

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH DANCE:
MAUD ROBART AND HAITIAN YANVALOU

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To my mother, María

To my wife, Natasha

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I would like to thank Maud Robart for her unconditional support and friendship, for allowing me to participate in her work, and guiding me through a learning adventure in which I have approached a type of knowledge that reveals the profundity of life and being. She never left me alone on my path since we first met in 1987. She welcomed and supported my academic research, making sure I understood both in words and in practice, her propositions and ideas. During the writing of this thesis, she was always available to clarify my doubts and give me her sincere, constructive opinion. These words are not enough to thank her for everything she has given me. I will always be indebted to her.

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ABSTRACT

This research is an inquiry into the role of the Haitian dance *yanvalou*, in the work of the Haitian artist Maud Robart. Robart works with groups of individuals in structures of movement, in which the dance is combined with Vodou chants. Robart's work focuses not on the creation of dance forms, but on the search of pulses of creative awareness or inherent creative drive within the individual, as the source of dance.

In this thesis I argue that Robart emphasizes the exploration of dancing and singing as a window into a deeper and larger view of the human being and creativity. I explain how her approach to form, in both dance and chant, widens the experience of the body by going beyond the inherited cultural viewpoints that consider dance as a tool of the mind to create forms. I explain that in the context of her research, the body is seen not as an object limited by time and space, but as an entity of relatedness, an interface that connects our consciousness to the external world perceived through the senses, as well as to the inner, subjective world— what we feel within our body and psyche. In Robart's work, the body is an open door to the present, past, and future, to all beings, to the most mundane and to the most sacred in the human being.

In Robart's research, form, articulated either as dance or chant, is the expression of a duality. Such duality includes the subject's pulses of creative awareness and its response to those same pulses. Robart calls the pulses of creative awareness *élan*. For her, *élan* is more than a physical or kinesthetic impulse; it is like a fervor, a passion, and a will to go beyond our limited human condition to find freedom— it is a propulsion toward God. Dance and chant are simultaneously a call and a response to that call. The call represents an innate need to overcome our limitations and realize our transcendental

nature. The response is expressed through the evanescent forms our body can create through chant and dance.

The realization that form itself is the expression of the creative power of life may lead the individual to a process of transformation of identity and agency. Such transformation is not a temporary and extreme psychological or religious experience as in the Vodou rituals, but a subtle and permanent transformation of perspective on life and art. This research explores Robart's work and ideas, and their connection to notions related to the body and perception as present in modern phenomenology

Keywords: Haitian dance, Maud Robart, Merleau-Ponty and dance, phenomenology of dance, Voudou, yanvalou.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION



Figure 1.
Maud Robart at Las Téoulères.
Photograph by Tanya Khodakivska. Summer of 2013.

Maud Robart was born in Port au Prince, Haiti, and lived there until she was twenty years old. Some of the experiencesⁱ she went through in Haiti became the basis for the artistic research she later developed in France. Her exploration is a form of deconstruction in which she removed Haitian chants and yanvalou from their ritualistic context, challenging the view that sees the “traditional” as detached from modern life and related to obsolete knowledge. In her exploration, the questions contemporary artists as creators and transmitter, may ask about the relationship between creation, tradition and modernity are answered through a re-evaluation of what she calls the “archaic foundation of culture”. She uses the word archaic not in the sense of old-fashioned, but rather, in the

ⁱ I will elaborate on such experiences in Chapter 3

sense of origin or source (from Greek *arkhaikos*, from *arkhaios*, from *arkhē* 'beginning'¹). The archaic foundation of culture is the lived, pre-reflective direct experience, which is the base and source of culture and is independent of historical time.

Robart's practice is not limited to singing Afro-Caribbean chants but to penetrating the complex sonority of the chants as oral tools for the transmission of a type of knowledge which transcends time and cultural boundaries. She considers rhythm as a form of living precision that links the individual rhythm of a person to the rhythm of the movement of the universe, through singing and body movement. Her practice also highlights the importance of implementing the pedagogical framework to allow the integration of the modern multicultural way of living with a practice that is closer to archaic mythical practices.

Robart is not interested in a folkloric approach to yanvalou and the chants; she is interested in their archaic and pure origin. She affirms that her goal is to connect with that which precedes the chant and dance, that which manifests itself in the form of chant and dance.² She explained this further in one of our conversations:

The chants and yanvalou are a treasure for me. They strengthen the relationship I have with myself and with my origins. Above all they connect me to the Origin. Origin for me is the space (inside and outside ourselves), which is separated from the historical time. This treasure of songs and bodily movement is older than the culture that spawned it. It opens me to broader and subtler aspects of the fundamental human condition, and to the wild side of creation. That is why I like to develop this research with people of all nationalities and cultures, in order to explore with all our humanities broader opportunities for welcoming, enjoying,

experiencing (even through fleeting impressions) the fullness of life. Because those magical moments are rich in sensations, perceptions, and a great sense of freedom. The treasure I refer to must be approached with a respect and a rigor compared with the one applied in scientific research.³

Along with her explorations in chant and yanvalou, Robart has developed her own pedagogy and shared her work internationally through workshops and conferences in Europe and the Americas. It is important to mention that Robart's research is not oriented towards performing for an audience. Instead, it is aimed toward and designed for the direct participatory experience of individuals willing to understand her ideas in a practical way. This thesis focuses on the way Robart approaches the chants and the yanvalou dance, from the Vodou Rada ritual, in her research.

The heart of her search is the discovery by oneself of the simple and original meaning of the elements of traditional art, which are the base of her practice. Her inquiry is in some sense pure and wild. It is not oriented toward conceptualizations and is independent of secular or religious ideologies. It is determined by a personal, inner need.

Robart's quest is void of any predetermined academic method, and she uses the word "research" only as an easy reference to define her endeavor. In scientific research, the subject keeps distance from the object of study. However, Robart's approach takes the risk of directly and consciously engaging all the resources of the subject: the body, senses, emotions, instincts, and mind, therefore, Robart's standpoint becomes the axis of a living understanding, unified and channeled through a single impulse: the passion for living and knowing.⁴ In regards to her research trajectory she said, "Poetically, I feel this

path as a ‘return to the myth’, beyond the limits of language, the linear space-time notion and on my worldly envelope.”⁵

Yanvalou is a dance that belongs to the Rada rite, the main ceremony in the Vodou religion of Haiti. Robart takes yanvalou and the Vodou chants out of their ritualistic context in order to explore the problematic between the modern and archaic approaches to creativity and art. She works with groups of individuals from diverse lifestyles in elaborated time/space structures in which the dance is combined or alternated with chants. She explains that her goal is not to emphasize the production of dance or chant forms, but to search the pulsations of creative awareness⁶ for which the body is a vehicle or instrument.

In this thesis, I use the expressions ‘pulsation of creative awareness’, ‘pulse of creative awareness,’ ‘creative pulsations,’ ‘creative pulses’, and ‘inner creative drive’ to address phenomena articulated as rhythmical actions or oscillations, perceivable and capable of being incarnated by the subject through a focused and subtle awareness -an inner pre-reflective activity of consciousness. Robart also calls those pulsations or pulses *élan* (French for pulse, impulse, impetus, and momentum). They are not limited to physical or bodily pulsations, and are hindered by mental manipulations. They are connected with a type of awareness striving to penetrate the surface of reality, and both experience life in its fullness and depth, and allow it to express its rhythmicity through the body. They are close to the idea of *spanda*, from Kashmir Saivism. The word *spanda* is a Sanskrit word loosely translated to various meanings. According to the concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy, *spanda* means vibration, flutter, throb, and self-

movement. It is used to describe the principle of movement in the universe, as well as the reflective aspect of the divine consciousness.⁷

Robart claims that her intention is to “actualize the essential qualities of an ancient form of creativity, which affirms the identity between art and life”⁸. The essential qualities are specific elements of the chant and dance, possible to be found through a kind of sensitivity, which demands an open, flexible, and lucid attitude. Those qualities include vibratory and kinesthetic characteristics, achievable only through intense practice, continuous attention, and a readiness to adapt to the present and imminent situation. Examples of objects of attention are other participants’ voices and movements, the workspace and its resonance, as well as the realm of corporeal feelings and impulses within the body.

Robart’s work makes its place in dance research because it leads the dancer through the embodiment of dance as a process. Process here refers to an integral series of actions, in which dance is not only a visible form but the evidence of an effort to bring into play and harmonize the creative pulses of life, which are not limited to the mechanical or kinesthetical actions of the body. Life, in this context, includes the totality of being, endowed with the potential to transcend the limitations of the ego and express itself in its widest meaning. In this framework, dance as a process may offer the chance to develop a new self-perception and generate a transformation of identity and agency.

Existential phenomenologyⁱⁱ is an important part of my research because it deals with the analysis of perception of lived experience. The element of perception in

ⁱⁱ Existential phenomenology is a philosophical current inspired by Martin Heidegger, Søren Kierkegaard, and Edmund Husserl. It describes subjective human experience as it reflects people's values, purposes, ideals, intentions, emotions, and relationships. Existential phenomenology concerns itself with the experiences and actions of the individual, rather than conformity or behavior. The individual is seen as an

Robart's work requires a particular openness of attention because it relates to a type of awareness directed towards the phenomena in the world surrounding the subject, as well as towards the world of its inner subjective experience.

This research will cover the following areas: 1) my personal experience in Robart's work, both as a direct participant and as a researcher, 2) Robart's research and pedagogy, and 3) an analysis of the practical and ideological elements of her work from a phenomenological perspective.

The focus of my work is limited to the role of yanvalou in the context of Robart's research. Although chanting is fundamental in her practice, it will be addressed in terms of its direct relationship with the dance, the moving body, and the general framework of Robart's research. A musical or ethno-musical evaluation of the chants in Robart's work is beyond my experience. In regards to yanvalou in Haiti, this study will present only a brief overview of this indigenous practice.

1.1 THESIS

One of the most pressing questions regarding Robart's work is what her contribution to the field of dance or performance studies is. In my experience, I have learned that any utilitarian approach with the intention to take any of the aspects of Robart's work as a style or method oriented towards performance, or as an excuse for theorizing without having direct experience in it, may lead to disappointment.

Active and creative subject, rather than an object in nature. In other words, the existential person is not merely passive or reactive as subject to environmental influences, but also a purposeful being who has inner experiences and can interpret the meaning of his or her existence and relationships with others in a social world. See Thorpe, Richard, and Robin Holt. *The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Management Research*. London, UK: Sage Publications, 2008. Print.

This realization highlights the need to understand that Robart's work is not meant to be a spectacle for an audience, but an opportunity for a particular direct approach to the embodiment of dance and chant. In this thesis, I argue that Robart emphasizes the exploration of dancing and singing as a window into a deeper and larger view of the human being and creativity. I explain how her approach to form, either in dance or in chant, widens the experience of the body by going beyond culturally inherited views imposed upon it, which consider it a tool of the mind to create forms. I explain that within the context of her research, the body is seen not as an object limited by time and space, but as an entity of relatedness: an interface that connects us to the external world we perceive through our senses, as well as to our inner subjective world. It is an open door to our present, past, and future, to all beings, to the most mundane and to the most sacred in the human being.

In Robart's work, the body may be perceived as a point in which all lines of perception and experience intersect, a center of holistic involvement, the assemblage point of mind, soul, and matter. Thus, the body is not a fixed stage in space, but, a continuous process of change and adaptation, a dynamic meeting of opposites, intellect and physicality, expansion and contraction, inhalation and exhalation, up and down, movement and repose, self and non-self, the profane and the sacred, the known and the unknown. The interplay of these opposites is not expressed as a steady line but a continuous fluctuation, a wave, or a rhythmical phenomenon of dance or chant.

In Robart's research, form as dance and chants are the expression of a duality, which is an inner pulsation or drive, and a response to it. Robart calls that pulsation *élan*. *Élan* is more than a physical or kinesthetic impulse; it is like a fervor and a will to go

beyond our limited human condition and toward freedom. It is a propulsion toward God⁹. Dance and chant are simultaneously a call and a response to that call. The call is an innate need to break our limitations and go toward our transcendental nature. The response is expressed through the evanescent forms our body can create, through chant and dance. By means of the ephemerality of those forms, all aspects of being are funneled. That is why in this process, we cannot focus only on external forms or intellectual reflections, but in the call itself and our sincere and humble response to it. In this situation, form goes beyond itself to become a door toward the awareness of the interrelatedness of life and toward a transcendental reality.

The efforts to go beyond form, as well as the realization that form itself is the expression of the creative power of life may lead the individual to a process of transformation of identity and agency. Such transformation is not a temporary and extreme psychological or religious experience as a possession state in a Vodou ritual, but a subtle and permanent transformation of perspective on life and art.

It is important to highlight that even though Robart's research includes chants and dances from the Vodou Rada rite, in her work there are no instances of possession, as in the Vodou rituals. She neither encourages them nor makes allusions to them. Even though there may be subtle transformations of individual consciousness in her work, the person is always lucid and vigilant; consciousness is always there, present at every instant, intensified and enlarged by the consistent efforts to embody the chant and dances. This phenomena contrasts with situations in the Vodou ritual in which the individual consciousness and identity are suspended during possession.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTION

This is a multifaceted inquiry, which integrates questions directly related to Robart's ideas and practice, with questions addressing the relationship between Robart's work and existential phenomenology. My investigation is a response to the following interrogations:

1. To what extent is the transformation of identity and agency of an individual possible through dance? And, what are the pedagogical elements that favor such transformation?
2. What does Robart do, in practice, to lead the participants through the process of searching and modulating inner impulses?
 - a. What are the physical and psychological changes they experience?
 - b. How is this process evident in the resulting perceptible forms of dance and chant?

1.3 ARGUMENT

The following general statements are derived from my apprenticeship of yanvalou with Robart and my need to adapt my observation's methodology to understand her ideas. These also come from the awareness that dance, in the context of her work, is practiced as a process of learning that transforms the agency and identity of the practitioner. Robart creates the conditions to lead the participant to understand that in reality yanvalou is a teacher.

- A. Practicing yanvalou with Robart is an experience which requires leaving behind the idea that dance is a form imposed on the body by mental manipulations, and instead, entering a process which demands a careful

observation of body movements and creative pulsations, characterized by the awakening of a subtle type of awareness. This awareness is similar but not identical to the ones present in some meditation practices such as Zen meditation, or other non-meditative forms which, nonetheless, may include a highly focused awareness such as in Noh theatre. In the latter, there is the notion of the “flower”, which is a metaphor to express a particular quality in time, space, objects, and actions that provoke a transcendental experience either in the audience, the performer, or both. The “flower” represents rare moments charged with meaning and transcendental qualities which occur in the performance, and may appear not only because of the mastery of techniques, or “katas,” but also because of a flexible and mutable body and awareness.¹⁰

B. Dance is a form of learning, a means to obtain subjective knowledge of the felt body and its connections with cognitive and psychic processes. In this sense dance is a means for constructing or discovering subjectivity through an active kinesthetic and rhythmic inquiry in which the body plays a central part.

Statements A and B are broken into six more specific steps for this argument and representing the axial chapters (chapters 3 to 8) of this thesis. The first step also includes a historical aspect that sets the contextual background of Robart’s ideas.

1. Robart’s approach to yanvalou is based on a personal experience she had in Haiti, at a Vodou ceremony she was invited to which shaped her approach to chanting, dancing, and pedagogy.

