

# ***edged: exploring the porous boundaries between teaching philosophy, dance performance and choreographic practice***

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## **About the author**

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## **Abstract**

Over the past four years I have developed *The Porous Body*, a teaching philosophy that promotes the practice of heightened physical and mental malleability in dance training by following four fundamental guiding principles: flow, playfulness, metaphor and paradox. As my process deepened, I wondered: what would happen if I applied The Porous Body to my choreographic practice? How might this framework prove fruitful during a creative process? What kind of choreographic work would emerge from this experiment? This article is an artist's reflection on an artistic experiment; it describes the first choreographic process to which I applied The Porous Body's guiding principles, and which led to the creation and performance of *edged*, a solo work exploring the porous edges between inner/outer, planned/unplanned, control/surrender, pleasure/struggle and terror/courage.

## **Keywords**

creative process

dance practice

dance performance

movement improvisation

flow experience

mental imagery

## **The teaching philosophy**

How do I want to teach? I was preoccupied by this question about four years ago, as I was transitioning from a primarily performance-based dance career to a full-time university teaching position. This self-reflective process led me to investigate the current state of Western-based contemporary concert dance training on local, national and international levels. I concluded that with the decline of the dance company scene and the rise of a nomadic, freelance system, it has become increasingly essential for contemporary dancers to develop and maintain highly-adaptive qualities. I asked myself: how can I help as many students as possible gain some of the traditionally-required characteristics for a dance career (such as technical proficiency, aesthetic specificity and discipline) while simultaneously cultivating psychological adaptability? What environmental conditions increase adaptability in the classroom? What state of mind encourages it? What tools can students learn to access this mindset? How could the application of these tools become an integral part of my pedagogical practice, particularly while I teach codified dance techniques? While pondering these questions, I developed a philosophical framework which I named *The Porous Body* (Laberge-Côté 2018: 65-77). I consider it a 'structure of feeling' (Turner 2015: n.pag.), which focuses on the practice of an approach to movement, as opposed to the practice of movement itself. Since it is not attached to a specific movement vocabulary, aesthetic or series of exercises, this framework can be incorporated into diverse forms of dance training. The Porous Body (TPB) is inspired by various dance methods and concepts I have encountered, to varying degrees, throughout my dance career, notably: Ohad Naharin's *Gaga* (Katan 2016), Anouk van Dijk's *Countertechnique* (Siegmund and van Dijk 2011: 58-89), Gill Clarke and Eva Karczag's conclusions from the Vienna Research Project (2007: 27-31), Eiko and Koma's *Delicious Movement* (n.pag.), and Butoh.<sup>1</sup> TPB's goal is to

nurture the ability to transform willpower into a state of malleability, responsiveness, openness and vulnerability by following four fundamental guiding principles:

- flow and the loss of self-consciousness<sup>2</sup>
- playfulness and collectivity
- guided mental imagery and metaphor
- paradox and unknowingness

I have since planned and taught my classes with this framework in mind, and exploring and applying these principles has enriched my pedagogical practice. It has transformed my use of language around dance training, improved my relationship with the students, and clarified my educational intentions. As a natural extension, I later wondered: what would happen if I applied The Porous Body (TPB) to my choreographic practice? How might this framework prove fruitful in a choreographic context? How might TPB make me think, move, and choreograph differently during a creative process? What kind of choreographic work would emerge from this experiment? This writing is an artist's initial reflection on an artistic experiment rather than a detailed critical analysis of a choreographic process.

### **Day 1: Blurring the beginning**

As I was pondering these questions, freelance dancer Jordana Deveau<sup>3</sup> commissioned me to create a solo for her. We decided to use our creative process as an opportunity to experiment with TPB. To put myself into a heightened state of unknowingness (one of TPB's guiding principles),

