we talk at all has been affected by the range of technical expertise in the group, longtime membership with the group, age, and negotiation with what it means to be a woman. These conflictual nodes, while important to the decision making process, are also

constantly mediated by each person.

Judith Butler writes that, "if one is a woman that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive. . . . gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, regional modalities of discursively constituted identities" (3). Paraphrasing Butler, I would add that if one is a dancer that is surely not all one is. Because there are many other mediating factors, the problems associated with whether someone has technical dance experience have lost their importance for me. Whereas before I attributed the difficulties of the group to differences in technical ability, I am now aware that technical ability was only one among many possible differences among us. By constructing 'the problem' in relation to technical ability, in effect, I solidified my conceptual and practical control of the group and, hence, ensured the inequality of its members. It is not that I valued technical expertise per se but rather that I could not step out, become "free", of the experiences that had formed who I am. As Judith Butler indicates, the subject is constituted by the very positions it claims to possess, it must be recognized as the constitution of a historical effect *(Contingent* 42).

As a result of reflecting on the implications of feminist postmodern theorizing about experience for establishing hierarchical relations, I am now more aware that one must attempt to acknowledge and foreground the processes which have created some experiences and not others, and that in doing so, it is possible that one might better see the ways in which the experiences one has had (or not had or valued) serve to prop up one's own identity. This in turn may open up a space for the deployment of different, more equitable, and more self-reflexive political initiatives.

The group has survived and even flourished since its first troubled year. We have experienced positive results in our commitment to and implementation of the collective group process both in our decision making about what movements we wanted to explore, the people and places we would represent our explorations to and what form these representations would take place. Perhaps it is a convention of language that necessarily creates an arbitrary sense of unity, but when I speak of the group I feel a more genuine and legitimate ability to say "we" as compared to the year before when I felt less a member and more a leader. I attempt to say "we" not in the desire to speak for the various group members but to speak of the interplay of group and self subjectivity.

In our second year of operation, implementing collective process has been much more productive. With this more fluid, less problematic period in our decision making process I have once again begun to focus on attempting to understand how discussing political implications of feminist postmodern theory might be incorporated into the group and how this might contribute to the political impact of the group. Now, as we have begun to realize the potential of our collective efforts in group interaction and creating movement improvisation, I have begun again to consider how our work relates to the questioning of identity as discussed by feminist postmodern theorists and the political impact of future group endeavours. This consideration has developed new tensions for me regarding my position in the group. For example, by using collectivity and movement improvisation to counteract some of the marginalising practices in dominant dance formations, *bodyvoice* has developed

important alternative ways of knowing. Yet these new knowledges get taken up within the group as "truths" we have uncovered, only "waiting to be discovered in the vocabulary of "Nature" (Mercer 292), rather than something that we made from within a specific cultural and political situation. From my history in the group, I have been concerned that I will reinstate my hierarchical position if I attempt to challenge member's ideas. I have been divided about whether it is more important to challenge these ideas or whether it is more important to maintain our present decision making process.

I worry that many members of the group still understand their identities and experiences as originating from some truthful or authentic beginning. I fear that if members do not begin to see how and in what ways their subjectivity is formed by the exclusive experiences they have encountered, they will make the same mistakes that I did attempting to originate the project. I also fear that if members do not see that an effect of their partial experiences is partial subjectivities they could more readily exclude marginalized or valuable perspectives and knowledges. As Joan Scott instructs, "people are not discriminated against *because* they are already different. . ., in fact I would argue, it is the other way around: difference and the salience of different identities are produced by discrimination, a process that establishes the superiority or the typicality or the universality of some in terms of the inferiority or atypicality or particularity of others"(Scott *Multiculturalism* 13-15).

I wish to accent how my own subjective experiences and prerogatives created problems in the group and how through my emerging understanding of feminist and

postmodern theory I was able to perceive these problems differently and perhaps more responsibly. I have felt that developing a dialogue about these ideas in the group would be an important political tool. Yet alternatively, I have not wished to undermine the group's dedication to collectivity as a means to evoke a more equal decision making process which has been forged through some very difficult interactions.

Deciding whether or not to introduce these issues to the group has been a struggle for me. Through the course of this year, the second year of the group's existence, I have stopped trying to bring feminist postmodern ideas explicitly into the group situations. I am afraid that these ideas might disrupt the collective interaction that the group has cultivated. I have spent the entire tenure of this project disassembling my own hierarchical status in the group. My fear has been that by attempting to speak about the importance of certain theoretical positions, I might reassert my over importance in the group.

Amplifying the tension between introducing feminist postmodern ideas to the group and ignoring their political import, is my emerging impression that the work we do in the group through our collectivity is enough of a subversion of the dominant. This subversive potential is realized both through the group's governmental process of collectivity and through creating alternative bodily knowledges. Through collectivity we have evolved an important questioning of dominant understandings of equality and political agency. Similarly, by creating alternative bodily knowledges and representations about dance, gender and sexuality we have undermined the

importance of the present, dominant, and perhaps restrictive, ways of knowing dance, gender and sexuality. In the following chapter I elaborate on the different ways we subvert dominant ideas and characteristics in dance and in larger culture.

Chapter Three- Disrupting the Dominant

In this chapter I examine how the practical workings of *bodyvoice* engage and critique dominant understandings about dance, gender and identity. First, I provide examples of the dominant dance characteristics that I have considered oppressive. Second, I examine how the Dance Improvisation Group questions these dominant dance characteristics. I indicate where I think this questioning has been a success and where it has not. It is my impression that important work resisting dominant dance models has taken place because of the group's mandate to work as a collective decision making group and by exploring movement improvisation

Dominant dance models usually value choreographic genius, highly codified movements which are rehearsed to technical perfection, the "natural" and "intuitive" as an aesthetic which informs both product and process, and male subjectivity. The creative importance of the choreographer enables him or her to present his or her creative vision and take credit for this creative work. Usually, it is the choreographer's name, work and image that are mentioned in publicity. While there have been some dancers that have attained notoriety, for the most part dancers remain nameless and faceless. In dance publicity the dancer's bodies are highlighted. Their faces are obscured and their names are absent. The dancer receives no recognition for any creative contribution to the choreographer's vision. The dancer does receive

some recognition for their artistic rendering of the choreographer's vision but this recognition is a consequence of their technical ability and body type. While dancers greatly outnumber choreographers, they do not hold as valued a position in dance subcultures as do choreographers.

Dancers become valued as they rehearse and perform highly codified movements which in turn cultivate a sleek bodily aesthetic. If this bodily aesthetic of sleekness is not attained or if the body type is unsuitable for either the method or aesthetic of the dance technique, then the dancer is not as valued. Because the body of the dancer is valued as the means to communicate a choreographer's vision, the voice, and by extension the subjectivity of the dancer, is not as highly valued.

Moreover, these dominant models are sanctioned by the principal impression that these models are natural, essential and hence 'the truthful'. As Elizabeth Dempster suggests in her discussion about Martha Graham's modern dance technique,

> The function of technique in modern dance is, as Graham has described it, to free the socialized body and clear it of any impediments which might obscure its capacity for "true speech." Ironically, perhaps this concept of the "natural" body was expounded in support of highly systemized and codified dance languages and training programs which inscribe relationships - necessarily conventional and arbitrary - between the body, movement, and meaning. (29)

Similarly the general impression of dance as inherent and essential has discouraged critical reflection into the way it is involved in the power structures of the culture from which it emerged. An example of this problem can be illustrated by the relatively marginal position held by cultural dance criticism in the academy. As Ellen Goellner and Jacqueline Murphy write, "That dance studies might need to catch up with critical developments in other humanities fields should not surprise. Long viewed as unintellectual, intuitive, and uncritically expressive, dance did not easily emerge as a scholarly discipline in the text-centered university. . ." (3). Additionally the dearth of critical cultural and social reflection on dance power structures have been influenced both by its classification as ephemeral and inarticulate, as well as the way in which dance scholarship is primarily dedicated to discussing historical narratives. As Susan Foster suggests, " dancing has been celebrated for its evanescence and for the speechlessness it produces. . . or else it has been pinned down by dates, places and names that surface readily in its wake. These more accessible traces documenting the fact that dancing occurred, like measurements conducted on the body, do not probe the significance of dancing"(xii). These problems have contributed to the normalized impression that dance is natural, anti-intellectual, and outside of social and cultural critique and analysis.

