



Theatres of Memory: The Politics and Poetics of Improvised Social Dancing in Queer Clubs

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Review of:

Buckland, Fiona. *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World-Making*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2002.

1. Scholars who take up Fiona Buckland's *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World-Making* will step into the vastly underexplored arena that Buckland defines as "improvised social dancing in queer clubs" (2). Based on four years (1994-1998) of fieldwork and detailed interviews with New York's queer club-goers, her book describes the forms of preparation, performance, and politicized exchange that transpire in these volatile sites. As Buckland observes from the start, "the subject of improvised social dancing has been relegated to the sidelines in scholarship, not least because of its perceived impossibility--that is, its resistance to discursive description" (2). Formal, scored modes of social dance such as the tango are difficult enough to translate into words. What, then, about the spontaneous, often ineffable actions and gestures that transpire in queer clubs? How does one forge a theory of value for the affective knowledge that emerges from this seemingly inchoate mode of performance? What promises, possibilities, and ways of relating to others does such movement signify to its diverse practitioners? How does ephemeral dance set enduring politics in motion?
2. In her first chapter, "The Theatre of Queer World-Making," Buckland outlines the parameters that will enable her to archive the social worlds and practices encountered in the course of her research. One of her primary tasks is to delineate the forms of

collective interaction that she will discuss. Buckland uses the concept of a "lifeworld" to distinguish the diverse constellations of people who frequent queer dance clubs from more conventionally defined communities. She draws upon a definition and distinction made by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner in their article, "Sex in Public," in which they argue that a lifeworld differs from a community or group because it "necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, [and] modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright" (558). This expansive sense of how, where, and why specific people come together in order to dance enables the author to address some key challenges that accompany writing about queer sociality. In short, the "lifeworld" paradigm allows her to focus on particular inhabitants of particular spaces while at the same time contesting facile claims about gay and lesbian "identity," as well as utopian ideals of "community."

3. In an effort to provide readers with a more concrete sense of New York's evolving queer lifeworlds, Buckland redefines both space and the status of the performers who occupy such spaces. "Lifeworlds" are "environments created by their participants that contain many voices, many practices, and not a few tensions" (4). These are not "bordered cultures with recognizable laws," but "productions in the moment," spaces that remain "fluid and moving by means of the dancing body" (4). Similarly, the subjects who produce such mobile environs are hardly static in how they understand and perform the points of interaction between their race, socioeconomic background, and same-sex attractions: "Identity is not fixed, but tied to movement and its contexts" (5).
4. In reconfiguring space and identity as contingent on movement and contexts, Buckland refers to José Muñoz's important essay "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts." He defines the ephemeral as "linked to alternate modes of [...] narrativity like memory and performance: it is all those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself" (10). Attention to such residue is a

key part of Buckland's methodology, and it is central to understanding how her project diverges from text-based explorations of queer history. In contrast to historians who focus on play texts, reviews, and other forms of printed documentation, her evidence revolves around people's memories of what happened to them while getting ready to go out, while dancing, while cruising, while having sex, while walking home in the wee hours of the morning. Her analyses draw upon anecdotes, impressions, and lingering experiences that participants recall by means of their bodies. Traditional scholars often disregard such modes of sense-making as "fleeting" or "unreliable;" after all, the stories told by an aging queer twenty years after a memorable night on the town are hardly the stuff of History. Yet Buckland delves carefully into the cultural archives embedded in her subjects' narratives by means of an ethnographic approach. Throughout her study, she grapples skillfully with this often-criticized approach to gathering data, providing unorthodox revisions to routine practices. One example of this is her departure from asking informants a fixed set of questions in the hope of being told, "This is how we do things around here," to inviting them to tell her a personal story. Buckland explains that in order to render the specific details of people's embodied memories more tangible, she asked informants to "remember how they moved around New York City when they first wanted to find and create queer lifeworlds. Where did they go and how did they meet others like themselves. What happened at these places? How did they constitute queer cognitive maps of the city" (21)?