I chose to initiate the process without any kind of plan – no thematic ideas, no movement vocabulary, no aesthetic expectations, no predetermined methodology. I entered the room while Jordana was warming up – rolling fluidly on the floor, giving in to gravity, coming in and out of a bright patch of sunlight. When I thought it was time to interrupt her warm-up so we could begin, it dawned on me: why do I believe there needs to be such a drastic boundary between warm-up and rehearsal? I had experienced the blurring of transition between warm-up and performance as a dancer, but had never used this tool during my own creative processes. I wondered: what might happen if we developed a porous relationship between Jordana’s warm-up and the rehearsal process? I asked Jordana to think of her warm-up as an improvisation guided by her warm-up needs and to gradually transition into a dance solely driven by her creative impulses. I added that she did not need to identify exactly where she was in this process and that she could trick herself into not knowing whether she was still warming up or not. Including some of the elements I have been experimenting with while teaching with TPB, I instructed her to let go of any sense of responsibility regarding time, efficiency, creativity or the merit of her investigations. Finally, I informed her that she will decide when to end her explorations, but that she must resist the temptation to give up when faced with discomfort. What unfolded was a four-hour long movement study that seemed to live somewhere between warm-up routine, meditation, self-care, performance and ritual. I was captivated by the quality of her concentration – acute and watchful, but also gentle and playful. I have always known Jordana to be a high achiever. It was exquisite for me to witness her relinquish some of her ambition and to dance without any perceptible sense of pressure or agenda. She later admitted that she had rarely felt so unencumbered by her expectations, which allowed her to fully immerse herself in the experience

of her actions. Already in this preliminary stage, it appeared that TPB had influenced our process. By providing her with an opportunity to explore with a greater sense of freedom, TPB gave Jordana the ability to shed a layer from her ambitious dancer persona and allowed her to access more surrendered performance qualities.<sup>4</sup>

## **Day 2: Playing with guided mental imagery**

TPB's third principle is *guided mental imagery and metaphor*. I decided to begin our second rehearsal with a series of movement tasks based on mental imagery. These images were along the lines of the following italicized texts.

*Feel that your bones are slowly melting. Sense that they have the ability to change shape inside your body. Let them liquefy like melting butter. Connect to these sensations. Let your body respond and move of its own accord without any judgement. Become one with melting.*

I changed the tasks and images regularly during the rehearsal and, after a while, began mixing and multi-layering them:

*Imagine a glowing light emanating from your flesh. Let yourself bathe in this glow. Become aware of all the cells in your body. With your mind's eye, see each of these cells bounce and vibrate. Float in the calming luminosity of your flesh and feel the quick, energetic movement of your cells.*

I eventually led her toward conflicting tasks as a way to channel TPB's fourth principle: *paradox and unknowingness*:

*Feel that your organs slowly sink down into the earth while your blood floats upward toward the sky. Try to feel both processes at the same time. Simultaneously feel heavier and lighter. Try not to control the outcome but simply enjoy the impossibility. Let both processes renew themselves and affect each other endlessly.*

After some time, I asked Jordana to continue her investigations on her own, going back to the imagery we covered earlier that day and mixing this information in whatever way she wanted. Once again, I was mesmerized by the quality of her focus – intense yet playful. I was so immersed in the unfolding of her journey that I completely lost track of time – was *I* in a flow state? I felt so attuned to Jordana that, as I watched her, it was as if I could feel energetic and/or cellular transformations manifest inside of me – body parts liquefying, thickening, evaporating – even though I did not always know which images she was exploring. Recognizing my high level of kinesthetic empathy<sup>5</sup> toward Jordana's dancing, I began to wonder: could the practice of TPB's principles cultivate an environment in which kinesthetic empathy is more easily accessible? Or was my empathic experience mostly due to my emotional investment as the maker of the work? While I did not seek to examine the empathic responses of our future audiences, I wondered to what extent my strong response to her dancing might be mirrored or 'rebuilt' in a performative situation.

### **Day 3: New thematic ideas emerge**

At the start of our third day, I decided to focus on TPB's second principle: playfulness and collectivity. Out of curiosity, I chose to experiment with Kokology games.<sup>6</sup> We searched for several Kokology quizzes and tests online and carried them out individually. Comparing our answers provoked conversations during which we both acknowledged that we carry a history of sexualized violence. Ironically, what was meant to be a fun, almost trivial, entry point into the rehearsal process brought us back to some of the darkest times in our respective lives. While we were surprised by where this exercise led us, we realized that we both generally feel drawn to explore our traumatic pasts through our artistic work. We agreed to investigate this aspect of our lives together through our creative process. Despite feeling inspired by this unexpected creative direction, I also felt concerned that this may represent too much of a departure from our previous experimentations with TPB. How might these new thematic ideas create more possibilities for a TPB process? Jordana and I admitted that emotional and physical dissociation had been our defence mechanisms while dealing with abuse. We concurred that investigating the dissociative and rigidifying effects of trauma through TPB – an associative, explorative practice based on resilience and transformation – could create a compelling and fruitful sense of tension between method and themes.