As I suggested earlier, because I have found dominant understandings in dance to be oppressive and unyielding, I started *bodyvoice* to challenge and undermine these. One of these challenges was to work as a mutually informed collective assembly in order to question the creative control of the choreographer and

the hierarchy of privilege which assert the choreographer as genius. In order to challenge the cult of technical expertise, I wanted to employ dance and movement improvisation because this type of technique resists strictly codifying the movements of the body. I felt that working with people from a broad range of dance experiences would also call technical expertise into question. Lastly, I wanted to explore how dance could disrupt common sense notions about gender in an attempt to address issues of male dominance in dance. On the whole, I felt the endeavour of undermining and questioning the dominant would uncover that 'truths' about 'natural' and 'essential' men and women are not universal but embedded within the power structures of a society. It was through these initiatives that I felt we could do some important political work.

Through the course of this project collective decision making and movement improvisation have emerged as the most influential challenge to dominant dance practices. When I planned these challenges to dominant dance practices, I was unaware of the important impact collectivity would have on the group's understanding and mediation of these challenges. I was also unaware of the powerful way in which movement improvisation would be taken up as a means to reclaiming our bodies as a way of knowing.

Collectivity as a process of governing our actions in *bodyvoice* has worked to undermine the possibility of having one person's opinion dominate, one common view point dominate or one common expertise dominate. The process of collective decision making therefore, has been an important critique to the privilege and

importance given to the creative and organisational control of the choreographer. In challenging the authorial privilege of a single creator, such as the choreographer, we have invisioned new ways of understanding equality. Collectivity has reworked definitions of equality so that decisions and judgments are made based on a consideration and respect for difference rather than assigning an arbitrary sameness for effective decision making. This understanding of equality creates a powerful argument for understanding human beings as relational rather than as autonomous.

Equality is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "the condition of being equal (between two or more; with persons etc. in or of quality)"(325). Equality, then, rules out that which is not the same. In order to make judgements about equal status there is a value assigned to sameness and a devaluing of that which has been excluded. Popular and common sense conceptions of equality in Western culture assume that as human beings, regardless of sex, race, class, social/ethnic group and other differentiations, we are guaranteed the same and equivalent rights both under the law and that this guarantee is fortified by the assertion that, as individuals we are autonomous agents acting and reacting to social situations and social institutions

This nominal notion of equality is necessarily called into question when difference and heterogeneity are considered. Moreover, equality based on a notion of an autonomous self is inadequate and perhaps impossible when one considers the differences people bring to situations by virtue of their life experiences. As Sara Ahmed suggests, "universalist epistemology and ethics . . . presupposes that universal

rights have their foundation in the subject as a self-identity that is prior to the contingent realms of history and culture. The humanist self is thus a disembodied and unitary category whose rights are guaranteed as natural and intrinsic properties" (73-74).

bodyvoice has worked consistently and successfully in this last year because we have structured a decision making process that is more respectful of individual differences and preferences. Our coherence as a group is based on a recognition and respect that there will be instances in which individuals will either need to speak or need to withdraw during our various explorations and endeavours. This respect creates the space for less confident people in the group to speak and voice what they feel is important. Likewise, this facilitates the possibility for all the members to see alternatives to their own positionalities. The availability of and value for alternative forms of authority emboldens members to contribute to the dance process even at times when they do not have authority in the methods of dance and movement exploration. More importantly, our interactions are negotiated within very specific contexts. This understanding allows us to see and deal with matters of difference on a more mutually informed or democratic basis. This does not blanket over disagreements in order to create more homogeneous, more "harmonious" interactions but allows us a more specific understanding of how our various experiences are partial and potentially more privileged.

Our collectivity has envisioned the political aims for specificity discussed by Shane Phelan. As she suggests,

> "heterogeneity" cannot do the job alone. By itself, the concept of heterogeneity calls upon us only to be mindful of difference; it gives us no way to understand or deal with actual differences . . . Specificity is the necessary complement to heterogeneity . . . An emphasis on specificity in our analyses and practices aims at disrupting hegemonies, calling our differences for question and rendering everyone accountable for her positions and actions. (128)

The structure of our collective interaction is formulated on specificity. Specificity must necessarily be the end product for negotiating the different and sometimes conflicting roles each member of the group must play, such as friend, mentor and peer. In this way, individual members influence the subjectivity of the other members in the group, and the group in turn, influences individual members. Throughout this year's process we have become aware of the way in which subjectivities not related to dance still enter the arena of the group, changing what it means to be a dancer or to dance. These challenges have in part worked to expose our own partialities. In this way, while we all intersect to "dance," the group collective cannot make decisions just as dancers. We all bring ourselves to this process aware that we are also other than or beyond "dancer"; our individual circumstances ultimately make us more than just "dancers." As one member suggested during a meeting, she valued the group process because it made her realize that people were not going to answer from her perspective or the perspective that she thought was important. Envisioning new ways of understanding equality has come

about through a process of questioning the privilege of single choreographic and administrative authorship, allowing to see our relationships withing the group as more horizonal and relational.

It is my belief that the important strides that we have made in *bodyvoice* this year have come about because we have pooled our various talents to seek publicity, make brochures, come up with workshops, do public performances, and attend international conferences. While there have been problems regarding what constitutes more or less involvement in or contribution to the group, instead of cultivating resentment, valuing difference has allowed for an openness to put those problems out for discussion. Since we have complicated and contextualized what it means to be a member in the group, each person can take up different work to support the group and still be valued.

The value we place on specificity in the collective process has also allowed us to initiate effective fund raising and publicity without having to define or pigeonhole ourselves. Moreover, collectivity has allowed us to be "shape-shifters" (S. Phelan, *Coyote* 200) who can morph into different identities in order to make our political initiatives a reality. Literally and figuratively we can and do "dance around" in various identities, working to shift our weight and our subjectivities in the dance and social space around us.

Shape-shifting in our group is facilitated by the various subjectivities of the people participating in the group. Of the nine members comprising the present configuration of the group, three are technically skilled and trained dancers, four are

full-time university students (two of whom are studying outside of the field of dance), five work full-time. The subdivisions continue: two study and work in the field of graphic art and design; I am involved as both a researcher whose "specialty" lies within feminism and postmodernism; one member is a women's studies major. I detail this in an attempt to illustrate the multifarious positions and subjectivities that exist in the group. These varying viewpoints play an important role in mediating our identities.

Striving to describe the group can be both an endeavour that is entirely inconclusive and yet extremely necessary. For example, there are times when we must articulate with certainty what the group is about in order to be understood, heard or legitimated. We need to facilitate this description in a way that is readable for the different groups to whom we try to represent ourselves. In certain enterprises we shy away from describing ourselves as feminists and in others we embrace the description. The group is important for different reasons to the different group members. Group members attend for many reasons, some of which may be as "apolitical" as coming for recreation and physical activity. But, the extent to which the group is empowering in members everyday lives is in effect very political.