2. Robart's work emphasizes the attention to perceivable inner pulsations that generate the dance. She refers to them by using the French word *élan*, the pulse of creative awareness. For Robart, *élan* can be considered the root of artistic creativity. She also said that *élan* may be the "means for understanding one's place in Creation".¹¹
3. *Élan* gives a living meaning to the notion of spontaneity. When a dancer is in humble acquaintance with the pulses of creative awareness, the pulses express themselves throughout the body. When one is open and flexible to their actions and allows them to articulate themselves, they shape the dance and the chant. They make each iteration different, as if the iterations were words, a vocabulary through which life speaks. Spontaneity ceases to be an action of doing anything the mind arbitrarily dictates. Mental manipulations only block what life is trying to say.
4. Chanting is central in Robart's research. There is a direct connection between the traditional Haitian chants and *yanvalou*. She also works the *yanvalou* without music, and calls it "silent *yanvalou*". It has been part of her explorations since the early stages of her research.
5. In addition to chants and *yanvalou*. Robart's work also includes other elements emerging from her research, such as "Za Za" and "The Salutation," which are directly connected with the chant, as well as pedagogical tools like the "Exercises" and the "Spiral," which are respectively connected with body movement and respiration.

6. Robert's pedagogy creates an environment based on: respect for people, the elements of her work (previously mentioned in item 5), the work space, and the natural elements around it. This approach is consistent with the idea that the interrelatedness and harmony between human, artistic, and natural elements contributes to creativity.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE AND MEDIA REVIEW

2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

This review includes the works most relevant to my research. They cover key aspects of my inquiry, which started in the fall of 2010 when I began to do inquiries on the yanvalou dance and penned my own research piece, “The Path of Yanvalou in USA”. The following sources are arranged in chronological order, starting with the most recently reviewed, including items used in early stages of my research, which I recently revisited. Example: Donna Haraway’s *Situated Knowledges* and *Emotions Outside the Box* by Alvin Herman Schmitz.

I begin my review with Donna Haraway’s “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, published in 1988. This essay provided me with the basis to understand the legitimacy of the knowledge acquired in the type of pragmatic work Robart proposes. Despite the lapse of time, Haraway’s ideas seem fresh for my research. She is an advocate of the feminist idea of science and opens the door to topics in which experience and the body are central characters. These topics are addressed in other items of this literature review.

Haraway foregrounds and criticizes the concept of “objectivity” in contemporary sciences, portraying it as representative of a conflict between “academic and activist feminist inquiry” and the reductionist masculine view of scientists and philosophers. The latter is an expression of social constructionism, working not toward the truth but toward control and power. For Haraway, scientific objectivity is ambiguous because it is subject to a continuous flux of reductionist interpretations and definitions, which ultimately beget an “endless play of signifiers” (Haraway 577). Science, in this context, fabricates truth

and rhetoric, its intention meaning to persuade and maintain the hegemony of scientific knowledge. In order to deconstruct the claims of science and unmask its “objectivity,” feminist movements point towards the necessity of a “successor science project,” a science that gives “...simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real world’...”¹² a science that allows for the multiplicity of local knowledges. Robart’s strategy challenges scientific objectivity by refusing to rely on a fixed and predetermined method. She does not treat the elements of her exploration as objects she can distance herself from or manipulate. Instead, she allows her exploration to shape its own path and she is always attentive to details, which may, directly or indirectly, affect the work itself. For example, Robart shared with me a story of a situation in which one of her workshops took place in an old church. She explained that even though she is not a religious person, she realized the location deserved respect. Therefore, some of the movements of the exercises were adapted to the given situation. The modifications were a response to a real situation and became a permanent part of the “Exercises”, a trace of a stage in the development of her research.

Contrasting with Don Ihde¹³, Haraway touches vision from a feminist perspective. She explains that objectivity in science is associated with the sensory system of vision and gaze. Facing such “gaze,” Haraway proposes a feminist objectivity or *situated knowledge*, which is an embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist projects.¹⁴ The expression “gaze” signifies to Haraway white male dominance,

an attitude that distances subject from object, mind from body, and the body from knowledge in a lopsided power relationship.¹⁵

According to Haraway, feminist empiricism reclaims vision in order to “attach objectivity” to feminist consciousness, to affirm its existence, and to justify and create its world. The notion of “situated knowledges” goes beyond the limits of white men’s gaze which is equated by Haraway to an external and transcendental perspective to become a multiplicity of partial perspectives, specific embodiments of experience and knowledge in which the subject is not split from the object.

Transcendence is replaced by our individual capacity to be “answerable for what we learn how to see.”¹⁶ In the context of what she calls the “subjugated,” which refers to groups of individuals dominated by other individuals or cultures, knowledge can be claimed by the “subjugated” themselves and located within their specific context, instead of being elaborations made from an external gaze that replaces and appropriates their vision. Subjugated standpoints are not excluded from critical inquiries. Furthermore, subjugated perspectives are preferable over the external gaze “because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective transforming accounts of the world.”¹⁷

Situated knowledges and situated knowers are contingent upon historical circumstances. For Haraway, accurate descriptions of the real world are achievable, not through detached observations but through specific embodiments within the contexts of phenomena. She insists on the expression “situated knowledges” instead of the singular “situated knowledge” to emphasize a plurality in which partial and even contradictory perspectives, overseen by a code of ethics and politics, guarantee an objective vision of the world, which is also open to the unexpected.¹⁸

Towards the end of the essay, Haraway affirms, "... situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource."¹⁹ This statement expresses the view of objects of knowledge as active phenomena, and such phenomena could be the body or its movement, which as agents establish a relationship of reciprocity with the subject. Whether the subject is observing a dance or embodying it, the subject and dance affect each other, and in turn they affect and are affected by the historical and physical environments in which they concur.²⁰

Robart does not use a feminist approach to conduct her research. However, the notion of "situated knowledges" fits in her practice because the elements of her work are tools for exploration and acquisition of a type knowledge. This knowledge may not be accessed through books or other academic and scientific means, but through direct embodiment and under the circumstances and pedagogy of her work.

Yuasa Yasuo is a Japanese philosopher little known in dance studies. His book, *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory*, is an inquiry into the human body, which contrasts radically with most theoretical analyses found in Western philosophy. This book gave me the philosophical tools for understanding the importance of the connection between the body and the mind in Robart's work. Yuasa explains the mind-body relationship from the Asian perspective, underlining the mind-body unity as an achievement, a condition acquired through a process. In this sense, Asian philosophers see the possibility for the development of an extraordinary human being.²¹ His analysis reveals that in Western thought, the mind-body unity is considered essential or innate. However, according to him, in Western investigations, discussions on the possibility of a

perfect human being are avoided. The Asian perspective focuses on the exceptional. Western intellectuals, now less than their predecessors, focus on the universal.²²

Yuasa argues that Western thought asks what the mind-body is. In contrast, the Asian thinkers view the relationship as a gradient containing the different stages of development from beginner to expert, from novice to master. Thus, the level of unity of body and mind is tested by deeds or actions. The most critical observation made by Yuasa is that in the Asian thought, the way the mind and the body are related reinforces their union, while in Western philosophies the mind-body relationship focuses on their differences and therefore separates them.

Yuasa surveys representative texts of Japanese intellectuals such as Watsuji Tetsuro, Nishida Kitaro, as well as other texts dealing with Buddhist meditation, Kundalini yoga, and other topics. He points towards the relationship between the mind-body ideas in those texts and correlated concepts found in French phenomenology, Jung psychoanalysis, psychosomatic medicine, and neurology.

Yuasa takes a stance in the defense of the body in front of the mind, and claims that Asian philosophers have a more balanced approach to the mind-body binary. However, in his discourse he does not elaborate on the importance of the transmission of knowledge through sound and body movement. Sound in the form of chant and movement in the form of dance are made with the body. For Robart, the sounds of the songs are not just groups or words conveying a discursive meaning. Rather, to her, the quality of vibration is crucial because it has the potential to unveil meanings and worlds beyond intellectual understanding. In regards to dance, as I explained previously, movement is like a vocabulary through which life expresses itself rhythmically.

In *Listening and Voice Phenomenologies of Sound*, Don Ihde applies Husserl and Heidegger's philosophy to the auditory dimension. This book reaffirms the unity of the senses of perception, a unity that gradually is being lost in our visually oriented culture. It also made me realize that the tendency toward visualization and showing is an obstacle for the understanding of dance and body movement in Robart's work. According to Ihde, the Western philosophical tradition is visualist, with little consideration for sound. He goes further by saying that visualism is an attitude rooted in the classic Greek philosophical period, which glorified vision as the center of human experience.²³ He mentions Aristotle, Descartes, and Locke as examples to demonstrate this bias, advocating the necessity for the consideration of sound and voice.

Ihde criticizes the visualist perspective, which reduces everything perceptible to vision. One of the main issues with visualism is that it identifies vision with knowledge. Moreover, he affirms that this attitude has been continuously nourished throughout the history of Western intellectualism. It fosters hegemony of the sense of vision over the other senses, which in turn causes a separation or compartmentalization between all senses, denying us the possibility of holistic sensual experiences, understandings, and views of the world. Ihde claims that the reduction *to* vision was followed by the reduction *of* vision, which ultimately separated sense from significance.²⁴ This division happens at the core of experience and began also in ancient Greece with Plato and Democritus for whom the real was beyond sense. Thus, sense was downgraded with the invention of metaphysics. Theoretical attitudes and explanations were born as the ultimate proof of the real. For Ihde, downgrading of the sense was a symptom of the Western process of separation between the mind and the body.

In this thesis, I address Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ideas present in his works *Phenomenology of Perception* and *Cézanne's Doubt*. The latter is included in *Merleau-Ponty Basic Writings*. These books provide the foundation for inquiries on perception, as well as the relationship between the body and both the internal and external world. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty explains the concept of the "lived body" as opening the door toward a new view and experience of the human body. For Merleau-Ponty, the "lived body" is an entity which a person inhabits and connects him or her to the world; it is the "vehicle of being in the world."²⁵ It is also a place in which experience is determined by the ambiguity between psyche and physiological factors, to the point that "nothing is purely physical or purely psychological."²⁶ Merleau-Ponty's view is more appropriate for contexts that relate the body to an external environment.

Although the orientation of my thesis is towards phenomenology, it is not fully based on Merleau-Ponty's notions. However, at the core of my work, perception and the body play critical roles. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty's inclusion is a must, not only because of the importance of his ideas by themselves, but also because they contrast with ideas from other phenomenologists included in my research, such as Alvin Herman Schmitz, Nishida Kitaro, and Yuasa Yasuo.

Lewis and Staehler enumerate Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of experiencing the lived body (A) as a "constant here," (B) as a vehicle that "allows for 'double sensations,'" (C) as an "affective" entity, and (D) as determined by "kinaesthesia."²⁷

Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "lived body" may be appropriate for contexts that relate the body to an external environment. However, in practice, there are narratives

which require tools to study or describe phenomena underneath the skin, for example, pain or dance embodiment.

Dance is a phenomenon which can be seen, described, and analyzed from different perspectives. One of them is that of the dancing individual. Learning and perfecting a dance are processes of movement embodiment, which require careful self-observation of body movements and kinesthetic impulses. Furthermore, there are different types of dance. They range from the spectacular ones, which emphasize the external gestures, to the meditative ones, which emphasize inwardness and attention to subtle creative pulsations.

Merleau-Ponty's *Cézanne's Doubt* is another significant resource for my research. The author describes and analyzes the life and work of the French artist Paul Cézanne. He argues that the creative basis of Cézanne is what he calls the "primordial sensing," which is a way of sensing without dichotomies (i.e. subject vs. object; body vs. mind; inside vs. outside). "Primordial sensing" is the experience that precedes and feeds reflection, and the "lived body" as a living organism by which we "body-forth" our possibilities in the world.

Cézanne's Doubt is particularly important in my research because it provides a glimpse into an artistic process in which the artist produces art in a manner analogous to the way an existential phenomenologist analyzes experience through phenomenological reduction. Merleau-Ponty uses the expression "painting from nature"²⁸ to describe a process based on a pre-reflective awareness, a "primordial sensing" or "primordial perception," in which the conceptualization and pursuit of manipulative expression have no place, because they make the painter miss the mystery of nature. The "primordial

perception” is an embodied holistic sensitivity, in which all senses are participants in organizing the elements of a painting.²⁹ The painter becomes a conduit through which life expresses itself and manifests onto the canvas. An artist like Cézanne does not witness a landscape or an object as if he were an analytical spectator judging what he sees. Instead, he opens himself to landscapes and objects allowing them to live through him.

Cézanne’s Doubt’s central ideas about the making of art are closely related to Robart’s pedagogy for the execution, or doing, of yanvalou. For Robart, in order for the dancers to do yanvalou, it is more efficient if they exchange their attempts to intellectually and purposely elaborate movement for the search of a state in which the mind and body are open for the inner pulses of life to express themselves through them, as visible or audible impulses codified in the form of dance and chant.

Contemporary Japanese philosophy, particularly the Kioto school, has contributed thinkers that have opened a fresh view into phenomenology. *Evanescence and Form: An Introduction to Japanese Culture* by Charles Shiro Inouye is an insightful book that focuses on the ideas of modern Japanese philosophers. Part One includes a section about the importance of *kata* in the Classical Japanese musical performance known as Noh Theatre. This section offered me great insight because it explains the importance of the ephemerality of form as a means for the expression of transcendental inner experiences. Noh originated in the 14th century and evolved from various, popular folk and aristocratic art forms, including *Gagaku* and *Bagaku*, which are court music and dance related to Shinto religion. Noh theatre or *Nogaku* is derived from the Sino-Japanese word for “skill” or “talent.” Noh performances are extremely codified, with an emphasis on

tradition rather than innovation. Noh actors and musicians rehearse together only once, a few days before the actual performance.

In the Noh theatre, there is always an emphasis on the mastery of a specific set of methods or *katas*. The word *kata* has various meanings: model, pattern, prototype, and style, “that which distinguishes one tradition from another.”³⁰ *Katas* are “...carefully practiced patterns that were personally taught to one generation by another. They were living documents of essential knowledge” (Inouye 66). Each Noh performer practices his or her fundamental movements, songs, and dances independently, under the tutelage of a senior member of the school. Since the Noh performances are not fundamentally based on group rehearsals, each performance becomes a meeting place where the actors assemble as if their encounter was both the first and the last. Thus, Noh exemplifies the medieval Japanese aesthetics of transience, exemplified by the saying of Sen no Rikyu, “*ichi-go ichi-e*,” or “one chance, one meeting.”³¹

In the Noh theatre, emptiness is a receptive state or openness that allows the emergence of authentic spontaneity and the potential for the manifestation of all forms. However, this potential is articulated not through gestural multiplicity, gratuity of form, or the first thing that comes to the actor’s mind. Instead, it is expressed through moments in which the action of the actor is reduced to the point that it becomes apparently static. These moments are charged with an intense state of awareness in the dancer, as well as with a transcendental meaning because it is then that nothingness or *Mu*, the goal of Zen, is achieved.³²

Emotions Outside the Box: The New Phenomenology of Feeling and Corporeality by the German philosopher Alvin Herman Schmitz is a small essay that explains the set

of notions that postulate a new phenomenology, which criticizes the intellectual trend that appeared in Socratic times and "persisted throughout the 'history of Western thought.'"³³ This essay is central to my research because it discusses human experience as a holistic phenomenon and reaffirms a unity of mind and body, in which they enjoy equal ontological status. For Schmitz, the peculiarity of the Western way of thinking is its tendency to separate the mind from the body and give priority to the former over the latter. Contrasting with Husserl and Heidegger, but in a way similar to Haraway, Schmitz defends the idea of not considering "things themselves" but rather consider things, events, or phenomena as they appear from a particular (historical and localized) conceptual framework.³⁴ Schmitz considers the neutral standardized realities of science irrelevant, proposing to recover a sensibility for the nuanced realities of lived experience. Crucial to his phenomenology are the notions of the "felt body," the "vital drive," and the "primitive present".