### **Framing the choreographic work**

Over the following days, we pursued our movement investigations through various aspects of TPB – imagery-based explorations, paradoxical tasks, and light-hearted games – with the intent of creating an environment in which the flow experience could be generated.<sup>7</sup> While free-



associating and brainstorming around the trauma-based thematic ideas, several elements were gradually incorporated within our 'creative pool' such as the historical figure of Joan of Arc, the seven Christian virtues and capital sins,<sup>8</sup> the seven chakras,<sup>9</sup> Kübler-Ross' 'five stages of grief',<sup>10</sup> and the Chartres cathedral petite labyrinth pattern, which later became the spatial structure of the choreographic work. These diverse elements provided us with a rich bank of concepts, images and metaphors from which we created several dance 'riddles', each of them flirting with TPB through different applications of mental imagery, playfulness, impossibility and flow. As I observed Jordana grappling with these multi-layered tasks, I realized that I was more interested in witnessing her mental struggle - the juggling of the demands on her attention and awareness while working with complex imagery - than in setting a specific movement vocabulary and aesthetic. We agreed to keep the movement material in a task-based structured improvisation state – somewhat similar to Deborah Hay's choreographic scores (Hay 2013) – to preserve a heightened sense of challenge and unknowingness. As the work developed, I began to see how the superimposition and merging of our various games blurred the lines between actual external spaces (Jordana's location in the studio), imagined spaces (Jordana's location in the labyrinth), emotional spaces (stages of grief), internal physical spaces (the chakras), human characteristics of spiritual significance (the sins and virtues), as well as the intricate duality between character (Joan) and real-life persona (Jordana). This latter duality inadvertently created a synergy between reclaiming one's land after military invasion and healing one's body following sexual abuse. As Jordana deepened her use of TPB principles to frame and work with these dance puzzles, she appeared to shed more layers of her ambitious self and to become more competent at 'letting go' and 'moving on'; 'the need to activate one's entire being in the business of dancing and to exist

in the moment' (Hay, in Crabb 2015: n.pag.). As I watched her gain deeper knowledge through daily practice, I felt increasingly calm and secure in the work we were doing. In dancerly terms, I could describe my responses to watching the work unfold as corporeal experiences in which something was shifting within my body. I find it challenging to describe exactly what it was, but I sensed that my main 'energetic centre' dropped lower in my pelvis, in a place that felt simultaneously new and familiar, complex yet simple, corporeal and spiritual. While I was delighted by these transformations, I could not help but wonder: could an audience with no previous knowledge about the work, its process or TPB experience such a high level of kinesthetic empathy? How might I support the cultivation of a porous connection between Jordana and our future audiences? Should I even worry about this at this point?

### **The setback**

As we approached opening night, something unexpected happened. Jordana, usually a confident performer, started feeling insecure about dancing the work in front of an audience, not so much because of the intimate or traumatic nature of some of the elements involved, but because she suddenly felt incapable of working through the various choreographic tasks in a performance setting. Even though she had performed structured improvisations on many occasions, she admitted she never felt this vulnerable or powerless about performing. She confessed that her uneasiness resided in her inability to control her performance and the recognition that the only way forward was to surrender to the moment entirely. I then realized that, with the added pressure of the performance dates approaching, we both had higher expectations and forgot about one of TPB's essential components: playfulness. We devoted the next stage of our process to the

re-exploration and re-inclusion of sensuality, levity, curiosity and pleasure within the choreographic structure. This phase made me recognize my tendency to forget about playfulness when faced with higher expectations and highlighted its importance within TPB. As we further rehearsed with this new approach, Jordana eventually managed to let go of her desire to control and came to be at peace with the unachievability of the tasks. She later acknowledged that the trauma-based themes may have increased her need for self-control and that TPB provided her with practical tools to cope with these challenges. Her discomfort – and eventually acceptance – of the performance of the work added a whole new reading: on top of being inspired by Joan of Arc's journey toward the stake and Jordana's healing of old wounds, the piece also became about a dancer moving through her insecurities, renouncing control, and advancing toward a new understanding of empowerment through performance. From then on, I titled the work *edged*, as it lived within the porous edges between inner/outer, planned/unplanned, control/surrender, pleasure/struggle, terror/courage, victory/defeat and the ongoing frictions between free will and destiny.