My aim is to accent the diversity we incorporate as we negotiate what the group means and how we should represent it. While creation of the group was founded on certain privileges, such as affiliation with an academic institution and identification as white and middle-class, we are not a mainstream dance group. We both can and cannot call ourselves a dance group; we both can and cannot call

ourselves a women's group; we both can and cannot call ourselves a feminist group. We have spent hours deciding what it was that we do in order to articulate an identity for the workshops we hold. The challenge has been to be concrete enough to make sure that people who wanted to attend would feel welcome and that others are not mislead and leave disappointed. Yet this challenge has been complicated by not wanting to be pigeonholed into being only one thing.

Group members have first hand experience in dealing with the material concerns of whether, and under which banner we could or should unite in order to attract people. We feel the work we do in dance and movement improvisation is important and we want to share this work. This has brought us face to face with the dilemma of having to frame ourselves in order to be understood, yet fearing, by virtue of that framing, we would not only misrepresent ourselves but exclude potential workshop participants.

Similarly, there have been questions about how to frame our identities when searching for funding possibilities. We have been marginalized because we could not legitimately fit into any specific discipline or identity category. Our ambiguity was such that we could not identify enough with certain categories to be considered for funding. For example, the lack of "technical dance expertise" in our group censured us from applying to various arts' grants as "dancers." We have also had difficulty with receiving recognition as "legitimate" within theoretical circles in which our "research" has not been seen as a viable form of inquiry.

There have, however, been substantial rewards for not quite getting our

identity right. Lacking a concrete identity has uncovered the possibility of inhabiting various identities in order to appear as legitimate but never being fully defined by them. Our process has shown that there is political potential in not laying down too many concrete boundaries. For example, the largest monetary grant that we did receive was attained through inhabiting a certain identity in order to represent ourselves as legitimate. And, while we now have certain obligations to document how the grant was used we have not had to embrace a defining vision of whom we are. We have resisted being identified by this identity. The shape shifting potential has also been realized in the way we have mined the various avenues of our own individual support networks in order to also raise money.

Our diversity has opened up possibilities for embracing certain subjectivities and not others. In the struggle to raise money, money which ironically is be used to gain political visibility, we question the rigours of identity politics or at least we seemingly can inhabit certain identities quite easily, inhabit them in subversive ways, and then discard them if they are no longer useful.

I do not mean to suggest that those differing identities are not very important to us or that individuals in the group do not identify with these definitions but that they become important in different ways and at different times. A member can have one's own agenda within the group. This has not disallowed mutual respect or our continued work together.

The diversity we engender can be equated with what Peggy Phelan sees as the political potential of remaining "unmarked" (6). It is the very possibility of remaining

unmarked or undefined that affords a type of liberation from signification and hence naming and controlling. It is "a willful disappearance" (Peggy Phelan 11). The group's political effectiveness works in part because of our ability to willfully disappear. Our disappearance is created because we resist taking on a unified group identity. We have resisted unifying, to cultivate 'technical' forms of dance, by appointing a leader, or by working with only one goal in mind. More importantly, is our ability to willfully appear in different possibly antagonistic identities and inhabit them, both individually and collectively, in ways that are important to us and then disappear when it is no longer beneficial. Unexpectedly, it has been our ability to seek out and inhabit different disciplines and different networks of personal relations that enabled us to generate enough funds to attend a major conference overseas.

The events the group has had to deal with, such as one member's absence due to financial problems, decisions about how and when to hold workshops, or the future goals of the group, are like specific exercises that we enact during our movement explorations. These exercises include work such as *weight bearing* as a means to negotiate mutual trust and safety and *interrelating pathways* as a means to design and create different group interactions. The added dimension of bodily association informs and complicates our communications and interactions within the group. In this way our decision making process is not only mediated by verbal, social or intellectual interactions but also by an awareness of how our relationship are forged by moving together.

While movement improvisation is an important feature that informs our

collective process, the understandings we develop through movement exploration have been important tools for disrupting dominant ideas both about choreography and about ways of knowing. The movement exploration that *bodyvoice* does is vitally important because it advocates and reclaims one's body as a way of knowing. We celebrate a way of knowing that has been marginalized and could be potentially disruptive of hierarchical norms. The alternative bodily way of knowing that we explore and represent through our work is created by a movement technique called contact improvisation. Contact improvisation is a type of movement exploration in which anywhere from two to several people move together, giving and taking each others weight using multifarious points of balance, stability and touch.

Participating in contact improvisation critiques the dominance of visual ways of knowing by asserting the importance of touch rather than sight in the movement decision making process. Contact improvisation exercises focus on communicating movement interaction and intention through the use of body weight, momentum and touch. One does not use one's vision as an important cueing point, although one's visual field is important in order that one does not collide with others. In discussions of these exercises, we have noted that our exercise explorations seem more fruitful and well developed when our eyes remain closed. We are surprised at times to realize that our eyes were actually open and that our sense of position and knowing was through a body register rather than a visual one. More rarely, we have managed to come out of an exercise amazed that the movement "organically" unfolded to the extent to which we could no longer tell where the give and take was located. This is

an interesting development that challenges the understanding that one is a discrete body in control of its own movements. The contact work causes fissures in understanding the body as self contained and self-directed because one must always negotiate one's own movements in relationship to the trust and safety of another person.

One of the exercises we do that works to undermine the power of sight to define our understanding of ourselves and the world around us comes from seeing ourselves. This exercise involves learning other people's movement sequences, alternately performing their sequence as they would and then incorporating and performing, with feedback from the group, your own sequence as if you were the other person. It is at the same time both novel and disquieting to see the other person with whom you had been working attempt to perform your sequence as you would and perform their own sequence as if she were you. In watching the sequence one is given the chance to step outside of one's self and at the same time, witness oneself moving - to be the other person in effect. In this exercise, I was confounded by this other person not only because I was shocked at literally "seeing" and recognizing myself but also because it was not me. In witnessing my movement signature in the other person's steps, a displacement of how I saw her was also happening. I had to renegotiate how I understood the other person and myself, because I was being constructed differently through the engagement with and representation of another person, another bodily identity. In this way, the self is destabilized and also under renegotiation because the person to which you ascribe a certain visual and movement

identity to, by performing you with her steps, is also changing. How we know ourselves is not always a conduit to the truth. Our 'selves' are not autonomous, but defined, at least in part, by interacting with others. In this way, identity can be viewed as relational and in flux rather abiding and original.

Taking this interdependence into account, I would like to suggest a different understanding of equality than that proposed by the Oxford English Dictionary. Following Sara Ahmed, I propose that equality "constructs the subject as relational, as existing in connection with other subjects, in a network of human relationships" (75), and that equality construed in this way must necessarily pay attention to difference rather than evoke some nonexistent sameness.

The movement work we do asserts the importance of the interrelationship between our subjectivities and our bodies. In our movement explorations we aspire to have our bodies communicate and move our intellect, our emotions, our subjectivities rather than have our intellect and our emotions move our bodies. In revaluing the body as an important source of knowledge, we critique the dominance of intellectual knowledge in our culture. Similarly, because we can know others through our bodies using weight and touch, we circumvent the dominant and sometimes oppressive position that vision and sight holds in our social relationships. This allows the self to know another person through a different route. For me, this route is more responsible to another person's well-being. Because negotiating our relationship is ultimately more immediate, we must understand ourselves in relation to another person's body. If we did not, we may injure each other. In this way the

self knows difference differently. Negotiating this difference is perhaps less dichotomous, perhaps more respectful and more relational.

The intimacy we create in our movement work combined with our collective process have also created some important political tools for critiquing both the dominance, and perhaps oppression, of heterosexuality or of any socially imposed sexual norm. Our work in the group has politicized sexual preference both because of the representations we create and through our collective process. While I would suggest that this is somewhat dependent on whom our audience is and how our audience reads this work, I feel the potential exists to confuse conventional and dominant understandings about the importance of sexual norms.