For Schmitz, the "felt body" is a feeling body, the carrier of corporeal feelings and impulses. It exists by manifesting to the conscious subject through specific corporeal impulses the subject feels as belonging to himself in the vicinity of, or within, his material body. The *felt body* notion is close to Merleau-Ponty's "lived body." However, it differs from the latter because its manifestation is not based on the five senses, or what in psychology or analytical philosophy of mind is referred to as "bodily impulses". The "felt body" contains both what we think of as the physical body and a quality of awareness related to the senses as a totality, a holistic attribute in which the senses are not separated. The "felt body" becomes manifested in holistic corporeal stirrings such as vigor and languidness, or in one's being corporeally gripped by emotions and room-filling

atmospheres.³⁵ The “vital drive” is a dynamic intertwining of paired physiological or psychological tendencies, an oscillation between expansion and contraction tendencies running counter to one another. Such oscillations can be rhythmical or segmented. An example of rhythmic oscillation is the process of respiration. Schmitz’s “primitive present” is similar to Merleau-Ponty’s “primordial perception” in the sense that it is also pre-reflective awareness, which in turn may also resemble the pre-reflective state of the existential phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger. However, Schmitz’s “primitive present” is a broader phenomenological concept because in it are not only the five senses but also the five elements: here, now, being, this, and I, all of which are fused.³⁶ The “primitive present” occurs only in rare moments in one’s life. Nevertheless, it grounds all forms of self-consciousness because it generates an undifferentiated pure presence of “mine-ness” which is the foundation for subjective experience.

Emotions Outside the Box is the only document translated from German into English from a large collection of Schmitz’s writings. It is perhaps the most important text for my research. It contains a language as well as phenomenological tools that allow me to pursue Robert’s work with a clear approach and produce localized interpretations. The apparent vagueness of the notion of the “felt body,” rather than being a hindrance, opens the door to a more vast realm of subjective descriptions, experiences, and descriptions. In inquiries and descriptions of movement and rhythm, the “vital drive” concept is an important phenomenological tool.

The next items in this review incorporate a variety of topics that connect with different stages of my research. They include topics such as dance studies, Haitian dance history, diasporas, etc.

In the article “Dance’s Mind-Body Problem,” Ana Pakes discusses the mind-body problem, a key issue in philosophy of mind, when it is applied to dance. Her ideas helped me to substantiate my arguments on the mind-body dichotomy. She states that in philosophy of mind, the “physicalist” thesis claims that any physiological event is an event determined by other physiological or neurological occurrences which themselves may be caused by other physical stimuli. Pakes argues that mental causation and phenomenal consciousness are important factors in dance, which cannot be satisfactorily eliminated by physicalistic theories of human behavior. By examining concrete dance experiences, she shows how “even the most extreme physicalist positions encounter difficulties in tackling different aspects of the mind body problem”.³⁷ Accordingly, she suggests that defenders of the physicalistic approach should be cautious when they postulate solutions.

In *A Vulnerable Glance: Seeing Dance through Phenomenology*, Sondra Fraleigh scrutinizes the extent to which existential Phenomenology (developed by Heidegger, Sartre, Ricoeur, Merleau-Ponty, and Marcel) can be used to explore and examine dance. This essay was important for me because it gave me an example of a practical application of a phenomenological method in dance. Fraleigh explains how phenomenology aims to describe, not to analyze and theorize, the immediate contents of consciousness faced by a lived experience.³⁸ Thus, phenomenology of dance describes the immediate encounter of the dancer with the lived experience of the dance. It attempts to reach the state of consciousness that precedes any rational consideration, or pre-reflective quality of awareness, in order to describe the dance experience and our world to ourselves as we experience it. She also clarifies how the body’s intentionality in dance differs from the

everyday intentionality in that it takes on “aesthetic” spatiality. The author favors the dancer and spectator’s subjective accounts of dance over a phenomenological attitude, which strives to reach objectivity on the basis of perceptions and descriptions of fleeting events.

Her argument for the vulnerability of the phenomenological perspective is that the essence of existence is its impermanency. Thus, existential phenomenology is weak because it rests on experiential descriptions of the lived world.

In *Returning to the Well: An Inquiry Into Women’s Experiences In Community-Based Expressive Movement Sessions*, Mischa Davison inquires about women’s experiences in improvisational movement sessions. Her studies are categorized within the field of Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT). However, instead of deriving from a formal DMT perspective, it focuses on the experience of expressive movement. For Davison, “returning to the well” is both a title and central motif for her study, which was inspired by the desire to investigate and better understand the state of consciousness that arises in movement experiences. The author used hermeneutic phenomenology as methodology and acknowledges the need for research outside the clinical context, as well as the importance of recognizing and maintaining the essence of the movement experience apart from interpretation or manipulation.³⁹ She underlines the phenomenological reduction as an exhortation to return to the body, much as a meditator uses attention to bodily sensation as a way to quiet the mind and recognize ungrounded storytelling.⁴⁰

Īshvarapratyabhijnāvimarshinī (Doctrine of Divine Recognition) by Abhinavagupta is a rare book which provided me with the conceptual tools to understand and express the notion of élan or the pulses of creative awareness in Robart’s work,

which are difficult to define in terms beyond the physical realm. This book is representative of the Kashmir Saivism, a philosophical and religious tradition that flourished in Kashmir from the latter centuries of the first millennium C.E. through the early centuries of the second millennium. This book deals with the concept of spanda, which can be translated as impulse or vibration, though it is also considered the principle of movement from the state of absolute unity to the plurality of the world.

Abinavagupta defines spanda as “the pulsation of the ecstasy of the divine consciousness.” Spanda relates to Robart’s idea of élan (French for pulsation, impulse, emergence, gushing). Élan is central in dance and chanting throughout Robart’s work as it refers to the original pulsations of creative awareness, thereby making it similar to spanda, the creative impulse of cosmic creation.

Patrick Bellgrade-Smith and Claudine Michel gathered a collection of essays by various scholars in *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture: Invisible Powers*. Although the essay has a strong sociological focus, it gave me a clear view of the role that Vodou plays in Haiti, examining the influence it has on spiritual beliefs, cultural practices, national identity, popular culture, writing and art. How Vodou works as a healing force that penetrates Haitian culture and social life is explained in the introduction. This book is also an attempt to destroy the stereotypes and fictions about Vodou, which have been around for many years.

In *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba and Bahian Candomblé*, Yvonne Daniel uses her research on Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Brazil Candomblé, to speak about dance and music behaviors as important factors in the socio-political and socio-economic issues of the cultures of their practitioners. Her

central idea is the concept of “embodied knowledge,” which plays a critical role in the integration and development of a community. According to Daniel, such knowledge is part of an ancient wisdom, still existing in the religions of the African diaspora in America. This book is important to me because I am particularly interested in the way she emphasizes the role of the body within the Vodou practices in Haiti. However, I must clarify that based on Robart’s stance, “situated knowledges” are more related to the embodiment of life’s intelligence than to social dynamics. Additionally, Daniel provides detailed descriptions of the Yanvalou dance.

Katherine Dunham, author of *Dances of Haiti*, was one of the first researchers of Haitian dance. She offers an honest and clear account of the experiences of an audacious researcher; having originally been an anthropologist and years of direct field research allowed her to analyze the sociological and psychological functions of the different forms of Haitian dances. Throughout her book, she describes the use of dances for recreation and play, social solidarity, externalization of emotions or sexuality, worship, and artistic expression. The author highlights the central role of dance in a society, a role that goes beyond the context of the ritual in order to become a defining agent in the social dynamics. Because of her capability to assimilate and comprehend the subtleties of the social and religious structures in the Haitian culture, she reveals dance as the point of connection between the sacred and the secular, the individual and the group, the body and the mind.

Dancing Spirits: Rhythms and Rituals of Haitian Vodun, the Rada Rite by Gerdes Fleurant, was used in my research as a guide into the structure of a comprehensive research thesis. Fleurant offers a detailed ethno-musical study of the Rada ritual, one of

the major religious rituals in Haitian Vodou. It is a revised version of the author's Ph.D. dissertation thesis at Tufts University, published under the name of "The Ethnomusicology of Yanvalou: A Study of the Rada Rite of Haiti" in 1987.

Born in Haiti, Fleurant became deeply acquainted with the Rada rite and its musical style through a complete immersion in the daily life and culture of Haiti, as well as devoted apprenticeship in the rite. Eventually he was initiated and became Vodou priest, which alongside his training as ethnomusicologist, gave him privileged insight and access to information that enabled him to provide descriptive and rich in details arguments. He presents in-depth investigations of the music of the Rada rite. His observations are important because they provide valuable information about the dances within the context of the rite.

In *The Research of Maud Robart* by Luisa Tinti of the University of Rome, is a compilation of the most complete and current literature about the work of Maud Robart. It begins by depicting Robart and her complex personality in light of her theoretical and practical trajectory. It also describes the significant history of the book and underlines the quality of the "team work" which emerged from it. The monograph includes interviews of Robart by scholars from diverse fields, Robart's writings, and essays written by individuals from a variety of professional backgrounds, countries, and languages who participated in her work.

In Robart's first essay "With a Free Voice," she outlines the constitutive points of her practical and theoretical research, which is based on the oral tradition and permeated by a trans-disciplinary view of the challenges of today. The questions that the creator-

transmitter artist asks about the relationship between creation, tradition, and modernity are answered through a re-evaluation of the “archaicity of cultures.”

In Robart’s second essay, “The Silence at the Heart of the Relationship,” she talks about her work with Jerzy Grotowski. First, she explains her reticence to speak about her collaboration with him. Then she proceeds to underline the particular attitude of the common mentality, which became one of the characteristics of modern Western culture, sustained by individual demands and oriented towards immediate gratification. Such attitude is different from the traditional path, which is characterized by the anonymity of oral cultures.

The Function of Dance in Human Society is a collection of essays from a seminar directed by Franziska Boas at the Primitive Society in New York in 1944. The analyses include dances from Native American Indians in North America, communities from various regions in Africa, as well as in Haiti and Bali.

The seminar was presented as an introductory investigation of the relationship between dance and various lifestyles. The authors defended the idea that only a homogeneous community can produce art that can be understood by all its members. By presenting the analyses of dances of communities around the world, they attempted to introduce the idea that in order for modern Western dance to connect with society, the dancers must absorb the characteristics of the community by learning the philosophies and movements of all group types. Unfortunately, the essay on Haitian dance doesn’t seem to be based on any legitimate research and seems to have relied on questionable information. It also contains racial and biased statements.

The following works support various topics ranging from *yanvalou* to artistic diasporas, and the dynamics caused by the imposition of limits by cultures other than original tradition.

Gage Averill's "*Mezanmi, Kouman Nou Ye?*" *My Friends, How Are You?: Musical Constructions of the Haitian Transnation* is a collection of writings from several authors, covering a variety of subjects, including the examination of the connections between music in Haiti and the music of Haitian immigrants in Miami. It traces the ideological changes in the notion of "homeland" overtime, and investigates how the circulation of Haitian popular music has helped the Haitians in the United States to reconstruct their Haitian identity.

The author considers the Haitian immigration to the United States a continuation of the African diaspora, and applies the term "*transmigrant*" to the Haitians in Miami. He also affirms that even though the diasporas have been caused by globalization and transnational capital, they also intensify issues of national identity and strengthen the connection with the homeland. In these dynamics, the popular music plays an important part because it intensifies transnational consciousness by creating and sustaining a culture that connects Haiti and the United States.

In *Dance in Diasporic Communities*, Judy Van-Zile explains that when immigrants arrive to Hawai'i, they bring with them material things from their country such as their favorite foods, clothing, family pictures, etc. They also carry with them what the author calls "virtual suitcases" consisting of cultural elements from their country of origin. Among those elements is dance.

Van-Zile insists on the idea that a culture has not only a past but a present as well. Within a multicultural environment, the different cultures influence each other; thus innovation is a part of the cultural dynamism. In order to reconcile the past with the present and the traditional with the innovative, both institutions and individuals have to adapt their attitude to a constantly changing cultural atmosphere.

This article raises questions about diasporas and cultural identity. It is important for me because it expounds the idea that a dance is not something static that remains trapped within an individual or a group. Instead, it is a living phenomenon that changes and adapts according to its environment.

2.2 MEDIA REVIEW

In the 1985 film *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, directors Maya Deren, Chérel Ito, and Teiji Ito give an introduction to the Vodou religion in Haiti. This film not only gave me a view of the Vodou ritual in Haiti, but also insight into the way *yanvalou* is practiced in its natural ritual environment. The film shows scenes of actual rituals and celebrations in various locations throughout rural Haiti. An audio narrative based on Maya Deren's book, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, accompanies the images. The film depicts and explains the main elements of the Vodou religion such as dances, chants, ritual objects, and animals. It is divided into sections, which are dedicated to different gods⁴¹ or *Loas*, as well as to the Rada Carnival. The sections about the *Loas* explain their characteristic ritual behaviors, attributes, function in the community, and forces or aspects of life that they represent. The film also explains the roles of priests and their assistants, their behavior, and the behavior of the participants throughout the different phases of the ritual, which culminates in the possession of one or

more participants by the Loas. The film explains the act of possession as the riding of a human being by a god or divine horsemen. It makes clear connections between the different factors working in the rituals, in the sense that all events are interconnected in order to justify the sacredness of the ritual time. Animal sacrifice is validated by the sacredness of life as essential nourishment for the gods. Furthermore, the presence of the Loas is viewed as an objective phenomenon, in which the personality of the possessed individual is temporarily suspended in order for the Loa to manifest itself through the individual and establish a dialogue with the participants in the ceremony. Generally, the dialogues are based on questions that the human participants ask the gods in order to cope with the difficulties in their lives.

This film is important for me because it is not meant to impress an audience but to inform and provide an objective perspective on the Vodou religion. Thus, the different scenes in the film provide a view on how art, the body, and the members of a community are integrated by an attitude that considers life sacred.

Teiji Ito edited the film twenty years after Deren's death. My question is: how would the film have looked if Deren herself had done it? For example, would she have altered the cinematography of any of the scenes in the film?

Some Moments in the Work of Maud Robart (2013) directed by Maud Robart and Pablo Jiménez, takes place during the summer of 2013 when Robart and I started the task of video documenting the process of her research. The purpose of the project is to generate an archival visual testimony of the development of her work during a period of four to five years. The footage is characterized by its simplicity and absence of elaborated or dramatized recording and visual effects. The camera work was limited to basic camera

angles and shots. The use of close-ups was restricted to important details. Slow motion was not allowed. Furthermore, there were no rehearsals. Robart's intention was to capture the process of her work as it normally develops. The footage was collected during a work session with the members of the Central Team and two guest participants, Mariella Gaeta and Juri Barone, at Las Téoulères International Center for Theatrical Research and Training in France.

For the purposes of my thesis, Robart and I selected fragments from long hours of video recording in order to assemble *Some Moments in the Work of Maud Robart*. The goal of this short film is informative, providing a general and non-exhaustive view of some aspects of her research.

The film displays Robart and a group of people at work, as well as the physical elements in which the work develops. It begins by showing a rhythmic march led by Robart. The march is followed by the work on yanvalou, in which we can observe the basic yanvalou structure as it develops in the dancers.

After yanvalou, there is a short transition with another march. Then, Thibaut begins to develop the rhythmical structure called "Za Za." After some moments, Central team members Laura Cassinelli and Ana Tocci join him. Their movement is accompanied and guided by the "Za Za" chant done by Robart.

The next rhythmic structure is called "The Salutation." Central Team members Cristina Baruffi and Thibaut Garçon develop their action as Robart gives them instructions from the periphery. Robart assists "The Salutation" with verbal indications, rhythmical body actions, and playing while Central Team member Eva Kreikenbaum does yanvalou. It is important to notice that, despite the different actions Eva, Thibaut,

Cristina, and Robart are doing, they are connected through a single pulsation and rhythm. The film ends with Thibaut dancing alone following Robart's chant.

For Robart, the film is a visual testimony of her research and a tool to track its development. It is not meant to show her work as a final product but to observe its trajectory through time. For Robart, it was also the opportunity to adapt her practice to an unusual situation, and instead of adopting an attitude of tolerance toward the microphones, cameras, and technical demands, she opted for adopting an integrative perspective in which their presence became part of the practice.