### **The performance**

We moved to the theatre and, to my eye, Jordana danced the work while integrating TPB's four guiding principles. I cannot adequately describe what happened, but there was a quality to her presence that seemed simultaneously secure and risky. I remember when I watched Christopher House perform his adaptation of Deborah Hay's *I'll Crane for You* (2015). House himself describes his experience of the work as 'entering an arena with no shield and no sword... with an hour of potential failure hanging over me' (House, in Smith 2015: n.pag.). Similarly, I thought Jordana appeared different in a way that felt both mysteriously intangible and deeply grounded in

reality. I saw her as ‘other’, meaning that she did not quite look like Jordana. And yet, I never felt that she tried to emulate anything other than herself. I like to imagine that the TPB framework helped her access different aspects of her psyche by working through some of the limiting characteristics of her personality.

I could not shake my desire to know about how members of the audience experienced Jordana’s performance, and in particular their kinesthetic experience of her work. I approached a friend and experienced dance artist, Michelle Silagy, to respond in words. Although her response does not deal directly with kinesthetic empathy, or indeed TPB, I found it helped me identify interesting correlations between her perception of *edged* and its somewhat ‘hidden’ themes (the Joan of Arc references and the trauma-based components were not clearly identifiable in the finished choreographic work):

[...] This formidable woman is shifting the air with swaths of weighted intent with every fibre of her physical form. She saturates us with emotional fortitude and movement intelligence. She seems selfless, almost divinely guided. I imagine a multilayered grid of laser-like pathways. I see her cutting through these pathways with steely, metal-like precision. Yet, the mass of her entire body is fluid, dense, saturated with brilliant knowingness. Her form and the density of her internal network are complex, yet remarkably attuned. This is what I experienced – a woman fully aware of what she was doing in the moment it was being done. I imagined that she was moving with adversity, against it. I imagined that any thought that she ‘had’ was being processed by her in the

moment. A woman busting through survival regardless of outcome. In the moment of sensing *edged*, I felt and knew that moving against adversity is never without pain but always necessary... A stage is a stage except when it is transformed. Is she imagining her own transformation? Or do I see it because transformation is happening – through her?  
(Silagy 2016: n.pag.)

Silagy's writing is only a single, highly subjective response, and I doubt that every audience member had such a profound experience during the performances. Nevertheless, I'm excited that Silagy – who had no previous knowledge about the work, its themes, its creative process, and TPB – seems to refer to the labyrinth, the battle, the divinely-guided quest, and even the 'steel'. I like to imagine that our use of TPB helped cultivate Silagy's empathic experience and response.

I was also intrigued by Jordana's experience, and asked her to provide me with a written post-performance reflection:

[...] Louis created a situation that was both joyfully, and frustratingly impossible for me. There was actually no way that I could prepare or practice what it was that I was supposed to achieve. I could rehearse. I could keep working at the tasks. I could practice the juggling of a million ideas [...] but I could not practice doing all of that in performance. I had to go through something, while observing myself going through it, without judgment, but with an awareness of being true to myself without putting on a performance – the layers of consciousness and awareness became dizzying. It was

thrilling and terrifying and something I did not know how to ‘do best’ and perhaps something that would only ever be felt and understood by me. But I know people were moved. Those who knew me expressed that they had never seen me like that – I am choosing my words carefully here, consciously avoiding the words ‘perform’, ‘dance’, and ‘move’ as these friends and colleagues awkwardly did when they tried to express how it was exactly that I was different. I think this gets at what we as performers and dance artists are striving for: we hope to move people in some way; to be ourselves while also being more, or different from ourselves. (Deveau 2016: n.pag.)