The potentiality for this disruption has come about primarily because of our interrelationship in the group collective process. It has been reinforced by doing and representing movement and contacts improvisation. About a year ago one of the members in the group came 'out' to the rest of the group. She indicated that she was experiencing tensions between how important the group had become for her and her inability to share an important part of her life or being with the rest of the group. She felt that taking the risk of disclosure was important to her even though it might jeopardise her membership in the group. This occurrence rather than jeopardising our group's collective process has in fact strengthened our ability to respect difference. While causing some awkwardness and discomfort, this event forced us to address difference in a personal relational rather than in a general way. Similarly, it allowed us to question how some of us have been privileged by our involvement in

heterosexual culture, privileges that have been unavailable to women identified as lesbian.

Additionally, the way we understand our movement work has changed by this member's coming out as lesbian. It has taken away the safety net of heterosexuality. It is my impression, although no one ever mentioned it before, that the bodily intimacy we created through this type of contact improvisation was sanctioned and encouraged because we could all hide behind our heterosexuality. This occurrence has forced us to look at what it is we do more closely. Our contact improvisation work creates both the appearance and actual physical feeling of mutual trust through a bodily intimacy. I think we have come to the understanding that doing this movement work is not itself sexual in a stereotypical way and yet representations of physical intimacy do evoke ideas of sexual intimacy depending on your audience.

We have not fully explored the potential in representing this type of movement to others. What I do want to highlight is that our feelings about the group are more empowering and political. Our intimacy can neither be categorized as heterosexuality nor homosexuality because our physical and emotional intimacy is not necessarily about sex or sexual preference. In this way we disrupt sexual norms and call into question an oppressive and normative taxonomy which asserts sexual and gendered differentiation. Relationships in the group, even if sexual, are founded on a specificity of engaging with and respecting others. It is my impression that this occurrence has empowered us as a group. It has made the group about so much more than just dance.

These examples I have presented suggests that *bodyvoice* does some important work to disrupt dominant ways of knowing. Paradoxically, in other ways we reassert the power of some of these dominant ideas and models. The physical processes of our work do have some important and positive advances for questioning dominant ideas about the composition of knowledge and identity. Yet, in not initiating analysis and self-reflection into the biased experiences and knowledges that form subjectivity, we have not made explicit the problems and exclusions within what we do. My worry is that in closing off analysis of the type of processes and representations we are reclaiming, we will also begin to cultivate normalizing ideas about how we feel the body *should* be represented, reinitiating the very mechanisms we wanted to fight in the first place.

For instance, our work is occasionally influenced by different dance artists that come to town to perform and give workshops. Interest is sparked in the group by one person mentioning a particular artist and some of us go to see this person perform and/or participate in a workshop they give.

An artist that influenced us was Marge Gillis. Marge Gillis is a Canadian dancer who is internationally recognized. One of the unique things about her is that she has largely trained herself to dance because of her unpleasant experiences with formalized dance education. She is also an iconoclast because she has verbally chastised the dance establishment for being too rigid and callous, draining the joy and life-affirming qualities out of dance . She has cultivated a large dedicated following in popular culture. People who normally would not go to see dance go to see her. Her

reputation in the dance community has been varied, being represented alternately as a charlatan or a trailblazer. Her dancing has a very personal style that gets represented as transcending social boundaries that portray humanities' hopes, fears and joy.

bodyvoice members attended Gillis' show and a workshop. This happening generated discussion about the transcendence of dancing. In discussions members focused on the joy represented in Gillis' dancing, suggesting that this joy was able to transcend our petty differences and that it opened up places to see where dance is more natural and more universal. I indicated that this joy might be specific to our culture rather than all culture, and that suggesting that it was applicable to all culture might be a bit imperialistic from our western perspective. Margie Gillis is a great dancer. She is a great inspiration for political aspirations of our group because she rebelled against the dance establishment. But is it fair to say that she "truly" gets at what dancing "is"? Many members were critical of my opinion maintaining that there *is* something more truthful and natural about her way of dancing.

I worry that we are generating a type of naturalism that echos the monolithic constructs of the dominant dance formations that we want to subvert. One person's notion of the natural is not necessarily anothers. If we conceive of our dancing as more natural we might fall into the very trap we try to question, namely that oppressive dance practices cannot change or should not change because they are natural or transcendent. If we assert that our group is about doing a "more natural" thing, then we run the risk of reifying our own political objectives. Although we work through respecting difference and valuing alternative forms of knowledge, we

have done this within the specific context of the group. Newcomers and workshop participants will not necessarily view this work as something natural to them. What is more important, given that this work is highly personal, what type of inadequacies will we be creating in newcomers if we start describing it as "more natural?" What psychical inadequacies will we open up or augment if new individuals don't or can't fit in with this definition of the natural?

The dance group does some politically transformative work. We disrupt dominant models in dance and society through our collectivity and our movement exploration. These disruptions raise questions about the nature of knowledge, equality and political agency. Reciprocally, our desire to normalize our dance practices by claiming it to be more 'natural' or 'truthful' may reinitiate the oppressive models we want to critique in the first place. This contradiction creates tensions for me. I will explore these tensions more fully in the next chapter.

Chapter Four - Ambivalent Territory

> "This is more natural."
>
> (spoken by bodyvoice member at our panel/performance session, Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism Conference, Lancaster University, UK, July 1997)

> A social theory committed to democratic contestation within some postcolonial horizon needs to find a way to bring into question the foundations it is compelled to lay down. It is this movement of interrogating that ruse of authority that seeks to close itself off from contest that is, in my view, at the heart of any radical political project. (Butler, *Contingent* 41)

In this chapter, entitled "Ambivalent Territory", I address the tensions between politically motivated feminist postmodern theory and the actual practice of political critique I have experienced in *bodyvoice*. Ambivalence emerges from exploring these two different, sometimes conflicting understandings of what constitutes useful and legitimate forms of political engagement or social critique. On the one hand, feminist postmodern theorists suggest that radical political projects

should not rely on naturalizing or universalizing as the platform for effective political agency. On the other hand, *bodyvoice* does not meet this theoretical criterion. However, the practical approach of *bodyvoice* creates self-affirmation and may constitute radical political empowerment and the critique of dominant practices. My interest in feminist postmodern theory and my membership in *bodyvoice*, two different, perhaps conflicting, examples of political and social critique, have made me ambivalent about which is more politically effective.

To investigate this ambivalence between the political effectiveness of feminist postmodern theory and practice, I first discuss how feminist postmodernist theory has generated important ideas about political initiatives. These ideas criticize foundationalism and universalism as the basis for political action. The work of Judith Butler, for example, asserts that, while adopting certain unified identity categories, such as "women" or "dancer," is politically useful, the insistence on foundational and unitary categories as a means for effective politics runs the risk of reestablishing oppression through oversimplification and the exclusion of difference. (*Gender Trouble* 4-5)

Second, I develop my discussion to include problems that I see occurring in feminist postmodern theory's relationship to actual paradigms of political practice. This is an ambivalent relationship because, while comprising some important ideas about what could implement political agency, feminist postmodernist theory, also, simultaneously, delimits political agency when it excludes people not extremely familiar with the jargon of theory.

Third, following from an examination of various antithetical positions in feminist postmodern theory's relationship to radical political practice, I suggest that incommensurability is perhaps the very means by which political projects can be realized. Through the course of this project, I have begun to realize that, my aspirations for *bodyvoice* have been to amalgamate theory and practice into an example that would uncover a comprehensive universal political practice. This is even while I have striven to show the problematic and even dangerous things this type way of thinking creates. This realization has suggested to me that political effectiveness can only be an ambivalent process. One should still strive to make the relationship between theory and practice more self-reflexive and democratic, but, often, the forms that resisting and questioning the dominant take, will be mutually exclusive and mutually contradictory.