CHAPTER 3: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 YANVALOU IN HAITI

The nature of this section is merely informative and not exhaustive. Giving a comprehensive description about Yanvalou in Haiti is beyond the scope of this thesis. The reasons I include this section are: (1) provide the reader with a brief introduction into the Vodou culture in Haiti, and (2) an attempt to answer questions that may arise during the reading.

Yanvalou is the main dance in the Vodou Rada rite in Haiti. It has a specific place and function in the Rada ceremonies and is a highly sophisticated tool; its initiatory character indicates that it is a key to open the door towards forces lying in the subconscious. According to Robart, yanvalou is a form of transmission, a conduit through which those forces flow, giving a sense of direction and definiteness to the dancer. The following paragraphs are a brief introduction to the Vodou basic elements.

Vodou (also known as Voodoo, Vodun, Vaudoux, Vudu, Vodou, and Vaudou) means spirit or god in the Fon and Ewe languages of West Africa. Haitian Vodou is a syncretic religion, which unifies the beliefs and practices of West African peoples (mainly the Fon and Ewe), the religious practices of the Arawak people (the indigenous people of the Haiti whom Christopher Columbus met when he first landed in America), and Roman Catholic Christianity. The Rada rite is the main rite of Vodou. Its name derives from Arada, a Dahomean tribe in West Africa. It is considered a solar rite, which in the Vodou system is also called the rite of the snake or Dambalah, the highest god who represents the source of life. This ceremony is performed for a variety of reasons such as *kanzo*, or fire ordeal; a *boulezen* or burning of the pots; a *powmés* or promise, a solemn

engagement, or a prelude to a more elaborate service a *maryaj* or marriage (a mystic marriage whereby a person marries a loa of the opposite sex), or an *accion de grace* or thanksgiving. The Rada ceremony is not limited to those occasions; a service may be conducted for many purposes deemed necessary by the people or the leaders.⁴²

A *loa*, or spirit, is a representative of Bondye (God God), the highest principle in the universe, the origin of cosmic order and human activity. In the Vodou ceremony, the loas or are both active participants and audience members. They are the representation of forces inhabiting deep within the human being, and include male and female entities. The purpose of the ritual is to attract the attention of the loas in order to communicate with them, as well as entertain them, because they give guidance and wisdom. The world in which they dwell is not chaotic; instead, it is a well-structured reality that can be accessed by means of an equally well-structured vehicle: the Vodou ritual system⁴³

The Rada rite is the most important ceremony in the Vodou religion; it is a functional structure in which the main components are singing, dancing, and drumming. The Rada rite is a ceremony in which the human participants summon the loas. When the loas arrive, they make themselves manifest through a human being, who is a participant in the ritual; this is what is meant by possession. When somebody is possessed in a Vodou ceremony, it is said that he or she is being ridden or “mounted” by the loa. This “mounted” person is called the “horse.” In such a state, the possessed subject becomes the loa who has mounted it, losing its personality and acting as a vehicle through which the loa communicates with the rest of the participants in the rite. Every loa has a specific behavior and a specific dance. At the end of the experience, the “horse” cannot recall his or her actions during the possession.⁴⁴

Considering the divine world of the loas and the human world as two separate realities only leads to a superficial classification. This limited view prevents us from understanding the relationship between the components of the Vodou ritual: the loas, the humans, and art. The Vodou ritual is close to Grotowski's⁴⁵ concept of art as a vehicle, which states: "art as vehicle is like a very primitive elevator: it's some kind of basket pulled by a cord, with which the doer lifts himself toward more subtle energy, to descend with this to the instinctual body. This is the objectivity of the ritual. If art as a vehicle functions, this objectivity exists and the basket moves for those who do the Action."⁴⁶

Haitians believe that the family has the highest importance and ancestors never cease to partake in the life of their descendants. The roots of Vodou are found in the history of Haitian families. Loas are ancestral spirits who became abstracted over many generations. They are considered to be founders of lineages and have the power to manifest in living form through possession.⁴⁷ Furthermore, ancestors can be divinized and transformed into loas. The loas are inherited through generations and they give messages to the family during possession.

Houngan is the term for a male priest in the Vodou religion. A female priest is known as *mambo*. There are two ranks of houngan: *houngan asogwe* (high priest) and *houngan sur pwen* (junior priest). A houngan asogwe is the highest member of clergy in Vodou; he has the sole authority to ordain other priests. The role of the houngan, the houngan sur pwen, and the mambo is to preserve the rituals and songs, as well as to maintain the relationship between the spirits and the community as a whole. They are entrusted with leading the service of all of the spirits of their lineage.⁴⁸

3.2 THE WORD YANVALOU

The word yanvalou (also known as jenvalo, yanvalloux) literally means “come to me” in the language of Whydah or Ouidah in Benin. The origin of the dance can be traced to the Fon people of Dahomey in Benin. The yanvalou dance and the music are an invocation and a supplication. *Yanvalou-dos-bas* (low back yanvalou) is the dance that begins the Rada rite. By means of yanvalou, drumming, and singing, the participants in the Vodou ceremony build a communication bridge between themselves and the loas. Thus the ritual function of yanvalou is to call the loa.

Yanvalou reveals that the human body is a means whereby a human being coalesces with the divine. The purpose of the dance is practical and at the same time requires a close relationship between the dancer and his or her body, containing an impeccable inner awareness and deeply rooted spiritual beliefs. A devoted yanvalou dancer cannot afford to turn his or her attention outwards to please external spectators. My own experience has taught me that one has to be finely tuned in with the motions of their body. The dance happens underneath the skin, deep within the muscles, the bones and the heart, and is a spectacle made for an inner audience, the loas.

By participating in the Rada ritual one can learn yanvalou. However, there are some movements and gestures that require extra guidance. This guidance is provided in initiation rituals throughout the procedure called *balance ounyò* or balancing the initiate.⁴⁹

3.3 MAUD ROBART’S LIFE

Marie Maud Gerdes Robart was born in Port au Prince, Haiti, on Feb. 10, 1946. She is the second daughter in a family of five children. Her ancestry includes bloodlines

from Africa, France, and Germany. One of her ancestors was Alexis Dupuy, a signatory of the Act of Independence of Haiti in 1804. She had a relatively sheltered childhood within the national repressive and insecure political environment promoted by the dictatorship of François Duvalier “Papa Doc,” who was president of Haiti from 1957 to 1971.

During Robart’s youth, Port-au-Prince was a city that vibrated with the life of popular traditions. As a colorful fabric, the structure of Haitian society was and still is an interweaving of different cultural and ethnic currents. The Gerdes family did not practice Vodou, and Maud and her siblings attended Catholic schools. However, at a very young age, Maud was attracted to the echo of ritual Vodou chants and dances. Often, she managed to circumvent the prohibitions that her family imposed on her to attend the Vodou ceremonies. The songs were particularly fascinating for her. In this regard, she said: “In some way, I carry them with me; I listened to these songs and heard the call of the drums since I was in my mother's womb.”⁵⁰



Fig. 2
Robart at the Capoise Art Center in Haiti
Courtesy of Maud Robart

At the age of twenty, Robart married the French ethno botanist Guy Robart. She also became his guide and companion on his research trips. It was an intense time of travel to different parts of the island doing fieldwork, which also included meeting remarkable people.

In 1971, she met the artist Jean Claude Garoute, with whom she began painting. At the same time, she continued her immersion into the diverse cultural backgrounds of Haiti by participating with Garoute in archaeological research and staying in popular handicraft and religious centers throughout the country.



Fig 3.
Jean Claude Garoute (Tiga) and Maud Robart.
Photograph by Carole Stark.

In 1973, Tiga and Robart founded the art movement known as Saint Soleil at the “Soissons la Montagne,” a house in a mountain village nearby yet still isolated from

Port-au-Prince. They introduced the spirit of creation in a rural environment impregnated with Vodou religion. They offered to the nearly illiterate peasants within the area the means to actualize their potentials through the deployment of skills different from those required in their daily activities. Farmers, masons, carpenters, and others were amazed to discover that they could express themselves through painting, sculpture, theater, improvisation, singing, and poetry as well. This movement was free from mercenary attitudes of political or religious involvement. Thus, until 1981, this movement represented more than art for Robart; it was an exciting and creative humanist experience of freedom. The French writer André Malraux, who visited Haiti in 1975, devoted a chapter to the paintings of Saint Soleil in his book *The Metamorphosis of the Gods*.⁵¹ He describes the Saint Soleil movement he witnessed as “the only experience of controllable magical painting in our century.” Today, the original spirit that precluded the development of this movement is forgotten; Saint Soleil is identified only as a post-naïve school of Haitian painting.



Figure 4.
House at “Soissons la Montagne”
Photograph by Edouard Robart

In 1977, Robart met the Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski in Haiti. From 1978 to 1980, she was co-director in Haiti and Poland of the “Theatre of Sources” project led by Grotowski. She also worked with him on his projects at UC Irvine in California (1984). Robart’s position in the work of Grotowski is unique because she is the only collaborator who participated in all post-theatrical stages, from the “Theatre of Sources” to the research conducted at the Work Center of Jerzy Grotowski in Italy until 1993. Twenty one years after Robart’s departure, traces of her influence can still be seen through the artistic elements used in this center.

In 1994, she returned to her home in France and continued her research. Her primary exploration is traditional chants from Haiti. However, beyond chanting, she seeks “the hidden dance within the chant.”⁵² According to her, “[the] chant reveals the original dance, which the body, since before one was born, remembers.”⁵³ She invites artists and researchers to share her experience in work sessions in which she creates the conditions to return to the sources of human expression through somatic processes and structures that facilitate the connection between the mind and the body.

3.4 DEVELOPMENT OF ROBART’S RESEARCH

Robart started her research in yanvalou after she left Haiti and moved to France (1982). In one of our conversations at her home,⁵⁴ she told me that there was a crucial moment in her youth in Haiti, which represents an important turn in her experience and understanding of yanvalou. Such a moment can be considered as the cognitive and phenomenological root of her research because the realization obtained from it became the guide for her subsequent explorations on yanvalou and chants, as well as the base of her pedagogy.

On one occasion, she was invited to participate in a ritual in the countryside, close to Port-au-Prince. It was a family event, and a rather small, improvised, and crowded Vodou ceremony. The small size of the place, as well as the disorder and jostling prevailing in it, disappointed her. But even though she did not feel comfortable, the experience she had with yanvalou transcended the atmosphere and quality of the place. She was accompanied by an old feeble man, who, despite his disadvantage, stayed very close, trying to protect her in the middle of the chaos. Since the old man was a Vodou practitioner, he marked the yanvalou step for Robart in a very gentle and precise manner. After a while, Robart experienced a change in her consciousness: she felt as if she was in a place beyond everything happening around her, a space that was completely detached from the turbulent situation. She danced yanvalou as her body was gently taken by its rhythm. However, Robart was not partaking in the excitement of the collective situation. According to her, she was rather in a state of “sweetness and subtleness,” as if a door had opened for her. She explains her experience in these words:

...Even though I was always in the collective undisciplined atmosphere, I found myself in a space of plenitude and abundance; as if in that moment the yanvalou was teaching me its secret meaning, its original sense. It was a very strong experience for me. There are no words for that experience, but it filled me up with peace, life and plenitude. It was as if the inner core of yanvalou told me it was silence. Yanvalou is silence; it is the movement of silence.⁵⁵

Since then, Robart had a different rapport with yanvalou. When she left Haiti, she started to work alone at her home in France, without drums or any other device to assist her in her efforts. She did not even have recorded Vodou music. After a while, she was

able to connect with the silent quality of yanvalou, as in the experience she had at the chaotic ceremony previously described. In regards to this, she explains:

This foundational experience I had [in Haiti] was like a guide. It gave me the keys to a new approach to yanvalou and the songs. I named it “silent yanvalou.” I tried to stabilize this movement pattern without the support of the liturgical apparatus that accompanies the traditional yanvalou. Since then, the yanvalou I practice became a hymn to silence. It is the same for the songs which are also revealed to me as receptacles of inner silence.

For Robart, the chant is fullness, and its intrinsic quality is realized when one can enter in a space of silence, as she did with yanvalou.⁵⁶

3.5 WHAT IS THE WORK OF ROBART ABOUT?

This section is based on a recorded conversation between Robart and I at her house on July 6, 2013, as well as on my own experience in her work.

Robart’s work is about the experience provoked by an approach to art in which the dance, the chant, and the artist are not viewed as isolated phenomena but as processes or organisms,⁵⁷ which in turn are part of an organic whole, whose parts are interdependent. This notion derives from a worldview in which reality is also like a living organism in which one part is not more important than the rest but all become one through their interactions. Thus, the subject is not a primary entity that relates things to itself, merging them into its singleness. Instead, entities and phenomena grow together and enrich each other. Another way to consider the chants and dances is as if they were holograms: being independent of the perspective or angle from where one sees them, one

can perceive the tridimensional rendering of their totality, which represents not the individual chant or dance, but the matrix containing both of them.

According to Robart, her work is about entering in contact with the mystery of life. In practical terms, she explained, her work is about relatedness because it exists in all levels of life, and there is no life if there are not interrelations among things. She considers the human body as an entity of relatedness. It connects or relates us with the air, the birds, the sun, other humans, and everything around it. Regarding this argument, Robart mentioned the following poem:

What are you doing?

The Sun

If you make the sun you are the sun

A canvas and my body speak

I throw myself to the left

I throw myself to the right

I make the fish

The bird flies

flies, flies, flies

Goes, returns, passes by

Ascends, glides, and falls

I'm the bird

All lives, all, while singing and dancing.

(Anonymous African poem)⁵⁸

One of the aspects of her work is the development of intimacy within the body in order to attain the awareness that the body is a body of relation, because it is made for that. That is why we have senses. The eyes see, the nose smells, the ears hear, and the hands and the skin sense the world around.⁵⁹

In our modern culture we have the tendency to reduce everything to “I” and “mine,” but relatedness has nothing to do with the isolated individual. Robart’s idea resonates with the Japanese notion of human being conveyed by the expression *ningen* (人間), which includes the character 人 (*nin, hito, bito, pito, jin*) for human, and 間 (*ma*; pronounced *gen* in the compound). The Japanese character *ma* is translated as “among,” “Interval,” or “gap” in Japanese aesthetics, it is used to describe the negative space between artistic objects. *Ma* introduces an active quality into *ningen* and establishes the relational and relative nature of the human being. For Pilgrim⁶⁰, *ningen* “also carries an experiential connotation: for persons to stand in relationship to other persons is for them to experience each other.”

For Robart, by becoming conscious of the interrelatedness of the beings and things in the world, we can understand why one and one’s body are there, as well as one’s mission in it.⁶¹ In order to experience the relatedness, one has to arrive to the “zero point,”⁶² where the ego is silent and its tendency to judge and individualize experience ceases. Only then, the body can resonate and enter in relationship with everything around it. Robart’s pedagogy aims to bring the participants to the intuition of relatedness. She does not want to convince them with words or theoretic indoctrinations. Her way is not speculative but practical: she creates the conditions to give the participants the

opportunity to discover by themselves and allow their bodies to be bodies of relatedness. Details about her practical work will be developed in Chapter 6.

Robart is not concerned about making philosophy. The essence of her practice is what the person concretely experiences through the body. In her work, the chant is not separated from the dance, and vice versa, because nothing happening in the body is separated from the rest. Rather, the chant and the dance are phenomena born in the body.

The body is a field of relatedness, or a conduit; it connects the world in which they originate with ours. However, the idea that the songs are born only from the body would be too limited. Indeed, they are closely connected with a deeper notion of life.