5. In response to her questions, informants perform "theatres of memory" (18). Though narrated in language, such theatres also reside in the body, as evidenced by an Argentine ex-patriot's shaking hand as he recalls defending himself against homophobic assailants with a broken bottle in the early 1970s, when walking to Chelsea's gay clubs meant traversing a tough Latino neighborhood. In tracing memories of past movements, some informants draw makeshift maps of Manhattan on scraps of paper, marking spaces mostly shuttered or demolished now due to the AIDS crisis and the city's draconian re-zoning of adult businesses. As informants retell their

unique yet related stories of the streets they once traveled and the ways queers could meet, they "release the power of events and experiences years after they occurred" (28). To implicate space in this dialectic between the past and its retelling, Buckland compares informants' theatres of memory with other gay maps of the city, particularly those marketed at the Gay Pride Parade to a largely white, male audience distinguished by its high level of disposable income. Her subjects--people of color, low-income students, teachers, door people, and HIV-positive persons on disability--"deliberately constitute queer life worlds that overlay, complement, and contradict official maps" (28). Their cognitive maps of defunct lifeworlds such as the West Side piers disrupt the Gay Pride Parade's linear trajectory from ritzy, uptown Manhattan to fashionable Greenwich Village. Their fond appraisals of the glamorous sleaze that once infused the *Squeezebox* and *Saint* dance clubs unsettle the parade's focus on trendy, sanitized sites. Moreover, as informants recall the circuitous detours they once took in order to meet with other gay and lesbian people, Buckland realizes that these stories indicate something important about where queer lifeworlds are forged. In short, queer world-making takes place "at the level of the quotidian: the walk through the city, rather than the riot in the square" (30). As such, attention to seemingly trivial details of the city space is crucial.

6. The author spends the early part of her book describing walks around the East Village with informants who recall a vivid tapestry of extinct dance clubs, saunas, bathhouses, restaurants, and bars. Many gay businesses in New York are not gay-owned, a factor that puts them at risk of closure whenever the costs of running a club outweigh the revenue taken in, or when political pressure to "clean up the neighborhood" is applied. In short, straight proprietors of queer spaces have less of a commitment to keeping those clubs open; money talks, and when money can no longer be made without hassle, queer spaces tend to fold and come back as straight establishments. Virtually everyone with whom Buckland traverses Manhattan's queer districts describes a favorite hangout that no longer exists physically, though it continues to thrive in memories and narratives. Her interlocutors show her

the remnants of the places they used to go, recounting adventures they experienced inside, explaining why these sites of pleasure are now gone. Interestingly, Buckland posits that these oral performances of the past do not "reproduce a fact" (31), but rather recast lost places and people in the terms by which subjects want to understand them: as heroic absences, as melodramas, as social-political calamities, as provisional sites of queer pleasure always at risk of closure. Though certain accounts are not necessarily accurate, it is through the retelling of these stories that subjects construct meanings for themselves: "These memories were full with the presence of absences, which in itself made meaning, because they were deeply missed" (31). More than just deeply missed, many of the places that Buckland's subjects mourn are ones they identify as a "vital part of queer education and socialization" (32). In these vanquished clubs, an older generation of queers once carried out embodied acts that were observed, practiced, imitated, and passed along to a younger generation. Both men and women learned about "acting gay" in such spaces: forms of collective knowledge were conveyed and sustained there by means of ritual practices.

7. While the past haunts *Impossible Dance* in potent ways, performances preparing for the future are equally crucial to this study. In her second chapter, "The Currency of Fabulousness," Buckland examines how informants get ready, arrive at clubs, journey to dance floors, and cruise potential partners. We turn from exploring the exterior vicinities in which queer dance clubs are located to entering those intimate spaces with the author as our guide. In the process, we learn about the "currencies of fabulousness and fierceness" valued in queer clubs (36). Unlike the spheres of family and work, where people are typically praised for their skills as team players, the sphere of queer club-going places a high value on individuality. As Buckland puts it, "the clubgoer expected to be noticed and judged on his or her first entrance. Being special or fabulous was a way to enjoy the attention of peers. Entrance was the opening line of nonverbal communication" (55). In short, there is a tremendous amount at stake in the deceptively simple act of entry. Those people who do so simultaneously "appropriate" the physical

space that existed prior to their arrival; as Buckland points out, these individuals "*realize* the club as a queer space" (55). They do so "both by the presence of his or her queer body, and also by queer acts--kissing, touching, looking with desire, celebrating the presence of other queers, and expressing queerness openly and physically through self-carriage and without fear of surveillance or reprisals" (55).