Ambivalence does not disallow political agency but actually creates the possibility for political understanding. There is important political power in implementing or negotiating two sometimes mutually contradictory paradigms of understandings, in which, one can not help but "question the foundations it is compelled to lay down" or "interrogate that ruse of authority that seeks to close itself off from contest" (Butler, *Contingent*, 41).

How, then, does universalism create oversimplification and the denial of difference? Peggy Phelan exposes the partiality of seemingly universal social paradigms and institutions by suggesting that they all attempt to assert a hierarchical claim about what counts as the "real." Different discourses or categories of

knowing, she states, present themselves as the "real-Real." For example, discourses such as "Western science, law, and psychoanalysis are alike in believing their own terms to be the most comprehensive, the most basic, the most fundamental route to establishing or unsettling the real"(3). She suggests that the very proliferation of epistemologies attempting to define the "real" disables any type of universalist claim (3). As Judith Butler appropriately asks "How many 'universalities' are there and to what extent is cultural conflict understandable as the clashing of a set of presumed and intransigent 'universalities,' . . . ?" (*Contingent*, 40). Through these observations Butler and Phelan uncover the contingency of any "universalist" political initiative.

This motivation stems from the critique of Western practices that draws universalistic conclusions about reality, lived experience or oppression by documenting specific situations as if they applied to everyone. This 'grand theory' then serves as the only gauge for understanding oppression, reality, and lived experience. Oppression is thereby re-created through oversimplification and the denial of difference. This dominant practice also constructs the researcher as omniscient, serving to de-politicize the fact that the researcher is subjectively embedded within specific formations of race, gender and/or class.

The contingency of political claims can also be witnessed in the way that different social agents use a similar set of words, such as culture, community or identity in order to serve their own political initiatives. Kobena Mercer uses the example of changing ideas about the nature of Black identity in Britain in the 1980's.

To illustrate this, she suggests while certain key words (such as community, culture, identity) denote things that are of important consequence for social change, they can never be contained within definitive boundaries of meaning. As a result, these same words are subject to endless and antagonistic re-articulation by different social agents wishing to assert their higher hierarchical understanding of those terms (426). As Mercer suggests, "Different actors appropriate different meanings out of the same system of signs"(Mercer, 426). One must take seriously the understanding that the direction of social change or social definition is dependent on the strategies and tactics of the opposing players in language games. Often these language games are played by different social agents in an attempt to solidify that particular agent's claim to represent the "truthful," "natural" or "essential." Yet when this process is understood as a game of strategy, tactics and cooption, claims to universality become provisional, exposing the different power relationships that may benefit from the apparition of the universal. As Mercers suggests,

> No one has a monopoly or exclusive authorship over the signs they share in common; rather, elements from the same system of signs are constantly subject to antagonistic modes of appropriation and articulation . . . What was important and empowering about the redefinition of black identity in British society in the 1980's was that it showed that identities are not found but made; that they are not just there, waiting to be discovered in the vocabulary of Nature, but that they have to be culturally and politically constructed through

political antagonism and cultural struggle. (426-427)

The same process of universalizing identity is apparent in the presumably radical forces within the feminist movement. The presumption that there is a unitary identity to women and a unitary cause of women's oppression has lead to factionalism and bitterness rather than a universally beneficial political model. This can be witnessed in postmodernist and postcolonial feminist critiques of essentialist positions within different feminist theories and practices. Some of the essentialist feminist paradigms under question are Marxist feminism, radical feminism, and liberal feminism. These forms of feminism see the mechanisms of oppression as originating from unitarily analysable and criticisable formations such as capitalism, patriarchy, and democracy. Women's identity is thought to be unitarily understandable because they experience the same type of oppression. [1] Essentialist positions claimed a universal truth about the nature of women or feminism: certain truths about the identity of feminism upon which one could mediate and address political interests. These 'truths' disintegrated in the face of charges of exclusion by women who did not feel that they fit into these so-called universal categories. These marginalized or excluded women included lesbians, women from the third world or working-class women, who

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I am grateful to Miranda Ringma for discussing this with me and for allowing me to read her unpublished thesis *In(con)clusion: Exploring the Possibilities of an Amicable Relationship Between Feminism and Postmodernism.* For more in depth information about these essentialist forms of feminism see Gender Roles: Doing What Comes Naturally? edited by E.D. Salamon and B.W. Robinson and Changing patterns : women in Canada edited by Sandra Burt, Lorraine Code and Lindsay Dorney.

criticised "Feminism" as being white, middle to upper class and/or heterosexual. [2]

Questions were raised about knowledge systems which promote claims to universalism. How is legitimacy constructed through these knowledge systems? How and why, are some knowledges more important than others? What happens when so called universal knowledges are decentred and exposed as mechanisms which are implicated within power relations and privilege?

Judith Butler argued that universal subjecthood and sisterhood, taken up as "natural" and "real," are actually formulated by a network which produces identity (*Gender Trouble* 2-3). One's identity is an effect of experiences and practices which inform one's world view and decision making practices. Moreover, feminist identity politics and its foundation in assuming the universality and unity of it subjects, "the seamless category of women" (Hall 15), can no longer be understood as the 'truthful' and incorruptible bases for feminist political agency. As Judith Butler states;

> The suggestion that feminism can seek wider representation for a subject that it itself constructs has the ironic consequence that feminist goals risk failure by refusing to take account of the constitutive powers of their own representational claims. This problem is not ameliorated through an appeal to the category of

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See bell hooks Ain't I a woman: black women and feminism, Elizabeth Spelman Inessential woman: problems of exclusion in feminist thought, and Denise Riley "Am I that name?": feminism and the category of "women" in history, Judith Butler "Contingent Foundations", Gender Trouble, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" and Diane Fuss Essentially Speaking)

> women for merely "strategic" purposes, for strategies always have meanings that exceed the purposes for which they are intended. . . . By conforming to a requirement of representational politics that feminism articulate a stable subject, feminism thus opens itself to charges of gross misrepresentation. (*Gender Trouble* 4-5)

Yet from experience being a *bodyvoice* member, I have to question the usefulness of these ideas in matters of political practice. This questioning comes about because these ideas are often communicated in difficult and jargon oriented language. As Patti Lather writes, " In terms of acting in the world, the derision of metatheory and the lack of any effective theory of agency undercuts efforts toward reasoned action and community and/or collective purpose"(40). This understanding is echoed by Margery Wolf who writes, "Our agenda, whether we are engaged in adding to the descriptive material on women's experience or in building theory, is to expose the unequal distribution of power that has subordinated women in most if not all cultures. . .If our writings are not easily accessible to those who share our goal, we have failed" (119).

An example that stands out for me as very useful degrounding of theory and jargon happened during *bodyvoice*'s trip to England to attend the Transformations Conference hosted by Women's Studies at the University of Lancaster. This conference was described as an interdisciplinary conference although the impression we got from the advertisement was that it would also be quite theoretical. When we finally received the final program, we found out that we were the only performance or

practical activist group that was presenting at the conference. We realized that this could mean several things; other practice oriented groups did not apply or were turned down or that we might have been invited in order to contest what the term interdisciplinary, or feminism or theory meant within this conference setting. I think our attendance did just that.