3.6 ROBART AND PHENOMENOLOGY

First, I have to clarify that Robart is a practical philosopher, not a scholar interested on entering the current rhetoric discussions in the fields of phenomenology. In her work, she welcomes intellectuals not to develop debates but to do practical work. On their part, they have to leave aside their scholarly attitudes to understand her propositions. Robart's research is practical and she prefers to develop it in a background free from academic or institutional bonds. The relationship between phenomenology and her work is the product of my own initiative and she is aware of my need to include it as a critical element of my research methodology. Despite not being a scholar, Robart has read and is familiar with the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Alvin Hermann Schmitz. Last year, I began an email dialogue with Hermann Schmitz. I sent him a paper about Robart's work.⁶³ In that paper, I talked about the relationship between Robart's work and Hermann Schmitz's phenomenology. He showed interest in her work and we are in the process of arranging a meeting with him in Germany.

The reason I choose phenomenology in my research is because it deals with the analysis of perception of lived experience. The element of perception in Robart's work requires a particular openness of attention: it relates to a type of awareness directed towards the phenomena in the world surrounding the subject, as well as towards the world of its inner subjective experience. The threshold between those realms is the body and its perceptual capacity. Our modern culture tends to give more importance to the relationship between the body and the external world. However, in dance embodiment, particularly in the context of Robart's work, the disinterested attention towards the inner subjective experience is vital. Thus, I opted for the inclusion of Merleau-Ponty's and Hermann Schmitz's phenomenologies in this thesis. This inclusion motivated me to develop a creative comparison between key elements in their systems, such as their views on the body, which in turn led me to the postulation of the need of a phenomenology that integrates in a balanced manner the mind and the body as instruments for the acquisition of knowledge. Having said that, I proceed now to talk about phenomenology and Robart.

Phenomenological reduction is the method used in phenomenology to analyze experience. It comprises of: (1) *epoché*, a Greek word which in phenomenology means to suspend judgment, abandon our ordinary ways of looking, and set aside our usual assumptions regarding objects present to our perception and within our psychic realm, both of the individual phenomenon and of the whole psychic field in general; and (2) in the free variation method (also known as fantasy variation and horizontalization) in which all phenomena and their variations are considered equally real. In the existential phenomenology of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenological

reduction leads to the realization that phenomena are not isolated events in the field of perception, or “there are no-things-by-themselves” in the realm of visual presence.⁶⁴

Phenomenological reduction elucidates that things manifest in a context or background, and that things relate to all the elements of such background. One begins by observing individual phenomena, for example a pencil. A pencil exists in a specific place or context, such as on my desk, or a display window in a store, or floating down a river. After seeing a pencil, one sees the objects surrounding it, even if in order to do that, we have to move our eyes to focus on them. We also realize that beyond all objects surrounding a pencil there is a horizon, the limit of our field of perception. After an exhaustive or non-exhaustive scrutiny of the objects in our field of vision, we pass from seeing the individual objects to observing the relationships among them. In terms of space, my old unsharpened pencil is not only on my desk, but also on the right side of it, near my notebook, to the left of my computer; my desk is in my room together with many other objects, including myself. In terms of time, I imagine how my old pencil looked when it was sharpened and I can almost feel in my hand the sensation of writing with it. I remember how it looked when it was new; I can also imagine it becoming a sculpture if I carve designs in it. All of these relations that I discover among the objects contained in my perceptual field, which also includes my old pencil and the images my imagination makes of it, are rooted in my direct experience of the pencil and are co-present with it: they constitute its presence. Furthermore, the images of the pencil in my imagination, although absent, are latent or potentially present. This possibility- also rooted in my direct experience of the pencil- of having genuine others or variations, makes my pencil

transcendental. Thus, the event pencil is in a context of both space and time, and its presence is defined by its relatedness to the elements of both contexts.

The method of existential phenomenology deals effectively with experience, but its intellectual nature as a tool for analyzing the mutual relatedness between phenomena makes it step back from the actual reality the body experiences and remains within the conceptual philosophical realm. Existential phenomenology is a good tool for describing and analyzing lived experiences, though it is lopsided and remains at the level of the intellectual experience and theorizing. But the intellect is not the only means to access reality and knowledge. What about the experience of dance embodiment? Learning a dance encompasses both the acquiring of intellectual knowledge in terms of understanding sequences of movements, space relationships, timing, etc., as well as the tacit and subjective understanding of the body. So far we have seen the application of the phenomenological reduction or *epoché* to grasp the essence of external phenomena. But how about learning a new movement or apprehending the essence of a dance? Epoché is a means to suspend judgment and automatic habitual reactions in regards to observed phenomena. But how about the phenomena of embodying human movement? How about the difficulties dancers experience when they learn movements they are not familiar with? Often those difficulties are related to the failure to suspend acquired automatisms and movement habits. This questioning led me to think about the need of a type of epoché that applies to knowledge acquired through the experience of dance embodiment, particularly within the context of Robart's work. Thus, I propose the pedagogy of Robart as a possible phenomenological method to answer my questioning.

Robart's approach is above all practical. The directness and simplicity of its pragmatism makes difficult to explain in words what it is about without making it sound vane or simplistic. Moreover, Robart avoids lengthy explanations or discourses in her teaching. The main objects of her work comprise the dances, chants, and the person itself, including his or her body and life. Being directly involved in dancing, chanting, or doing any other of the exercises in her work, one has no time for theoretical analyses or speculations as in existential phenomenology. This does not mean that the individual's intellectual activity is stopped. On the contrary, Robart demands a steady awareness and at the same a delicate control of one's actions and abandonment of oneself to the action at hand. During her work, one looks for the awakening of other intelligences, such as musical, kinesthetic, and spiritual intelligences, as well as the ways of perceiving associated with them. Thus intellect and awareness are not cancelled; instead, they go through a qualitative process of transformation. Robart's goal is to develop a quality of awareness, which aims to pierce the surface of the mundane to enter the depths of human being.

Robart's pedagogy has something in common with the phenomenological reduction explained above (third paragraph of this section), that is, the need to suspend judgment, abandon our ordinary ways of looking, and set aside our usual assumptions. In the context of Robart's work *epoché* may be interpreted as the suspension of judgments of one's movement or chanting, abandoning one's ordinary ways of perceiving and acting, and setting aside one's usual assumptions about chanting, dancing, and relating to others.

The awareness of relatedness in Robart's work develops from simple elements, which may seem too simple to an onlooker. These elements include: specific points of the body and their mutual relationship as perceived by the subject during a dance or chant; the relationship between the breath and the chant; the relationship between the breath, the spine, and the chant; and other components I will elaborate upon in Chapter 6.

Relatedness in Robart's work implies more than relationship or connection among elements. It has more to do with the quality of the relations, or the way the participant connects with the main elements of the work, which are traditional chants and dances passed down through generations of Vodou practitioners. Those chants and dances are not considered as objects one can utilize for the sake of showing, both in the authentic Vodou ritual and in Robart's research. They are not done with the intention to please an audience, by intentionally beautifying them or emphasizing their external form. In Robart's context, they are not actualized with the aim to do a Vodou ritual either. Instead, they are considered as instruments that connect our world with the archaic reality from which they originated. Such archaic reality does not necessarily have to exist in a historic past because ultimately the chants and dances are rooted in a deeper human nature.⁶⁵ Robart proposes an opening towards deeper engagement with phenomena and an opportunity for rich subjective experiences.

Unlike the metaphysical rational transcendence we tend to associate with philosophy or religion, transcendence in the context of Robart's work can be comprehended by means of the empirical reality of the body. Her work is based on the concrete and limited existence of body, which includes its capacities of chanting and dancing. That is why Robart sees the body as the conduit to enter the original ground of

art and being. The notion of transcendence in Robart's pedagogy is close to the concept of *yūgen* in Japanese aesthetics. The word is composed by *yū* or "dark," and *gen*, meaning "black" or "deep." *Yūgen* is often used to indicate a delicate vision that shows what is usually hidden or invisible."⁶⁶ In Buddhist and Taoist contexts, it may indicate the profundity of a truth.⁶⁷ According to Michael Marra, the notion of *yūgen* in Japanese philosophy represents the Shinto presence of the sacred in the natural world [...] and the presence of Buddhahood in the immediacy of the present body (*sokushin jōbutsu*, or "to become enlightened in the present life").⁶⁸

Robart invites one to seek within oneself creative pulsations and their source, from which the chants and the dances originate. The work of the artist becomes a sort of meditation based on kinesthetic actions and singing, which aims towards the manifestation of the chants and dances, as if they were a kind of being passing through the body of the subject. If one tries to impose a form on that which is emerging from within, manifesting itself externally either as a chant or a dance, one hinders its expression. According to Robart, instead of dancing the dance or chanting the chant, one listens to the body and lets the life in the body take its own course. She said: "you have to let the dance dance you, or the chant chant you."⁶⁹ As explained early in this section, Robart's pedagogy includes a strategy to lessen one's automatic tendencies to control and overanalyze, a *sui generis* type of epoché, to allow the subject to establish a connection with the intimacy of his or her body and being, where the source of the dance and chant reside, and to allow those chants and dances to work their way out. Robart's pedagogy is close to Heidegger's ideas in his essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*, wherein he states,

“an entity emerges into the unconcealedness of its being, [art is] the disclosure of the particular being in its being, the happening of truth.”⁷⁰

3.7 ROBERT’S PEDAGOGY. A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE



Figure 5.
Robart checks Yanvalou at Las Téoulères
 Photograph by Tanya Khodakivska. Summer of 2013.

During yanvalou, Robart doesn't verbally criticize the dancers. In fact, she rarely talks. Silent yanvalou is usually practiced in a large and well-lit empty hall, and in silence. The only sound in the room, if there is any, is the random creaking of the wooden floorboards. Robart leads the group of dancers, who try to follow her movements. The line moves throughout the space, which allows Robart to observe the dancers, and the dancers to see Robart from various angles. Everybody dances with bare feet and is dressed in white garments. Each dancer bears the responsibility to be consistent in the step and pass the impulse of the dance to the person behind. Robart is not concerned if the participants don't move exactly as she does. She does not stop to correct them, unless

someone becomes a considerable disturbance for the group. She understands that this process takes time and patience. It is only after the dance session ends that Robart gives advice to the dancers, and she does it with simple indications. What is more important to her than the correctness of the participants' *yanvalou* is their inner disposition towards the dance from instant to instant. This means making the right efforts, being engaged with an aggregate of small and precise actions, such as keeping to the step, the impulsion, opening the perception, avoiding self-judgments and negative thinking, etc. Thus, the participants may arrive to the point where they become autonomous and have the opportunity to make their artistic discoveries. She believes the realizations and discoveries the dancers create about themselves and their bodies are more important than the external form of their movements.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

4.1 MY RAPPORT WITH ROBERT'S WORK

Having participated in Robert's work for a good part of my life, I've developed a strong relationship with her as both my teacher and friend—one who has unveiled for me a side of art that is closely related to life and the human spirit. Thus, as a complement to this section on methodology, I should mention the path that led me to her. It is a little winding and contains some poetic images.

The first time I read Grotowski's book, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, an unforgettable vision appeared in my mind. It was that of a dark and ancient abode and group of almost naked individuals, whose sweaty bodies were doing light and silent movements, like the flames of the candles illuminating them. This image did not last more than a beat of my heart, and although I could not understand exactly what those individuals were doing, I could perceive, through their faces and movements, a high level of care and an absolute dedication to their work. They looked like warriors in the midst of a battle for the very essence of silence. I was a seventeen-year-old street performer and clown in Mexico city when I had this revelation.

I joined Grotowski's work in 1981 and collaborated with him until 1989 in the following projects: "Theatre of Sources", "Objective Drama", and "Art as a Vehicle", in Poland, California, and Italy. One day, my vision became a reality while I had worked with Grotowski, Thomas Richards, and Piotrus Borowski at the Work Center of Jerzy Grotowski in Italy. The actualizaion of the vision signaled the end of my work with him.

During the "Theatre of Sources" project, I met Robert for the very first time but my work with her was limited and I barely interacted with her. That stage of the "Theatre

of Sources” was set in a large farm house in the country side of Poland Grotowski had adapted for his work. There were several activities happening during that period, all related to Grotowski’s research on the sources of the performative phenomena.

Grotowski had invited individuals engaged in performative or ritualistic traditional practices from several countries to collaborate in his exploration. Robart and the Haitian artist Jean-Claude Garoute (Tiga) arrived from Haiti, accompanied by other individuals who, alongside Robart and Tiga, comprised the Saint Soleil, the art movement founded by Robart and Tiga in 1973.

I recall the first time I had seen a yanvalou movement. Robart and Tiga were talking with Grotowski by the yard in front of the house. Suddenly, I saw Robart showing Grotowski a fascinating movement. She was standing, with her knees bent, her torso slightly flexed and gently undulating. Her spine was alive and moving smoothly, like a snake in the water. She was doing yanvalou, but at that time I did not know it. I had no idea about what she was doing, and I did not dare ask her because I barely spoke English and my French was nonexistent. Several months later, the “Theatre of Sources” project came to an end.

It wasn’t until 1987 at the Grotowski’s Work Center in Italy, that I finally made Robart’s acquaintance. During the time in between our encounters I continued working with Grotowski. Though, up until I had met her, I had acquired many exciting experiences about art as a means for self-discovery and self-development. All of which had helped me to develop the two questions that would lead my research for years to come: what is the importance of the body in accessing the transcendental realities of art

and ritual? And, how can I help myself and others connect with the creative essence of the body?

Robart and Tiga played a crucial role in Grotowski's work in the "Theatre of Sources" in Poland, as well as in his work in Irvine, CA. During their work in Irvine, Robart and Tiga introduced the Haitian chants and yanvalou to Grotowski's work and I later learned the chants and yanvalou from Grotowski's assistants.

From the time I arrived in Irvine in 1985 to the time I met Robart again, I was assiduously and unsuccessfully trying to do the yanvalou and the chants I learned from the assistants. Later, when I worked with Robart, I realized that nobody, including Grotowski, had a clear idea of what yanvalou and the Haitian chants really were. Though over time, under immense pressure from Grotowski and his assistants, we eventually did something that, at the very least, seemed to closely mimic yanvalou and the Haitian chants. None of us being very familiar with them meant we had little sense of what they were supposed to look or sound like.

In 1987, when Robart joined Grotowski's work at his Work Center in Italy, I finally had the opportunity to witness what the Haitian chants and yanvalou looked like. Robart's yanvalou made the yanvalou I learned from Grotowski's assistants look like a caricature. Hearing Robart's voice as she chanted, was a captivating experience for me, as though I had heard it before during my childhood. Her voice had a particular vibratory aspect, difficult to describe exactly. It evoked images in my mind of a warm evening in a welcoming tropical landscape, I could see shadows of palm trees and sugar cane fields. It seemed like a place in Veracruz, Mexico, my father's birthplace. In my mind and heart, Robart's singing resonated in that landscape as if it were inhabiting it. I tried hard to

remember when I had ever been to that place but I realized I never actually had those experiences before that vision. However, they persist in my memory with the strength of my most vividly lived perceptions.

I continued working with Robart and Grotowski until 1989. After my departure, she continued her collaboration with him until 1993. Robart returned to France and continued her independent research there, in which I participated approximately every two years. Eventually, I wrote my reflections about my experience in her work.⁷¹

Working with Robart showed me the importance of preserving and divulging her work, and I quickly learned my limitations as a researcher and as a writer. Thus, I decided to go back to school to overcome my deficiencies, and to immerse myself in an intellectual environment in which I could communicate the ideas resulting from my experiences with her. To overcome such limitations, I resumed my studies at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, where I focused my academic research on Robart’s work—most of which I have presented in local and international conferences and symposiums. Naturally, the topic of my Masters thesis is related to Robart’s work because it is rooted in my own practice.

4.2 METHODOLOGY

Robart supported my intention to make her work the topic of my thesis. We decided to meet the summer of 2012 to begin my fieldwork and documentation on her research. We thought that the best course of action would consist of my direct participation in her work, as well as the completion of recorded interviews with her, her collaborators, and invited participants. Before my arrival, she scheduled three work sessions. The first session was at a small dance therapy studio in Kassel, Germany, the

second at a retreat center in Orvieto, Italy, and the third at Las Téoulères International Center for Theatrical Research and Training in Labarrère, France.