8. Buckland's appraisals of how queer dancers appropriate space may seem overly optimistic. In our postmodern age of hidden cameras and undercover monitoring, is there truly such a thing as freedom from fear of surveillance or reprisals? At times, she appears too keen on interpreting the entrances of club participants as radical gestures: "Walking into a club was the opening gambit of speaking queer; a way of expressing, 'I'm here, I'm queer, I'm fabulous'" (55). This image of club entry as the articulation of one's subversive magnificence will no doubt ring false to participants who are shy or socially awkward, who view the act of entering a dance club as a tremendous challenge and risk. Nevertheless, Buckland does go on to explain the more nerve-racking aspects of forging queer lifeworlds out of what is often a foreign, confusing atmosphere: "After entering a club, I found that many were disorienting spaces within which participants had to orient themselves in order to recognize and make a lifeworld" (56). She notes the various obstacles and reference points (staircases, coat-checks, foyers, bars, juice-stops, and chill-out areas) that participants must apprehend before they can stabilize their visual grip on where they are and what's happening. She also draws attention to "temporal appropriations" of club space, or the ways that diverse groups of people claim the dance floor at distinct yet often overlapping periods of time: "At four a.m. in *Arena*, I stood watching the dance floor as smartly dressed college girls danced next to a group of gay leather men in body harnesses and chaps. They did not interact, but seeing them dancing in the same recreational space, even for a short time, was a striking juxtaposition" (57).

9. Buckland is a superb observer, detecting nuances of dress, speech, and humor often ignored in academic texts. An example of how she draws

readers into the little-known rituals of social dancing in queer clubs is her focus on what people bring. She observes that many club-goers view chewing gum as an essential accessory. Gum alleviates the tenseness that dancers who take club drugs experience in their jaws; it also freshens breath, offers energy in the form of sugar, and serves "as a medium of friendship" (42). Along with water and cigarettes, gum was "often offered and passed between friends" (42). When offered outside of a circle of friends, "it was a social icebreaker, which was also used in cruising" (42). In short, the author carefully identifies those small yet pivotal details that comprise the unspoken social etiquette of these lifeworlds.

10. Yet where *Impossible Dance* truly departs from most dance ethnographies is in Buckland's ability to treat sound, space, and movement as primary, not secondary, social texts. In "Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies" (1997), Jane C. Desmond urged cultural critics to work harder on developing the skills needed to "analyze visual, rhythmic, and gestural forms [...] [W]e must become movement literate" (58). Buckland heeds Desmond's call in complex ways. Her third chapter, "Slaves to the Rhythm," examines the use of music, space, and composition in relation to ideas about the body. Arguing that "improvised social dancing involves the incorporation and embodiment of self-knowledge, self-presentation, sociality, and self-transformation" (65), the author studies how individual queer subjects create and express themselves on the dance floor. One aspect of her inquiry involves the specific types of music played at different clubs. Does it matter if dancers fashion their identities in the context of hip-hop, as opposed to salsa music? Does it matter whether the rhythms consist of a "bright, happy sound quality" (78), as opposed to the heavy, industrial mono-beats played at clubs like *Twilo* or *Arena*? Buckland argues that such factors do affect the relations between an individual and the group. What do individuals get out of dancing in queer clubs? What makes them feel vital and fulfilled? What makes them want to return? In studying moments where the musical beat functions "as a unifying thread rather than as a relentless master" (80), she provides insight into how dancers acquire a sense of personal worth and collective well-being

from frequenting queer clubs: "The effect of these dramas was [...] to create a community of movement in which the individual's own movement was essential and valued. There was not only the 'push' inherent in the dance music [...] there was also the 'pull' of participation [...] part of the experience of living in a late twentieth-century city" (80).

11. In exploring a wide range of clubs--some exclusively catering to lesbians or gays, some featuring mixed participation, some open to heterosexuals as well as queers, some composed mainly of blacks and Latinos, others mainly of whites--Buckland discerns some pivotal modes of distinction between social groups. Her fourth chapter, "The Order of Play: Choreographing Queer Politics," turns from assessing the rhythmical inventions of individual dancers to studying how people move *together* on the floors of diverse clubs. Based on the physical and verbal articulations "of at least some participants," she posits that improvised social dancing in queer clubs "did not exist outside of everyday life" (87). Rather, the forms of contact created during the ephemeral hours of the night are informed by the "real lives" people lead at other times of the day. One interesting topic discussed in this chapter is why certain queer subjects reject particular queer clubs: because a place is "not about them" (89). Buckland explains that several of her informants rejected New York's popular *Twilo* club for reasons that reflect on the types of communities and modes of political engagement they sought: "Colin was not interested in going to *Twilo* with its majority of white clientele, Tito because the vast majority were a good thirty years younger than he was, Thomas because he felt he could not be open about his HIV status, and Catherine because it was male dominated" (90). It isn't simply that any dance space will suffice in uniting members of New York's queer "community." Rather, those factors that inhibit relations in other arenas of life also play a major role in determining the types of connections that may happen in the seemingly liminal realm of improvised social dance.
12. After discussing why her informants will not frequent certain clubs, Buckland turns to examine the forms of interaction that transpire in the clubs they do