In discussions with some conference attendees other than *bodyvoice*, it was suggested that the performance created for them a rethinking of feminism or theory. They suggested our attendance disrupted the established trope of academic feminism which some women have begun to criticise as a type of containment strategy to disempower feminist activism and critique. In our attempt to bring our physically oriented activism to the confines of an academic conference, we accentuated the problems feminism is facing in understanding the relationship of scholarship and activism. This is reiterated by bell hooks who suggests that feminism's insurgence into the male dominated academy served also to separate and privilege it in its relationship to activism in the social sphere. As she remarks,

> . . .when women in the academy centralized the issue of academic legitimation within hierarchical patriarchal institutions, everyone began to move away from an emphasis on feminist theory that was concerned with building mass-based movements. Feminist theory became much more the site where the politics of legitimation within academic hierarchy was played out. This is the path that has brought us to where we are today, to where the kind of work (done

> by those feminist thinkers who see themselves as theorists) that makes no attempt to engage feminist politics is the work that is often most respected. (816)

Ambivalence is generated when highly stylized and jargon oriented language is used in feminist postmodernist theory to discuss radical political practice. Using this type of language may be the very antithesis of political practice because it produces suspicion and inadequacy in people who are not familiar with it. Members of *bodyvoice* disregard or distrust postmodern theory because the language used is so complex that when they encounter it they end up coming away with feelings of subordination and inferiority rather than empowerment. As Susan Bordo writes, "We deceive ourselves if we believe that postmodern theory is attending to the inclusion of "Otherness" so long as so many concrete 'others'. . . are excluded from the conversation"(140). Similarly this language seems to reinforce the already higher hierarchical status of theory and intellectualism in our culture because it is exclusive to and "constructs a very specialized audience"(Lather 40).

Butler's assertion that feminism does not require a subject can be problematic for practical social and political agency. Many feminist activists feel that if women are not the subjects of feminism, feminism is disempowered. As Seyla Benhabib suggests,

> The retreat from utopias within feminist theory in the last decade has taken the form of debunking as essentialist any attempt to formulate a feminist ethic, a feminist politics, a feminist concept of

> autonomy. . . The fact that the views of Gilligan or Chodorow or Sarah Ruddick. . .articulate only the sensitivities of white, middle-class, affluent, first world, heterosexual woman may be true... Yet what are we ready to offer in their place? (30)

Moreover, the disruption of a stable, unitary and transparent self prior to experience raises many contentious questions especially in the pursuit of socially transformative practices and beliefs for feminists. Questions emerge about the legitimacy of self when the self is understood to be fragmented which, in turn, raises questions about how one can represent either oneself or others. If identity is relational and always shifting under what circumstances can one speak or act? Problems with speaking from a shifting identity are echoed by Nancy Hartsock who describes difficulties encountered while co-teaching a feminist theory course at the University of Washington. As she remarks, "many of our conversations left me very disturbed about the current state of feminist theory. The students kept talking about how you can't name anything because things shift; you can't talk about "we" because who are "we"? Even when "we" referred to twenty graduate students at the University of Washington" (*Theory and* 1000). I also have come to experience these difficult issues in relationship to writing about my work with the women in *bodyvoice*.

To demonstrate the ambivalence I experience in understanding the political effectiveness of *bodyvoice*, I would like to go back to Kobena Mercer's suggestion that language games are played by different social agents wishing to solidify claims to represent the "truthful," "natural" or "essential." In our fundraising efforts *bodyvoice*

has played these language games quite well. But we played with a bit of a subversive difference. From the marginal position we held in relationship to dance and research, we inhabited competing identities and became members of different communities in order to find funding. In playing with and "being" two sometimes competing identities we exposed the contingency of that "truth." Our ability to mutate into different identities is a way of "interrogating the ruse of authority" (Butler *Contingent* 41).

Yet alternatively, because the majority of the group believes that what we do might assert a more "natural" and hence more "truthful" understanding about dance, then we are ultimately playing the language game in order to win. From this perspective we seem unaware of the very contingency of our position. However new and revolutionary our ideas may be, it seems that we are striving to reconstruct a reified political agenda, not unlike the one that we wanted to critique in the first place. By asserting that our work "is more natural" we proclaim that we have a monopoly on what should be considered the 'truth' of dance. In this way we could possibly reinitiate a relationship which creates oppression and factionalization because it gauges importance on an arbitrary sameness rather than a realization that there are many truths.

Another example of my ambivalence in judging the political effectiveness of *bodyvoice* can be drawn out by some of the ideas of philosopher Michel Foucault. Foucault saw the possibility of undermining dominant oppressive forms of knowing by bringing to light the knowledges that have been excluded or delegitimized. Yet

concurrently these subjugated knowledges also can become, in themselves, oppressive, within specific contexts.

Foucault called bring to light excluded knowledges "an insurrection of subjugated knowledges"(81). This was a method of subversion which inverted the privilege of the status quo. This inversion disrupts the privilege of dominant ways of knowing because it exposes the knowledges created as partial and involved in power relationships . (Foucault 80-82)

bodyvoice has made it possible for subjugated knowledges to be mined and subsequently brought to the surface. The group's investigation of alternative forms of "dance" knowledge, knowledges that have been delegitimized by dominant dance practices, reflect critically on the so-called universality of these dominant categories. These knowledges fall outside of standard systems of intelligibility. Foucault suggested that these are knowledges,

> that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, *beneath the required level of cognition*. . . I also believe that it is through the re-emergence of these low-ranking knowledges, these unqualified , even directly disqualified knowledges. . . that criticism performs its work. (82 emphasis is mine)

The subjugated knowledges that we produce create insurrection in which dominant knowledges can be seen as powerful ordering devices rather than universal

and transcendent ways of being and knowing. Simultaneously, Foucault warned that these subjugated knowledges also could become incorporated and appropriated back into dominant power structures. As he suggests,

> . . . after all, is it not perhaps the case that these fragments. . . are no sooner brought to light,. . . than they run the risk of re-codification, re-colonisation? In fact, those unitary discourses, which first disqualified and then ignored them when they made their appearance, are, it seems, quite ready now to annex them, to take them back within the fold of their own discourse. . . And if we want to protect these only lately liberated fragments are we not in danger of ourselves constructing, with our own hands the unitary discourse to which we are invited. (86)

In attempting to critique the dominance of highly specialized technical dance techniques, we ourselves have had to create specialized ways of knowing in order to function as a group. We have in this way created our own unitary discourse about what we feel dance should be. By our very doing of the work we have created specialized and unitary knowledges; knowledges that work through disqualifying other knowledges and then ignoring them. One must learn the exercises we do. One must become used to other member's movement identities in order to do contact improvisation work. In this way our relationships have become specialized into rather specific methodologies. The trust and movement interrelationships that must be cultivated can only be done through interaction with the group (dancing with people)

and learning the implicit the rules of the exercises. There must be a type of unity or commonality among us in order that we can communicate with each other. The work we do necessarily cultivates a large need for togetherness and trust in order for it to be communicated. The knowledges we value and advocate could be oppressive or exclusionary to certain people, such as men, people with physical disabilities, women who by virtue of their lower-economic and class status have not been afforded the privilege of a university education or the time to do this type of extracurricular activity, as well as, women who might find the work we do overly intrusive and overly personal.

What we do enables some things and disables others. Similarly we enable things because of who we are. For example, being middle-class, university educated women has enabled certain, perhaps more privileged experience and this has allowed us the time and resources to even attempt to question dominant oppressive ways of knowing. The problem of needing to be in a position of privilege in order to question oppression is brought up by Peggy Phelan in her discussion about representational politics. She sees effective political critique in remaining 'unmarked', or undefined within the representational field. But, as she suggests, the power to create an effective disappearance is based on recognizing who and what has failed to appear and this has largely been the possibility for white middle-and upper class women. (19) As she further suggests, "There is an important difference between willfully failing to appear and never being summoned" (11).

In this way we cannot be a totally inclusive liberatory practice, the liberation

we grant is provisional. The very fact that *bodyvoice* is a women's group, that we exclude men would suggest this. Although we have not formally defined ourselves as feminist, we understand that the work we do attempts to comprehend and actively question the oppression of women. The parameters we have set to facilitate this questioning exclude men. One of the problems that arises is that, if there are only women in the group, how will men come to understand our views on oppression. As Siân Williams remarks,

> I do not mean to suggest that women remaining cohesive in small identity groups is a negative place to be, but if feminism is defined as movement against patriarchy then it becomes a more difficult movement to envision when the primary area of difference is that articulation between and within groups of women and not between genders (57).