Figure 6.
Las Téoulères
Photograph by Tanya Khodakivska. Summer of 2013.

In the summer of 2013 we met again to complete the second part of my fieldwork. From the beginning of June to the middle of July we worked at her home, following the same work schedule as in 2012. It included chanting, yanvalou, the “Process”⁷², and the recording of insightful conversations she and I shared.

During the summer of 2013, Robart conducted two work sessions at Las Téoulères. The individuals in the first session were guest participants, with the exception of Eva Kreikenbaum, who is a member of the “Central Team”.

The “Central Team”, is integrated by individuals who had helped Robart to develop her work and followed her for at least ten years.



Figure 7.

Robart, The Central Team, and Guests (G).

From left to right: Eva Kreikenbaum, Laura Cassinelli. Juri Barone (G), Thibaut Garçon, Mariella Gaeta (G), Cristina Baruffi, Anna Tocci.

Photograph by Tanya Khodakivska. Las Téoulères. Summer of 2013

The second session included the “Central Team” and two guest participants. During the second session we had taken video footage of Robart’s work. The video recordings are part of a journaling project. The purpose of this project is to keep a visual track of the development of Robart’s research from 2013 to 2016.

In addition to the video recordings in 2013, I documented my fieldwork in 2012 and 2013 through field notes, as well as through recorded conversations with Robart at her Home and during her workshops in Italy and France. I also completed recorded interviews with the Central Team and participants in the workshops. The field notes are contained in two notebooks named “Field Notes 1 (2012)” and “Field Notes 2 (2013)”. The audio recordings are contained in the subfolder Robart Audio Recordings contained in the Folder named Robart files in the Lacie hard drive. Both the field notes and the

Lacie hard drive are in my possession and located at my current physical address. The video recordings are contained in a hard drive (named G-Drive), which is currently in Robart's possession and located at her home in France.

4.3 PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND SUBJECTIVITY

Due to the participatory nature of Robart's work, I chose participant observation as my primary dance fieldwork tool. In dance research, participant observation is a qualitative approach, which allows an understanding of the meanings of events within their global context. In participant observation the topic of embodied cognition (the idea that the body influences the mind, and cognitions arise from bodily interactions with the environment) plays an important role in the collection of information, as well as in the interpretation and analysis of observations. Participant observation includes the observer's subjectivity, personal ways of knowing and learning, body awareness, and integration with the phenomena investigated.

4.4 SUBJECTIVITY AS A METHOD OF STUDY

My research methodology is subjective because it relates to my direct participation in and embodiment of dance and chant. This is relevant to the empirical character of Robart's propositions, which I could not efficiently and fully understand as a detached observer. Robart's approach takes the risk of directly and consciously engaging all the resources of the body, the senses, the emotions, the instincts, and the mind. This pragmatic approach becomes the axis of a living understanding, unified, and channeled through a single impulse: the passion for living and knowing

In Dance Studies, and in most of humanities based on writing approaches, subjectivity affects the researcher's course of action, from the choice of topic, formulating hypotheses, selecting methodologies, and interpreting observations. Subjectivity also plays a role when one considers both the body -an essential element in dance- and dance embodiment with its transforming effect on the individual. This is particularly important when a researcher relies on participant observation and dance embodiment as methods of inquiry.

Subjective experience tends to be less valued than objectivity in academia, "as if experiential and perceptual transformations of the individual were not more than byproducts of a larger impersonal process"⁷³. A serious consideration of the role of subjectivity in dance research can offer creative opportunities to investigate and understand the experiential roots of dance embodiment and the acquisition of knowledge conducive to the development of the field of Dance Studies. An exploration of the idea of dance embodiment as connected to the transformation of the individual and how this transformation affects his knowledge, could lead to a better appreciation of subjectivity as a method of study.

The common ground between myself as the dance researcher and my object of investigation is experience and reflective knowledge. I took my subjective experience as the axis of this study about Maud Robert's work, and attempted to move from measuring the success of the observations and research by the amount of information collected, to considering the acts of observing and participating in the research as vehicles to understand and handle cultural, social, and embodied experience, and therefore, as vehicles to obtain knowledge.

Dance embodiment is tightly bound to the experience of the felt body, the connection between the felt body and the mind, the relationships between the people participating in the dance event, and the changes that such experiences produce in the individual. Therefore, dance embodiment is not a set of context-free actions, but a complex process of transformation of the subject's identity and agency over itself, concomitant with transformations in the dance that is being learned or performed.

In my experience, participant observation and dance embodiment developed into a multidimensional practice, in which I became the central point of exchange between the context of my research and my own individual way of knowing and experiencing. In this sense the knowledge I obtained through participant observation and dance embodiment emerged as an important type of situated knowledge, as defined by Haraway,⁷⁴ not only because is specific to a particular cultural and historical context but also because the ways of acquiring it involved more than intellectual speculation and theorizing. Situated knowledges in dance contexts challenge the idea that consciousness and intelligence are phenomena exclusive of the mind. Thus, the notion of situated knowledge in dance research expands the domain of consciousness and intelligence to includes the physical body as an epistemic entity.

In my dance research experiences I have attempted not be limited to the study of dance forms, socio-cultural contexts, movement notation, etc. Thus, I also include the processes of transformation of agency and identity of the researcher, as well as making sense of his experience. I suggest viewing dance embodiment as a process of transformation in which the subject constructs himself. This is not only relevant as phenomena of human development, but also as a source of knowledge in dance research.

Dance is a fluid phenomenon whose existence is manifest within the consciousness of the dancer. The dance embodiment process should not be seen only as learning gestures or codes because it is a journey in which the present and the dancing subject have priority. From this perspective, embodied dance research goes beyond the process of looking at forms, analyzing them, and fixing them, as if dance and dance research were a mere collection of movement patterns.

CHAPTER 5: FIELDWORK EXPERIENCES

OVERVIEW

In this chapter, I describe the details of my experiences as a researcher in the context of Robart's work. My fieldwork objectives were:

1. Acquire first-hand experience on the practice of yanvalou in Robart's work
2. Experience the chants and other elements of her work
3. Elucidate the importance of yanvalou in the context of her work
4. Find the relationships between all elements in her work

5.1 SUMMER OF 2012

5.1.1 At Robart's Home

My presence and work at Robart's home was an exceptional situation, for two reasons: the first is that she keeps her private life separate from her work; the second is that she welcomed my research and gave me her full support. .

I arrived at her home two weeks before the workshops began. Robart and I agreed that time was crucial and in order to make the best of it, we would work at her house before and after the workshops. The work at her house followed a regular schedule and was comprised of Haitian chants, yanvalou, the Exercises,⁷⁵ as well as formal and casual conversations, some which I recorded. I had my notebook always at hand and I took notes whenever it was pertinent.

After breakfast, we would clear the table and work on the chants.⁷⁶ We would chant a series of songs for about one hour. After chanting, we worked on yanvalou. Oftentimes we started the dance while we were still chanting. After yanvalou was finished, we would sit at her kitchen table and talk. In our conversations, we touched

upon different subjects, such as the work on the chants and yanvalou, planning her workshops, as well as reflections and questions about her work. I tried to record our conversations as much as Robart allowed me. At the beginning, Robart was uncomfortable with the audio recordings, but she soon became used to them. She would often ask me to playback the recordings to make sure they included what she meant to say or to add and clarify points. This activity was followed by a break during which Robart or both of us did house chores, such as cleaning, laundry, or shopping. In the afternoon, we would work on the Exercises.

Robart's house is located in the countryside close to the Basque region of Southern France. Originally an old stone barn built in 1772, it was converted into a large two-story house. We would work on the chants and yanvalou in the kitchen and dining room on the first floor. For the Exercises, we were mainly on the second floor, which has a large hall with a wooden floor.



Fig 8.
Robart's Home (Maison Lahire).
Peronal Photograph by Edouard Robart

During the work on the chants, Robart gave me instructions or corrected me as we sang. In order to help me understand the rhythm and the voice modulations, Robart used various devices, from the movement of her hands (such as gently tapping on the table) to the movement of her body and dancing. The most crucial of those devices was an action with a rubber band, which she improvised to explain the pulsation of the sounds in the chant. As she stretched the rubber band with her hands, she elongated a note of the chant; as she decreased the tension of the rubber band, she gently retracted either the same note or the following one. These actions connected the sounds in a continuous flow, making the chant move like a wave. The action of the rubber band also illustrates Robart's idea of in-tension, in the sense of having a state or quality of being tense or stretched. For her, in-tension is the result of the dynamic rapport between two factors, such as the inside and the outside, high and low, the individual and the group sound and silence. Such rapport brings forth life, like a sound or a vibration produced by a tense string.⁷⁷

While working on yanvalou in the kitchen and dining room areas, I would follow Robart as she moved through the spaces between tables, chairs, and other household objects. She gave me advice and corrections as we danced. Often, she would step out to observe and correct me. There were times when she would attend to her household chores, such as ironing or cooking; however, she would keep an eye on me as I danced yanvalou. She assisted me by marking the step or by giving me instructions as she was doing her activities. Compared with the work on yanvalou during workshops with participants, the yanvalou sessions at Robart's home had a domestic and down-to-earth atmosphere. Practicing yanvalou out of the formalized context of the workshop created a relaxed state within me, which allowed me to be more open to the dance and therefore

acquire a better understanding of it. At Robart's home, the gap between the ordinary life and the inner awareness in yanvalou was reduced. The proximity of daily life to Robart's work gradually changed the quality of my awareness. I began to realize that the separation between inner work, such as meditation or Robart's work, and ordinary life is a separation that's self-imposed, and can be eliminated if one has the desire and the practical tools to do it.

The work at Robart's home included the analysis of our experiences relating to the elements of her work. First, it was important to know if each exercise was a good foundation to experience and understand the interrelatedness between the body and mind. Second, Robart and I had to develop pedagogy to introduce the participants to and lead them in her work. Working with Robart in the exercises was crucial because I was going to either lead the Exercises or give feedback to the participants in the workshops. This situation was also important because it was the first instance where I worked in an everyday context with her, giving me a new perspective on the work, Robart, and myself.

5.1.2 Workshops 2012

Robart organizes workshops two or three times a year, mostly in Europe but sometimes in the Americas. The participants in her workshops come from various countries and professions. In addition to the Central Team, there is a group of followers who have joined several of her workshops, as well as first time participants.

She requires quiet locations for her activities. Such places are usually located in the countryside, although it is possible to find them in the city. Robart's work demands a space large enough to fit the entire group of people she is working with, as well as the absence of distracting elements such as noise or automotive traffic.



Figure 9.
Las Téoulères. Surroundings.
 Photograph by Tanya Khodakivska. Summer of 2013.

Robart also prefers that the participants stay focused on the work, as well as detached from the daily routines of their regular lives. Thus, she looks for locations that in addition to providing a place for work also provide comfortable places to sleep, eat, socialize, and enjoy nature. There are residential workshops in which all daily activities are connected with the continuity of the work. There are also nonresidential workshops, which are limited to only work sessions in medium to large size hall during day time.

In residential workshops the daily activities are scheduled the night before. Generally after breakfast, there is a morning work session which is followed by a group meal. After a short break or *siesta*, the afternoon work session takes place. This is followed by a group dinner, which ends with discussions or readings about topics selected by members of the group.

The work sessions had a simple organization, which Robart implemented as the work progressed. In the 2012 and 2013 workshops, the chants, yanvalou, the Exercises,

and the Spirals were arranged in a continuous time structure, with short breaks between sections. Robart considers the totality of each work session as a process, with even the changing of clothes a part of it. Sometimes she starts with the Exercises; other times, with singing or yanvalou.

The work sessions as processes do not have a rigid sequence, as everything is connected and contributes to the transformation of energy. The passage from one step to the next depends on what is happening, and, above all, on wakefulness and being present at every moment in soul, mind, and body. Sometimes a simple walk creates an opening or unblocking of energy. The understanding of work as a process leads one to the realization that one is also a process in which perception, action, and phenomena are interrelated.

In regards to space, there is a poetic relationship with the place of work, where one establishes connections not only with the physical elements of the working hall, but also with the elements of nature surrounding it. Therefore, the quality of the place is important. Ordinary phenomena, such as the living smell of flowers and grass, or the singing of birds, contributes to the chant and dance. This doesn't mean that Robart will not work in the city, as there are miracles that can happen in urban spaces as well, with workshops being a source of nourishment, even in unideal locations. The work creates its own environment, and obliges the sacralization of the place. Furthermore, the individual effort and attention are also sacralized by the quality of the work.

The work itself transmutes as it develops. The chants and the yanvalou affect the soul of the place and objects. For example, during the work at Robart's home, the kitchen table became a special object. It was like a bubble, a container of awareness and a place

of relatedness where our work developed. It even became an instrument of exploration, in which Robart would sometimes tap its surface to mark the rhythm of the chants. A propitious space for work is not made to cut oneself from the outside but to go deeper into the work.

5.1.2.1 Kassel, Germany

Kassel is a small town about an hour and a half from Frankfurt. This was a non-residential workshop location that took place in a small studio that belonged to a dance therapist, a friend by the name of Eva Kreikenbaum (member of Robart's "Central Team"). The studio was rather small (about 18 x 16 feet) but had a high ceiling and had good sound resonance for chanting. The participants included Eva, her mother, the German writer Barbara Schwerin von Krosigk, and myself. The workshop lasted five days. Each day we worked once for about five hours. We started with chanting and finished with yanvalou. I assumed the role of participant observer, but on the final day I observed the work sitting outside the work area and taking notes. After each work session, Robart, Eva, and I would return to the place we were staying at. It was a small apartment in a private home. Either during the walk back to the apartment or at the apartment itself, we would analyze the day's work session and plan the following day's one.

5.1.2.2 L'Ocanda

L'Ocanda is a very small village surrounded by agricultural fields and sheep farms in the Umbria Region of Italy. It is close to the town of Orvieto and about two hours away from Rome. Robart's workshop was held at the Agriturismo Center, which

has a small church that was converted into a workspace for different activities, such as yoga, acting, and dance. Being a residential workspace, the living facilities were close to the workspace, and included dormitories, bathrooms, a large kitchen, and dining room. The group consisted of two members of Robart's Central Team (Ana Tocci and Cristina Baruffi); eight participants (individuals who had participated in previous workshops with Robart, as well as first timers); and lastly myself.

The work was divided into two sessions: one in the morning, and the other in the afternoon. The morning sessions were dedicated to technical work on the details of elements such as yanvalou and the Exercises. In the afternoons, the focus was on developing a process of work which included most of Robart's work elements. The order of events was different each day. It depended on Robart's perception of the work and the readiness and progress of the people in the workshop. The process included yanvalou, chants, the Exercises,⁷⁸ as well as the Round Structure,⁷⁹ which consists of a march based on a circular pattern.

In this workshop period, I was involved in all of the activities as an active participant, except for the last two days. During those days, I stayed at the periphery of the action, observing and taking notes. Additionally, Robart and I had informal conversations at the end of each day. We would take walks in the evening along the only street in the village, discussing and analyzing the work done during the day.

At the end of the workshop, I had recorded and compiled interviews with all the participants. The interviews were based on a questionnaire I had prepared in advance.⁸⁰ These recordings are stored in a hard drive under the name "Robart Audio Recordings 2012."

5.1.2.3 *Las Téoulères.*



Figure 10.
Las Téoulères. Working Hall.
Photograph by Tanya Khodakivska. Summer of 2013.

Las Téoulères International Center for Theatrical Research and Training is located in Gascogne between Bordeaux and Toulouse, France. It is an ideal place for any type of artistic retreat. It is an old farm adapted for artistic workshops. It consists of a large hall with wooden floors and a high ceiling, and is well-illuminated and ventilated, with great acoustics. The dormitories, dining room, kitchen, and bathrooms are all located in a different building. In addition to lodging, the owner of the place provides food, as well as amenities to help the workshop participants stay focused on their work. Like the one at L'Ocanda, this was a residential workshop.