### **Post-performance reflection**

This initial experiment seemed to indicate that TPB has some value in performative and choreographic contexts. The principles have positively influenced my choreographic practice and have guided me in new creative directions. I like to think that by learning how to ‘unshed’ – or ‘unperform’ – herself through the practice of TPB’s guiding principles, Jordana was able to create an internal environment within which resilience and transformation could manifest, and that TPB provided her with useful tools for self-regulation as she discovered new shades of her psychophysical experiences. Would I feel differently about this experiment with TPB if I had collaborated with a less experienced, resourceful or open-minded dancer? Quite possibly. For instance, it’s entirely plausible that TPB had little influence over the seeming ‘success’ of Jordana’s performances. It is equally possible that this framework would not resonate with creators and performers who do not feel particularly inspired by the principles. How could I best direct a process with TPB while collaborating with performers who are not inclined to work with

mental imagery and paradox? How different would this experiment have been if I created set choreography, instead of a structured improvisation? How might the principles support the rehearsal of pre-existing works of repertoire? Does TPB have an ideal practice within various choreographic and performative contexts? How might I transfer this knowledge to other creators? Are there potential dangers of experimenting with a heightened sense of porousness? What are the ethical challenges associated with this practice? I need to spend some time refining this new application of TPB through more practice and experimentation before I can start to address these questions. However, I now see TPB as living somewhere between the boundaries of training, dancing, improvising, performing, creating and healing. How will TPB evolve next?

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Butoh is a Japanese dance form that includes a broad range of techniques and exercises. Most butoh exercises use guided mental imagery in a variety of ways. In many cases, the body is perceived as 'being moved' rather than consciously moving on its own accord. The movement can be generated from an internal or external source. (Baird and Candelario 2019)

<sup>2</sup> In positive psychology, flow is described as 'the positive mental state of being completely absorbed, focused, and involved in your activities at a certain point in time, as well as deriving enjoyment from being engaged in that activity' (Moore 2019: n.pag.). Although flow research in the west became widespread in the 1980s, the concept has been a source of fascination across cultures throughout history. (Csíkszentmihályi 2000)

<sup>3</sup> Jordana Deveau's dance biography is accessible at <http://www.jddance.ca/about/jordana-deveau/>

<sup>4</sup> I have discussed this representation of Jordana's character and her work, and she expressed comfort with it being published as I have described.

<sup>5</sup> Kinesthetic empathy is described as 'the ability to understand and share the feelings of the performer merely by observing their actions' (Jola 2017: n.pag.). Dance scholar Ann Daly explains: 'Dance, although it has a visual component, is fundamentally a kinesthetic art whose apperception is grounded not just in the eye but in the entire body' (2002: 307).

<sup>6</sup> Kokology is the study of kokoro, which in Japanese translates to 'mind' or 'spirit'. Invented by Isamu Saito, a psychology professor at Rissho University in Japan, and Tadahiko Nagao, head of the 'Kokology Project' team, Kokology is meant to unveil one's hidden beliefs about various aspects of life by using Freudian and Jungian concepts. The Kokology books present 'a series of lighthearted queries designed to reveal a player's innermost views on particular subjects, as filtered through the medium of riddles' (Dunn 2000: n.pag.).

<sup>7</sup> Jeanne Nakamura and Mihály Csíkszentmihályi have identified six factors surrounding the flow experience: intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment, merging of action and awareness, a loss of reflective self-consciousness, a sense that one can control one's action, distortion of temporal experience, experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding (2009: 90).

<sup>8</sup> The capital sins, or deadly sins, is a designation of vices within Christian belief. The classification originated with Evagrius Ponticus (345–399 AD), one of the most prominent ecclesiastics in the late fourth-century faith (Sinkewicz 2006).

<sup>9</sup> The chakras are a part of the esoteric theories that developed across Eastern traditions (White 2012). These theories asserted that human life concurrently exists in two dimensions: the 'physical body', made of mass, and the 'subtle body', consisting of energy channels joined by nodes of psychic energy or focal points, called chakras (Sharma 2010). The concept is found in the inner traditions of Hinduism, Chinese Taoism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Japanese Esoteric Buddhism, and was later adapted to the western mind with the work of Carl G. Jung (Coward 2002).

<sup>10</sup> The five stages of grief are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross proposed this model after studying mortality and its psychological impact on terminally ill patients. In 1970, she published *On Death and Dying*, often described as one of the most influential psychological studies of the late twentieth century (Kübler-Ross 1970).