attend. For example, she compares the musical choices of DJs and movement styles of dancers as indicators of distinctions between social groups. In attending to the specific rhythms and movement repertoires that dancers adopt as grounds for their improvisation, Buckland discerns the racial, gendered, and generational knowledge that *particular* queer subjects hold in their bodies, how it is used in social settings, and the consequences of this employment. She also compares how intimate people are willing to get in certain spaces: "At clubs such as *Escuelita* and *Krash* on Astoria Boulevard in Queens, I noticed different attitudes to dance compared to the relationship of the individual to the mass in clubs such as *Twilo* and *Arena*" (98). More precisely, the smaller, predominantly Latino/a clubs in Queens featured "more partnering [...]. The participants I saw made more contact with each other, both eye contact and physical touching" (98). Dancers decide upon the types of relationships (personal and political) they want to have with other bodies--whether to be closely packed in a tight circle, almost inseparable from the mass movement, or to have more individualized space. In this chapter, dancers also explain the social-political significance of being able to congregate with other queers: "I guess what I want is to be with others like me," says one young lesbian; "there's something really powerful about being in a room full of other women" (107). The dancers whom Buckland interviews experience similarity, not only in terms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or race, but also "in terms of shared knowledge expressed through movement" (107).

13. Apart from describing the physical and social dynamics of New York's queer dance clubs, Buckland's most important achievement is that *Impossible Dance* assures the survival of a culture's ephemeral past. Her final chapter, "Mr. Mesa's Ticket," examines the complex reasons why HIV-positive men continue attending queer dances after their diagnoses, and even after they fall ill. More precisely, Buckland describes the physical and political interactions that took place at the *The Sound Factory Bar*, a Manhattan space where HIV-positive subjects could partake in a special event called the Body Positive T-Dance. These dances began in 1993, when a pair of young HIV-

positive gay men decided to set up a tea-dance (called in this instance a "T-Dance") for themselves and their friends. The author explains the terminology: "A tea-dance is an early Sunday evening dance party form established within the gay male community in New York City" (161). The abbreviation of "tea" to "T" references those precious infection-fighting cells that the retrovirus destroys; it also tacitly suggests that dancing might be a way to increase one's T-cell count, or at least amplify one's will to hang on. Sadly, the Body Positive T-Dance no longer existed by the time Buckland finished writing her book; this practice was terminated in 1998, after a series of shuffles from one dance space to another, and after it became difficult to attract enough people on a regular basis to make the dances economically feasible. Nevertheless, the author's attention to the complex issues raised by these dances provides readers with a lasting memorial to their significance. A central question raised in this chapter pertains to "the relationship between salvage ethnography and the eagerness of participants to have their stories and experiences recorded for the future" (161). In other words, why is it so vital for gay men infected with HIV to tell someone about the ways they used to interact on the dance floor, about what they learned in those fleeting moments, and about the struggles and triumphs they are leaving behind as they prepare to die?

14. Buckland honors the adamant request that many of her HIV-positive informants made in talking to her: "You must write this down" (179). In poignant and haunting ways, she journeys with these people through the kinetic landscapes and encounters housed in their memories, through the music that once made them feel alive, through the clothes and accessories that helped them understand their gayness. Her older informants explain why they want these stories written down: so that "people would realize that dancing in a club is a privileged pleasure for which people have died" (179). They want the psychic and political benefits of queer social dancing to thrive in the present and future, so that a younger generation might experience the empowerment and liberation that an older one fought desperately to attain. There is something magical in how these men describe social dancing as a way of slowing down

time, as a way of making more of the time they have left. Buckland depicts their hopes and desires in ways that help readers grasp the temporal and psychological terrain that HIV-positive subjects inhabit as they dance. In going to the clubs where they are welcome, such dancers transcend the limits of the physical body, surpassing the obstacles that normative culture sets out for them. By means of dancing, they overcome self-consciousness about being too old, too thin, too unattractive, or too sick for the regular club scene. As Buckland argues, these forms of improvisation "may thus be seen as a conversation, not only with other participants, but also with the past" (179). In telling the youthful author about why they continue to dance in the face of death, subjects recall who they once were, and realize that political agency and hope for the future are not impossible after all. In its descriptive detail, analytical sophistication, and compassionate engagement with the subjects whom Buckland studies, this well-researched book inspires new generations of scholars to continue in her footsteps, creating groundbreaking possibilities in the field of dance ethnography.

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Talk Back