The work structure at Las Téoulères followed the same model as that of L'Ocanda. The workshop group consisted of ten individuals, some of them new to Robart's work.

5.2 SUMMER OF 2013

The 2013 fieldwork was divided into three sections: work at Robart's home, workshops with participants at Las Téoulères, and Robart's work with the Central Team, also at Las Téoulères. The work done with the Central Team during this time period represents the beginning of the video documenting project of Robart's work.

5.2.1 At Robart's Home

The work at Robart's home was similar to the one carried out in 2012, except that we were also working on the production of the video documentary of her work. We had to secure cameras and audio recording equipment, as well as planning the film process.

Like in the previous year, the work at Robart's home included only herself and I. Our activities oscillated between the events of daily life, the work on chants, yanvalou, and the Exercises, as well as conversations relating to her work. Besides the daily chores and short visits to the town, there were not many distractions. This allowed us to stay focused and discuss aspects of her research and creative life at almost any time during the day.

My role as a participant observer during the work at Robart's home is difficult to describe. Particularly because my presence in Robart's home and our friendship gave a particular meaning to the notion of participant observation. More than an observer or a participator, I had to live and be in the field. We worked in a non-utilitarian way, developing an inspiring relationship between teacher and disciple, perhaps relating to the connection found in ancient traditional cultures where the teachings were still alive. While adapting to each other, I became a part of Robart's work and life. In addition to working, we shared space, time, food, and house chores. Our conversations were not only

focused on my thesis but also on all aspects of her work. The discussions were not of the question-answer type, but true dialogues in which Robart and I would reflect and meditate upon various topics that were important to the both of us. The atmosphere in Robart's house was of friendship and collaboration. This situation was favorable because we intensified the exploration of her work, and developed productive dialogues. The aspects of her work included in our conversations range from her trajectory as a researcher, her life in Haiti, the function of chants and dance in her work, and other topics I will be addressing in this thesis.

5.2.2 Workshops 2013

5.2.2.1 *Las Téoulères. First Session*

Robart's main priority in this session was to share her work with participants of various levels. There were ten participants, with the majority of them having worked with Robart previously. However, several of them were newcomers to her work. Additionally there was also Eva Kreikenbaum, a Member of the Central Team, and myself. The work structure included chanting, yanvalou, the Exercises, and a new sequence of breathing exercises called the "Spirals."⁸¹ Like at L'Ocanda and Las Téoulères, this was a residential workshop.

5.2.2.2 *Las Téoulères. Second Session*

In addition to the Central Team, Mariella Gaeta and Juri Barone were included as guests.⁸² The work sessions comprised chants, yanvalou, the Exercises, and the Spirals, as well as other structures, such as Za Za and the Salutation. Additionally, the work included the integration of the cameraperson, Tanya Khodakivska, and the filming

process itself. Robart demanded that Tanya integrate herself within the practical work because she wanted the work process to be captured from an insider's perspective. Thus, it was important that Tanya got acquainted with all aspects of the work, as well as with the processes implicit in them.

In this workshop, I acted as a participant, sound equipment and boom operator, observer, and co-director of the documentary. Playing different roles was not easy, but provided me with different perspectives of the work.

CHAPTER 6: THE ELEMENTS OF ROBART'S WORK

OVERVIEW

In this thesis I only elaborate on the chants, yanvalou, and two sequences of exercises called, respectively, the Exercises and the Spirals. Robart's work includes other elements such as ZaZa and the Salutation. However, instead of including them in this thesis, I opted for elaborating on them in a separate work.



Figure 11.
Robart working on chants with Cristina Baruffi and Juri Barone.
Photograph by Tanya Khodakivska. Summer of 2013.

The elements of Robart's work are not isolated phenomena. Despite their different emphases, they are deeply connected with each other, not only through their common principles but also through the general attitude Robart and the participants adopt during the totality of the workshop time. The key words for understanding such attitude are care and quality. In Robart's work, care and quality are elements present not only in the practical or technical elements, but in every moment and in every place during the residential workshops. I witnessed care and quality even in her daily life at home.

In the workshops most of the participants come from big cities, such as New York, Paris, Rome, etc. They leave behind their occupations and families. They also try to leave behind their worries. However, what are difficult to leave behind are social and egotistic games. It does not take much to spark loud conversations and social games that create conditions of tension or distraction. But, contrary to what one may think, it does not take much to create the opposite atmosphere. Even just a couple of people with the right attitude can create a positive atmosphere. One of the most evident elements during workshops is the peace and silence present in them. People still talk, make jokes, laugh, and go on with the daily life activities, but there is an authentic and comfortable mutual respect that invites one to feel free and express oneself sincerely. Although social games are impossible and perhaps unhealthy to eliminate, there is a calm situation in which everyone gradually becomes transparent to the others as he or she relaxes and brings down social masks and defenses. There is a gradual change on the individual human quality, which gradually becomes physically evident in the participants. By the end of the workshops everyone looks invigorated and “lighter”, even their skin seems healthier, smoother. It’s as if the workshops improve everyone’s tranquil dynamism.

The best way to illustrate the care and quality is a practical example. For this purpose I will rely on some of the events transpired last summer during the work with the Central Team and the filming of Robart’s work at Las Téoulères.

The day after everyone arrived, the work began. In addition to cleaning and preparing the place for our workshop, we also had to prepare for the filming of the documentary. This meant wiring and hanging microphones, preparing and testing video and sound equipment, and other related chores. All this required planning, organization

and hard teamwork. Additionally, these preparations required the use of ladders and power tools, working through a lot of dust and debris that had to be cleaned before the work. Thus instead of starting the workshop with the elements of Robart's work, we started with the preparation for filming.

Cleaning and preparing the work space are not trivial tasks. They are not done with a utilitarian attitude or believing they are only necessary because one is going to be bare-footed, lying on the floor, etc. The simple tasks included in cleaning and preparation are connected to an attitude of respect towards the place and with an atmosphere of attention. Cleaning is the occasion to create a link with the work space and to get the body ready to unite with it.

For the 2013 summer session with the Central Team and the filming at Las Téoulères, there was neither the budget nor the people to assign a crew dedicated to the technical preparations. So, all the members of the Central Team, the invited participants (Jury and Mariella), Tanya (the cameraperson), Robart, and I were responsible for the preparations. As we worked, instead of the sounds of chanting and the movement of the dances, we had the sounds of power tools, hammering, discussions about how to do the tasks, and plenty of movement inside and outside the workspace. Despite the mundane character of the activities they all merged into a friendly atmosphere where they flowed like a river. There was an unspoken agreement and joy to collaborate.

My most memorable experience as Director was not organizing or telling everyone what to do, but to witness their movement and their attitudes. No matter how busy anyone was, each person made him or herself available to help the others. Their cooperative actions had a dance-like quality. The sounds of their voices and their tools

had a musical quality. What was so peculiar about the situation is that nobody, not even Robart, had planned it.

We all gave attention and care to our work. Everything we were doing was important not because we were going to film the work but because all those objects (microphones, lights, cameras, ladders, window curtains, etc.), which usually are foreign to Robart's work, this time had to be integrated into her work, and Robart as well as the group had to be acquainted with their presence. There was no way to avoid such reality.

The attention to detail was important because, again, due to the low or null budget, we had to economize resources and time, and make the best of what we had. Care was present even in situations in which we had to improvise. For example, we had run out of fabric for curtains to cover a couple of a few remaining windows just when we were almost finished and getting ready to begin the work session with Robart. Thibaut and Jury managed to collect and join some leftover fragments of the same fabric and came out with a couple of nice curtains. Tanya worked diligently completing photo studies and light tests to find the best light conditions and angles for filming. She had to do all that as several other activities were taking place in the workspace. All the implementations made were modest but had an artistic quality, which made them be perceived as part of the work itself.

In residential workshops the life around the work goes on and is indirectly connected with it. Daily mundane activities like reading, sleeping, writing, eating, taking walks, chatting, etc., are done with an attitude of respect and serenity. A pleasant and quiet atmosphere around the work helps individuals to stay focused and collaborate in harmony.



Figure 12.
Break time at Las Téoulères' dining table.
 Photograph by Tanya Khodakivska. Summer of 2013.

When the work session begins, it does without any delay and nobody is late. Usually, the group gathers a few minutes before in a small vestibule next to the working hall. Everyone knows in advance what type of activity will start the work session (for example, yanvalou) and is wearing the appropriate garments⁸³. Often, Robart is already in the hall. Everybody enters silently and ready to work. Once the work begins, all the attention is directed toward precise tasks. There is neither socializing nor chatting and everyone remains committed to the tasks at hand until the session finishes. Robart limits her speech to simple and concise instructions, advice, or recommendations. Often, she does brief analyses of the work at the end of the sessions. The respect present in the work sessions arises from cordiality and the common need to look for something deeper in oneself and in life.



Figure 13.
Robart and group at work.
 Photograph by Tanya Khodakivska. Summer of 2013.

6.1 YANVALOU

In the ritualistic context of the Vodou culture, the movement scheme of yanvalou is not separated from the rhythm of the drums and songs.⁸⁴ For Robart, yanvalou and chant are closely related because the pulsations that originate and sustain them originate from the same source. Whether in voice or in movement of the body, it is the same inner creative drive that manifests itself through chant and dance. The pulsations are accompanied by their own rhythm, and in those same pulsations force, time, and life intertwine. According to Robart, the pulses bearing the chant and the dance are not premeditated, intellectual activities or body manipulations but pre-reflective dance and/or pre-reflective chant. Therefore, Robart's pedagogy does not emphasize the actions of chanting or dancing for the sake of form. Instead, she focuses on the inner creative pulses expressed through them.

Despite the repetitiveness of the chants and dances, at the center of each repetition there is a continual change; each iteration is the same yet new each time. It is always in the present, the actuality of the moment. It is never something past, or mechanical. Every iteration of sound or movement is different from the one that precedes it and the one that follows it. However, the differentiation is not obtained by some sort of intentional manipulation but through the same organic process of awareness applied to the inner pulsations. At the same time, one does not disconnect from the external world. The capacity to connect with it is critical. One directs the attention simultaneously towards the external and internal worlds, and responds or adapts to both of them.

The work of the singer or dancer is not to make the chant or dance but to let the chant and the dance appear through him or her. The subject is a channel, a medium through which the art manifests itself. As such, the subject is no longer the center of creation or the creator, but an integral part of a greater creative process. This functional aspect of the subject is analogous to the phenomena of possession in the Vodou religion.⁸⁵ In the Vodou rituals, the subject's personality and consciousness are altered when a specific loa possesses him. In this state, individual consciousness and personality are temporarily suspended and the loa manifests itself through the body and actions of the possessed. In an analogue but not identical manner, in Robart's work the subject is a vehicle for the manifestation of something beyond his or her mind and ego.

The most important difference between a Vodou ritual and Robart's practice is that in her propositions, even if the consciousness of the subject is modified, consciousness is always present, enlarged, and intensified. One is always lucid, vigilant, and individuality is not lost.

Robart does not have a formula for teaching yanvalou. From my own experience and from what I observed in the participants in her work, the scheme of yanvalou is simple. However, when we try to do it, even by imitating her, what frequently appears is a weird deformation of what she is doing. The most common issue is the exaggerated undulation of the spine accompanied by an exaggerated movement of the head. Robart is patient and gradually leads the participants to find their way. Usually, she considers each case individually and gives them advice accordingly.

It is difficult to describe yanvalou. Obviously, it has a perceivable manifestation, but trying to describe it only as an external form, does not account for what actually happens as the pulsations that sustain it are incarnated. Yanvalou and the chants, in essence, are not external forms. They are part of a process, through which life flows and expresses itself rhythmically through the body. The process is a marriage of a high quality of human awareness and disposition, and the actualization of the inner creative drive through vocal sounds and bodily movement. There is no formula, trick, talent, dance notation, or technique, to explain such experience.

There are traditional varieties of yanvalou (see Appendix A). However, each of them is not a fixed scheme, they all change over time and throughout the different geographical regions in Haiti. But if one thinks that yanvalou is only a pattern of movement, then one ignores that yanvalou is a phenomenon that passes through the dancer. As a pulsation of life, it exists before it is visible. It does not exist because it is a pattern in which the dancer puts one foot here, the other there, the torso flexed at a certain angle, and so on. One can be correct in the pattern but if one blocks the flow of pulsations, through physical and mental rigidity, the wave of yanvalou is either broken or

inexistent. Perhaps the best way to introduce yanvalou to a beginner is asking him or her to ease the mind and the body and stop the will to control or create a form.

The following is only a general description of the yanvalou pattern. It is based on my own experience and it is not meant to include all the possible nuances of the dance. I include this brief explanation with the awareness that, in essence, yanvalou is not an external form that can be measured or comprehended from an external observer's perspective. It is an embodiment process, that, in order to be understood, one has to experience it directly⁸⁶.



Figure 14.
Yanvalou.

Photograph by Tanya Khodakivska. Summer of 2013.

Yanvalou starts with the feet together and a slight flexion of the knees and hips, with the torso leaning forward. The hands and arms position depends on the dancer's gender. Females hold their skirts some distance from the hips. Males rest their fingertips on the upper thighs and close to the hips.

The basic pattern of yanvalou consists of two steps. The mechanical impulse for the dance originates at the feet and their contact with the ground. Each step is preceded

and initiated by the slight flexion of the hips and knees. The impulse originated at the feet and ground reaches the pelvis and ascends through the spine making it undulate. In general, the dancer advances forward with a step-together-step movement. There are also side-to-side and dance-in-place variations, which include the same elements of the basic forward step. It is important to note that Robart does not emphasize the undulations of the spine. She advises that instead of manipulating it, the dancers should allow the impulses to travel through it.



Figure 15.
Yanvalou. Posterior view.
 Photograph by Tanya Khodakivska. Summer of 2013.

6.2 THE CHANTS

All chants in Robart's work belong to the Vodou tradition in Haiti. They are conveyed in Haitian Creole language⁸⁷. Usually, she just begins singing them and gradually the participants incorporate themselves as they grasp the vocalization of sounds. Robart does not introduce the chants by uttering them slowly or by parts. And she does not stop to translate them or explain them. When she begins to sing a chant the

group already knows, or when she introduces a new one, she sings it fully and without hesitation. She makes the chants present in their fullness, even when her voice is weak or rough. For Robart, even though the anecdotic meaning of the chants is relevant, the most important aspects of the chants are their vibratory and rhythmical qualities, which transcend language, culture, and speculative thinking. The message transmitted by the vibration and rhythm of the human voice in the chants is deeper than the anecdotic content because it strums deep cords within the human soul. That is why in order to approach the chants one has to be humble, precise, impeccably neat. As in yanvalou, one looks for inner pulsations instead of external forms. One has to be very attentive to Robart's voice in order to stay in tune and in rhythm. One also listens to the group as a whole, as well as to the resonance of the chant in the space. According to Robart, the chants have their own inner breath, which is different from the physiological breath. In fact, she does not manipulate her breath when she sings, but allows the inner breath of the chant to regulate her physical breath. The chant and its breath have their own drive, their own life, which is also a pulsation containing two corresponding components or qualities, an expansion and a contraction, like an inhalation and an exhalation. Those balancing components move in a wave, which like the waves of the ocean, are always advancing and in continuous change, and yet conserve their identity and carry a force and a bearing within.

The beauty of the chants often compels the singer or listener to be carried by emotions or images. In these situation it is natural to try to make sense of and attach oneself to those emotions and images. But often this is only an automatic reaction: a kind of reaction ruled by the mind and the need for immediate gratification through

understanding. This attitude trivializes the experienced phenomena. It rigidifies what one already knows; it reduces the discomfort of the unknown to something familiar and more comforting, and prevents one from discovering other aspects of the lived reality .