In defining ourselves as a women's group and actively pursuing only women to participate, we exclude the participation of men. Ironically if our work attempts to call the regulatory and oppressive function of gender in our society into question, how is it politically viable to exclude men from this examination? I do not wish to suggest that we should include men. I do want suggest that any political initiative will necessarily create exclusions. I have come to understand that, while one must remain critically reflective about who one is excluding in one's political agenda, these exclusions do not necessarily disempower the political objective that one has initially set out to implement.

In this chapter I have attempted to illustrate some important theoretical ideas regarding the political effectiveness of universalism. I suggest that exclusions and omissions are created in universalized political fronts, which deny differences. Yet implementing a practical investigation which questions these universalizing strategies has often been an ambivalent or contradictory undertaking. *bodyvoice* works to question the universality of authority and foundations while it also perpetuates a notion of a universal woman. Feminist postmodern theorists who problematise this notion, run the risk of only being able to communicate these ideas between themselves. Rather than view this as an inability to come up with an effective means to implement positive political and social transformation I would suggest that the ambivalence created is possibly the means by which one can have a more self-reflexive and politically responsible system of human interaction.

As I have suggested earlier this project originated because I wanted to devise a project that could address and revision the traditional relationship between dance production and a critical dance product. This desire came from the disillusionment of discovering that subversive dance choreography was not always created by subversive processes. In an attempt to solve this discrepancy I created the *bodyvoice*. Through this process I have come to understand that solving this problem is not possible. Perhaps what is important is the attempt and the impossibility. The attempt creates the possibility of more tenable self-reflection and the impossibility exposes the fallacy of assuming anything is universally true.

The forms that resisting and undermining the dominant take might be mutually

exclusive and perhaps contradictory. For example, while I still remain critical of the relationship between dance representation and mode of production, I now see that David Prices's assessment about the choreography of Pina Bausch has important subversive potentials; at least it got me questioning what subversion and questioning might mean. This potential is still present even while the work excludes critical reflection on the means of production. Ambivalence, the simultaneous existence of two contradictory beliefs, suggests that no struggle can be inclusively revolutionary. As Judith Butler has remarked, "there is no one site from which to struggle effectively. There have to be many, and they don't need to be reconciled with one another"(*Gender as Performance* 11). I believe these sites of struggle are multi-layered, at play in one's interactions with others as well as within one understanding of one's own identity.

While it is problematic that some members in *bodyvoice* rely on normative understandings about the 'truths' in the work we do, this does not disallow the potential to disrupt dominant ideologies nor does it deny the empowerment felt by being a member in the group. Similarly it is my belief that this normative ground is called into question by the very fact of our collectivity. For instance, there are literally nine sites from which to struggle from in the group one for each member presently in the group. Because we have worked toward cultivating a respect for difference in the collective decision making process, we have revalued each other as important alternative (sometimes antithetical and conflictory) sites of political struggle. Allowing a voice for these alternative subjectivities has opened up a space

for ambivalence. The availability to and value for alternative forms of authority in the group process emboldens members to contribute to the dance process even at times when they do not have authority in the methods of dance and movement exploration. Likewise, this facilitates the possibility for all the members to see alternatives to their own positionalities.

Throughout this year's process we have become aware of the outside subjectivities that enter the arena of the group, changing what it means to be a dancer or to dance. These challenges have in part worked to expose our own partialities. In this way, while we all intersect to "dance," members of the group cannot make decisions just as dancers. We are each aware that we are also other than or beyond "dancer"; and that with every new meeting those circumstances which define us could also change. Collectivity is the catalyst for this flux. When alternative perspectives enter the arena they rub up against us, confounding us with incongruities that may throw into disarray that which we thought was objective or unbiased.

From this ambivalent perspective, one cannot presume the omniscience of impartiality for one is always immersed in a negotiation of "the particulars of situation, feeling, affiliation and point of view" (Young 150). This realisation attests to the transformations I and the group have undergone. If I had been "mindful" of the specificity of difference, I would have perhaps been less interested in "equal say" and more interested in negotiating the different positions that construct our sense of self, of "resisting and claiming the other" (P. Phelan 13) and it may have been possible to begin earlier the process of working toward equitably and self-reflexively

understanding difference and 'otherness'. When we understand that we necessarily inform and transform our subjectivities by an engagement with social agents and institutions, such as race, class, social grouping, and gender, then change and critique become more tangible and accessible to the local and specific nodes of everyday experience.

This ambivalence allows me to suggest collectivity in *bodyvoice* necessitates a questioning of foundations in the prescription suggested by Judith Butler. Rather than discouraging responsibility for ones actions, the lack of foundations in this case, necessitated a responsibility for respecting difference. In addition, through collectivity we must "interrogate that ruse of authority that seeks to close itself off from contest" (Butler *Contingent* 41). One can no longer legitimate authority by claiming that they 'did the right thing' or the 'moral thing' in their decision making. One must attempt to understand more fully the different values and power structures at play. Answers are no longer easy but perhaps they are more fair. In this way I call *bodyvoice* a radical political project.

Chapter Five - Dancing on Boundaries

> Some people would say that we need a ground from which to act. We need a shared collective ground for collective action. I think we need to pursue the moments of degrounding, when we're standing in two different places at the same time; or we don't know exactly where we're standing; or when we've produced an aesthetic ground that shakes the ground. That's where resistance to recuperation happens. It's like a breaking through to a new set of paradigms. (Judith Butler *Gender as Performance* 10)

In the last chapter, I want to reflect on the political importance of crossing boundaries as a means to elicit more self-reflexive and responsible decision making and personal interaction. Through the course of this project I have wrestled practically, theoretically, spiritually, physically and emotionally, with several different definitions, paradigms and approaches. This has occurred not only with paradigms of "theory" but also with technical forms of "practice," such as dance and dance choreography, and alternative forms of governance such as collective say environments. Crossing boundaries the way I have in this project has been both beneficial and difficult.

The time I have spent with *bodyvoice* has been enormously beneficial because it has challenged me to see myself and the decisions I make in many different ways. It

has allowed me to identify myself in many different ways: as an academic, as a researcher, as a dancer, as a woman, as a feminist, as a postmodernist, ... I do not and cannot end this list. I do not think it can end. Interacting with nine women whose experiences are different from my own, has put those terms up for contest, changing and mutating into altogether new meanings that sometimes do not yet have names. Additionally, writing about *bodyvoice* through the ideas of feminism, poststructuralism and postmodernism has challenged my understanding of political effectiveness. It has allowed me to view political action as a context specific process whose outcome cannot be known. In this conception of politics there are many opinions and consequences rather than some monolithic secure, and intelligible process. Because of this, theory has empowered me. Conversely, this complicated mixture has made writing about this project enormously difficult for me.

In involving myself with *bodyvoice*, I have had to metaphorically dance and make up new movements on different sometimes contentious, boundaries. *bodyvoice* has facilitated that type of "degrounding, when we're standing in two different places at the same once."(Butler, *Gender as Performance* 10). These boundary dances have shaken the foundations of what constitutes dance, what constitutes expertise, what constitutes political struggle, what constitutes knowing, and what constitutes identity. Consistently, this has been a struggle. A struggle has shown me both the potential to open up new ways of thinking about social and political practices and the potential to get hopelessly lost within competing viewpoints.

I have become close friends with some of the members of *bodyvoice*. Some of

these friends believe in the uncovering and advocating essential ultimate truths. Because of these loyalties I cannot so easily criticise the normalising potential as discussed by Judith Butler. Similarly, because of this loyalty I have not wanted to deconstruct identity within a group of women, who through *bodyvoice*, have begun to be empowered by the fact of being a woman, being a dancer or being a lesbian.

I have also worried that introducing these anti-foundational ideas might reassert my hierarchial status in the group. I have also struggled with what constitutes false consciousness and viewing the members in the group as having a flawed consciousness because they see themselves as a coherent and stable identities. I have problems in saying their consciousness is flawed because this implies that my understanding of the world is better or more "truthful" then theirs. Suggesting that their consciousness is flawed would imply that there is some type of true consciousness out there waiting for me to uncover and bring to the group. Yet alternatively, I have felt that the mistakes I made during this project might have been avoided if I had understood some of these anti-foundational ideas better. Similarly, I am confronted and confused with my own complicity in perpetuating normalizing foundations and the way those foundational understandings within me remain hidden from me.

With all these incongruities I still feel this work is important. While the mixtures of theory, whether feminist or postmodernist or both and my practical involvement in *bodyvoice* have complicated my understanding of this project and of myself, I feel it has been an effective political endeavour on many fronts and has

contested the understanding of those fronts. I wish to go on with this type of research in which the researcher gets involved with the social or cultural formation that she is trying to document and understand. Even while this type of research is quite difficult and complex, it has the potential to question the vested interests of the researcher more self-reflexively. In this situation the researcher becomes challenged to see herself as a multiple and complex nexus of different experiences, loyalties and understandings. It might be contradictory to use the word integrity while also advocating multiple and dissonant personal identity, but I feel this work has given me just that. This integrity is not something that has a terminus but keeps on evolving.

In future research I wish to continue investigating the question uncovered in this thesis, "How and with what effects can one condone status quo beliefs when it makes other perhaps subversive and critical representations and practices possible?" Yet in examining this question I wish to incorporate the interview process as a research method. While this opens up problems of misrepresenting the words and ideas of someone else, I feel that it would bring greater specificity to my work. Embarking on an interviewing process would allow me to evaluate more closely and with more clarity my own impressions by having an outside perspective. In this way I could see more clearly how different representations are perceived by views other than myself and I would like to investigate this method as another form of self-critique.

One limitation of this project has been relying on my impressions of *bodyvoice* rather than have some analysable feedback from its members. I feel that the personal

reflection and personal experience method has limited me to seeing only certain things, things that might have been reflected in a different light through interviews. Alternately, I acknowledge that even with the inclusion of interviews, this project and any other subsequent projects, would still be my impression of the situation.

As a means to conclude a project that perhaps will continue to influence me long after I have physically withdrawn from it, I wish to accent the importance of struggle. The wrestling concerns that I have struggled with through the course of this project have only uncovered questions with only partial answers, which ultimately only lead to more questions or inconsistencies. I have had to reassure myself that it is not important to have explanations but acknowledge that the process of self-reflection is fraught with questions that do not have any ultimate answers. I have had to give up my desire of finding answers or getting it right because I have seen how I am complicit and embedded within the formations that I seek to question. I acknowledge that paradoxes and inconsistency do exist. And in acknowledging these contradictions I suggest that are no more ultimate universal answers, only partial, particular and specific ones.

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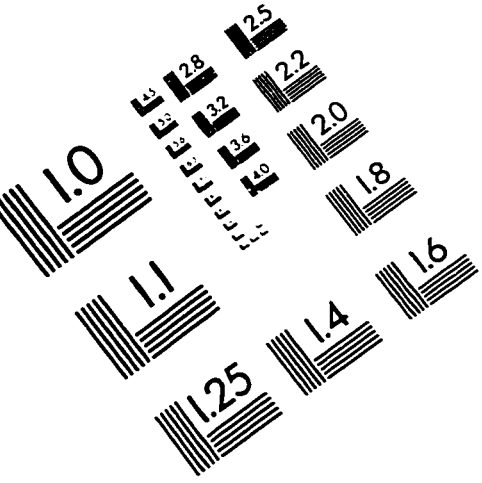
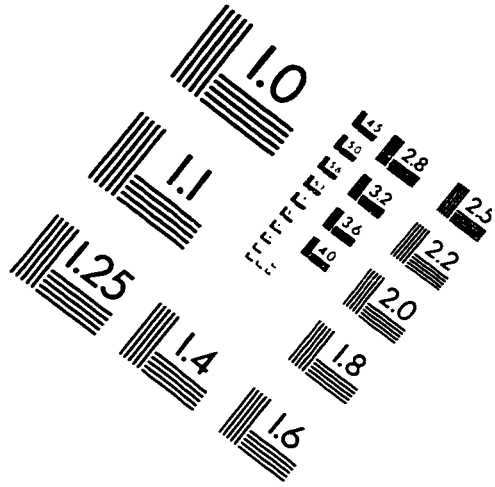
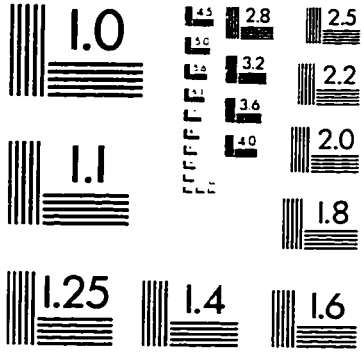
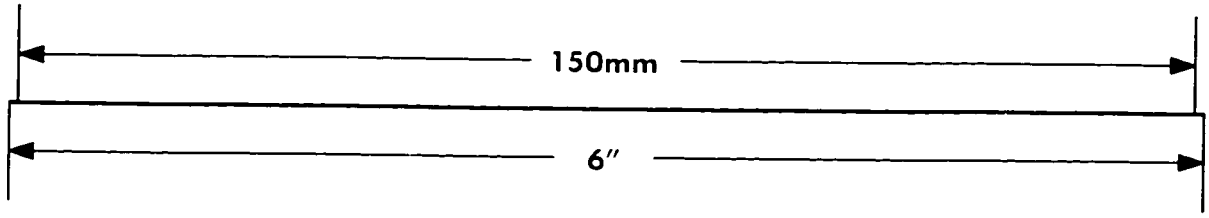
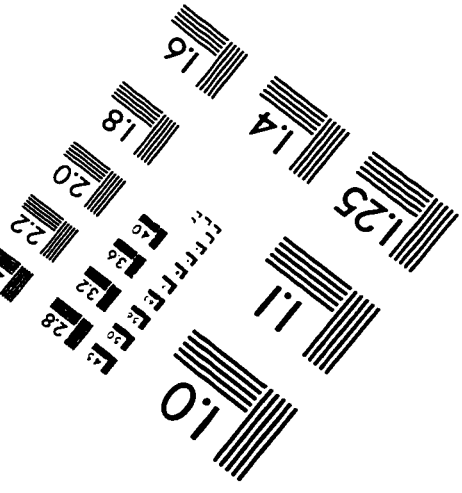
IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)

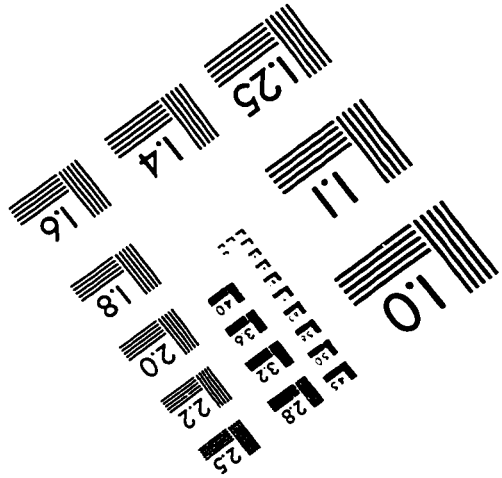












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