As mentioned early, the phenomenological method⁸⁸ proposes a tool to exit from the cage created by our reductionist tendencies. The tool is “*epoché*” (Ancient Greek for “suspension”). The phenomenological *epoché*, proposed by *Edmund Husserl*⁸⁹, also known as “bracketing”, has its roots in the Skeptics of Ancient Greece; it is the suspension of judgment about the nature of reality, no longer accepting it as we currently do. Thus *epoché* lays the basis for a type of experience that transcend our ordinary involvement in the world.

Robart’s work is practical and any associations I made between phenomenology and her pedagogy are only my interpretations and reflections. Her intention is not to theorize about her work, but to help the participants in their effort to experience the essence of the chants, dances, as well as other elements of her work. I believe Robart’s pedagogy has something to do with phenomenology, that is why in this thesis I contrast her work with the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, and I illustrate its relation to the phenomenology of Hermann Schmitz.

Robart asks her participants, in all the elements of her work, to stop judging what they do and simply perceive. She also asks them to abandon any attempts to manipulate their voices or bodies in order to produce an effect or premeditated form. Perhaps this is the most difficult aspect of her work because one cannot easily stop the train of judgment and the craving for controlling everything one does. In this situation, it is helpful to have confidence in the pulsations that carry the chant and the dance. However, this confidence

is not the outcome of abstract mental cogitations, but the outcome of a continuous and conscious effort of allowing the pulsations to express themselves as chant and dance.

The chants set in motion all the resources of the subject: its perception, affective capacity, intelligence, and creativity. They multiply the emergence of phenomena in the field of consciousness and oblige the individual, as an integral and organic system, to engage with the immediacy of experience. In this situation one is not busy with descriptions or analyses of events, but with living them, experiencing them as they happen. One is in the raw and archaic experience of the world and life. One is awakened into an attitude in which one experiences pure phenomena, pure emotions, the gushing of life.⁹⁰

6.3 THE EXERCISES AND THE SPIRALS

As I mentioned in the previous section, I think of Robart's work not as the product of mental abstractions, but as the result of direct practice and embodiment. Here, I should stress that confidence is not the product of willfulness or sole intellectual capability. Since Robart began to share her work, she realized that in order to help the participants understand how to chant and how to move, she had to provide them with simple and practical tools. With this in mind, she developed a series of exercises that would allow them to become intimate and confident with their individual bodies. These series of exercises are simple but important in her work because they help to discover the keys for the chants and dances hidden within the physicality of the body. One of these series is called the Exercises. The other is called the Spirals. Both of them relate to the chants and dances.

The names ‘Spirals’ and ‘Exercises’ are temporary. They include a series of exercises that indirectly relate to both chanting and dancing. With some reserve, Robart opted to give them the names they have to be able to identify her propositions. Though she is reluctant to use the words “exercises” or “preparation” because the word exercise is associated with fitness or sport. And the word preparation makes one believe that whatever one is doing is for the sake of something else and not an end in itself. The Spirals emphasize the respiration, but it is not the main element. Robart decided to call it Spirals because she did not want it to be considered only a series of respirations or create the possibility of it being associated with yoga or pranayama.

At first sight the Exercises and the Spirals look like eclectic collections of exercises from various sources, such as yoga, calisthenics, physical therapy. However, they are none of these. Even though they include elements present in those disciplines, such as coordination, force, teamwork, and alignment, what makes them different is that, parallel to the attention to the precision of their external form, the awareness is also directed toward specific points and actions within the body. Their main purpose is not to develop demonstrative virtuosity, strength, flexibility, endurance, or skill, but to develop intimacy with the body and/or a subtle inner awareness to integrate mind and body. They simultaneously address various aspects of the person. They not only act on the body, but also on perception, will, emotion, and intellect. They develop the capacity to go deeper in all one does. The precision and simplicity of their elements facilitate reaching new levels of experience and entering a pre-reflective and pre-verbal condition. So as one is involved in the accuracy of their execution, one may experience emotions such as joy or humbleness, plentitude, etc.⁹¹

The experience I share here emphasizes, by analogy, the effectiveness of the Exercises and the Spirals. The basic standing pose in hatha yoga is named Tadasana or Mountain pose. I practiced this asana for a few years without giving much attention to its name. Once in while I wondered why the pose was given its name but it wasn't until I had been practicing it for seven or eight years that something happened in me as I was doing it. I felt solid and connected to the floor, as if roots were coming out of my feet. My whole body felt strong, erect, and rising upwards. At the same time, I felt vigorous inside. It sounds strange when I put it in words, but, I felt like a mountain. At that moment I grasped that all of the mountain poses I had done all those years were not separated events, but different facets of a single progression. I also recognized that the body in which I wake up every day could be seen as one single event that extends throughout all the days of my life. I realized that up until that moment I only did the mountain pose one time, and that single time lasted seven or eight years. From that day on, I no longer perceived the mountain pose as just another yoga exercise, for me it became a process.

The Exercises and the Spirals are sequences of physical exercises for awakening and nourishing the body's sensibility. They are not expressly related to the chants or yanvalou. Although, what is good for the body is good for the chants and dance. They are integrated into the general sequence of the work process, and sometimes Robart focuses only on them because of the need to work specific details of their elements. Their sequences include standing, sitting, and lying down exercises, as well as running and walking both freely and in organized group structures. For Robart, it is important that the participants understand that, although the Exercises and the Spirals are preliminary, they

are not a warm up. They address address specific conscious actions and body points. For example, in standing up straight, one aligns the body with a vertical axis that goes from the center of the top of the head to a point in between the feet. One tries to maintain the alignment and the awareness of the axis through all the exercises. Another important element is the awareness of the spine and the connection between the coccyx and the head. The essence of the Exercises and the Spirals is the empirical understanding that the body works as gestalt in which the interrelationship of all its parts is always accompanied and nourished by a stream of consciousness.

For Robart the Exercises and the Spirals are still in developmental stages and she did not allow me to give more details about them in this thesis.

6.4 MARCHES

Robart's work often includes other movement schemes, such as rhythmic marches. They are linear group structures, in which the participants march one behind the other, with Robart as the leader. The marches may be seen as a preparation for yanvalou. However, this view may reduce them to secondary accessories. The marches are simple schemes of movement but, similar to yanvalou and the chant, they are pedagogic instruments for the subject to align itself with the creative pulsations and channel them through the body. As yanvalou, the marches are processes. Doing them requires the same type of awareness and attitude one engages in yanvalou. The following paragraph is a general description of the rhythmic march. It does not equate to the actual embodiment of it.

One of the marches is based on a repetitive sequence of three footsteps. The first two steps are normal. In the third step the feet join and, at the same time, the hips and

knees flex slightly, making the body descend a few inches while the palms of the hands join in front of the chest as in a praying gesture. The neck is soft and flexes forward slightly to allow the wave of movement to pass through it. The sequence begins again, and at the first step, the knee and hip joints extend and the hands separate to return to the sides of the body. This movement proposition is very simple, and when it is not done without a careful attention to the bodily impulses, it may become just a repetitive movement that has nothing to do with dance. But when the dancer sets aside his worry about producing a visible form and instead focuses on observing his body and allowing the movement impulses to travel through it (for example, observing the actions of his feet when he steps, allowing the impulses resulting from their movements to travel through the legs to the upper body, and letting the movement of the arms and hands connect naturally with the movement of the legs), then he or she is ready for the next challenge, which is to let the body move as if the movement was something analogous to respiration; a series of expansions and contractions, openings and closings, ascending and descending like a wave. From this moment on we give opportunity to the body to express its own natural movement, unburdened by forms dictated by the mind.⁹² This simple march coordinates the motions of all parts of the body. It involves the totality of the person and brings a feeling of calm and equanimity.

CHAPTER 7: IMPULSE OR ÉLAN

7.1 IMPULSE AS URGENCY

In the summer of 2012, during the first week of fieldwork at Robart's house, she asked me to look for *yanvalou* in my body. We were sitting by the table in her kitchen. I stood up and began to march with the *yanvalou* movement scheme: one step forward, then joining the feet, flexing and extending the knees each time, allowing the pulses of the march to travel through the pelvis and the spine and then through the entire body. According to Robart, when the pulsations go through the spine they can sometimes be like a fluid that moves in a cycle that starts at the coccyx, reaches the chest, and opens the solar plexus.

I repeated this pattern through the kitchen and the living room for a short time. Then, she also stood up, began to dance and I followed her. Looking at the back of her body, I saw she was doing the same pattern of movement as mine. However, while my movement felt like a steady repetition, Robart's movement was different because, even though it also was repetitive, each repetition included new details, which appeared to be random but at the same time were rhythmically organized and graceful, similar to the flames of a fire.

As Robart was dancing, she asked me to find in me the sensation of *urgence* (translated in English to urgency), which is like a pulsation, a need, a sensation of something imperative and about to happen, a point in the movement scheme, which is like a propulsion that awakens and gives life to the dance. I struggled to find such *urgence*, but physically I could not feel anything in particular. Nevertheless, I persevered, trying to maintain the dance as if it was a series of undulations that traveled from my feet

toward my head. When Robart saw me, she told me that I was swinging from side to side, like the pendulum of a metronome. She said that sometimes she also does that, but there is a counteraction to the urgency, an impulse that opposes the rocking action. When I tried to find this counteraction, I realized that the awareness and conscious control of my body's weight had something to do with it.

Gradually, I sensed the need for a conscious holding back or restrain, a very subtle and almost involuntary impulse that controlled or limited the rocking action. This action reminded me of an event in my childhood, in which my maternal grandfather, who was a mason, taught me how to lift a bucket full of wet mortar mixture and place it on my shoulder. I was small, the bucket was heavy, and when I tried to lift it all the way to my shoulder, I ended up dropping it or losing my balance.

Then my grandfather showed me how he did it. He grabbed the bucket with both hands and swung it two or three times in front of him. On the last swing, right at the highest point of the arch, he gently and effortlessly pulled the bucket to his shoulder, where it landed as if it was empty or weightless. After trying to lift the bucket a few times, I finally did it correctly and understood that the action of swinging allowed two events to happen: (a) the development of momentum, and (b) the embodied awareness of the weight and shape of the bucket, as if the body and the bucket were unified.

Event b is crucial because by the time the bucket reaches the highest point of the last swing, both body and mind know, that it only takes a small pulling action to make the bucket land on the shoulder. Remembering this childhood experience as I was struggling with yanvalou somehow helped me to embody and understand the dance. My childhood

memories awakened in me the awareness of the weight of my body and the momentum of its movements, as if my body was my grandfather's bucket full of mortar.

Event a corresponds to the urgency. Event b corresponds to the counteraction to urgency. The whole process was nonetheless difficult because it required a very delicate control of efforts, attention to the smallest mechanical impulses of my body and an insistence upon going forward in the space. Robart told me that she saw some positive change in my *yanvalou*. This was the visible outer result of my struggle. Inside I was fully awake and I had a feeling of sobriety and serenity meaning the emotions I evoked were subtle. I did not look for them. It was as if they casually arrived.

Robart said that the urgency is like a feeling of agitation and one has to find calm in its dynamism, which is actualized through the interrelation of opposites: up and down, right and left, forward and backward. One has to simultaneously balance all those apparently opposite tendencies to find fluidity. Additionally, urgency is not a physical impulse. It is a real imperative, like the urgency to go to the hospital after an accident or when one is seriously ill.⁹³

7.2 THE NOTION OF *ÉLAN*

The vocabulary Robart uses in her pedagogy changes according to the needs of the situation. In a later conversation Robart referred to urgency as *élan*, a French term for momentum, impetus, impulse, drive, gushing. For her, *élan* is a creative burst, it implies a broader description of what she meant when she used the word urgency. She also preferred *élan* over urgency because *élan* includes both the urgency and its counteraction.⁹⁴

When I asked her where *élan* comes from, she told me that thinking of it only as a mechanical phenomenon, originating somewhere in the body, could be misleading because it can compel the dancer to move mechanically and monotonously. She said, “*Élan* issues from the being. It is a conjunction, a re-encounter with the profound self of a person. It is something that resonates in the depths of the individual. It brings with it the means of action to realize, re-actualize, and celebrate the link between the creator, the creation, and the creature.”⁹⁵ *Élan* breaks the mechanicalness of the dance and infuses it with life. Despite the repetitive quality of the *yanvalou* movements, *élan* makes every movement as if it had never been done before. The *yanvalou* dancer does not repeat movements. He or she creates them. When his or her profound nature and lucidity are engaged, his or her body returns to the beginning of movement: the non-historical, archaic origin of the dance.

Robart said that when she sings, her deep nature calls for something.⁹⁶ It is her need to call for something deep within her self. “If one does not call for [anything], nothing arrives. If one calls for *yanvalou*, the movement comes.”⁹⁷ In the Fon and Ewe languages of West Africa, the word *yanvalou* is the incarnation of such a call, meaning “come to me”. When one does *yanvalou*, one actualizes this meaning.

According to Robart, all traditional elements (for example, the elements of the Vodou religion) are associated with something vast and deep: Life in its widest and deepest sense. The awareness of *élan* reestablishes one’s connection with Life. *Élan* reconnects with that which is bigger than one’s individual self. Everything related to *élan* is the manifestation of an aspiration or impulse of the human being to reconnect with the unknown. It is the need for accomplishment of a being that is never accomplished. *Élan* is

the force of the process of development or movement toward accomplishment. Élan is like a desire: a desire of being. In order to do yanvalou, one has to restore the link with the call or desire and respond to it. During the singing of the ritual chants one directs and pushes the call toward the gods.

Élan is not localized in the body or the ego but in one's profound nature. When searching for it one does not look for a reward, it is a gratuitive action. It is not limited to only one fixed form to manifest itself. When it manifests unhindered or uninhibited there is spontaneity and a feeling of freedom. Élan is the call for freedom and the innocence of the response. It is the impulse of life, and what makes one the child of life.⁹⁸ As Robart was saying this, she remembered a fragment from the Kushitaki Upanishad, which, she believes, is related to élan:

The breath of life is one

When we speak, life speaks

When we see, life sees

When we hear, life hears

When we think, life thinks

When we breathe, life breathes⁹⁹

CHAPTER 8: SILENT YANVALOU

According to Robart, there is an outer Vodou, as well as an inner Vodou. The interiority of Vodou is what interests her. She also believes that within all cults in the world, which are closely linked to their own traditions, there are latent aspects. And if one creates the favorable conditions, the latent aspects emerge, revealing themselves. In her research, she tries to enter the interiority of Vodou to discover its unknown latent aspects. She affirmed, “It is not that I invented them. They are there. One has to discover them. Everybody has a fixed view of Vodou. I also have one from my infancy and youth. It is populated by rigid images of it. I must go against those images that I fixed. I must be in a free exploration”.¹⁰⁰

In Robart’s work the chants are done either standing or sitting. Yanvalou is done separately and sometimes while chanting. However, yanvalou, in Robart’s work, is generally accompanied neither by chanting nor any musical instrument. She calls this modality of yanvalou silent yanvalou, not only because it is done in silence, but especially because of the experience she had in Haiti (section 3.2).

Silent yanvalou is not a spectacle. It is an individual experiential action. It is not meant to be seen but to be done. Robart is conscious of the importance of the relationship between experiencing and learning and their effects on the totality of the person. The processes of learning and embodying yanvalou become experiences that transform the individual. In this sense they contribute to the construction of the subject.¹⁰¹

With the absence of external music, the dancer has the chance to focus his awareness on what is happening within himself and realizes that the yanvalou form is the external manifestation of the unification of internal pulsations of creative awareness.

Robart advises that when the dancer searches for the yanvalou in the body, he should not insist on looking for “feeling” the dance. Emotions, corporeal feelings and mental associations are impossible to avoid, but we can look at them without attachment. The search for a sensual experience can become a distraction leading to the waste of time and energy. Thus, instead of searching for feelings, one must do concrete actions. Instead of looking for what to feel, one must focus on what to do and do it precisely. Otherwise the practice becomes “masturbation”.¹⁰²

In order to focus on doing, the body may be approached as if it were a musical instrument. For example, a drum. More precisely, each part of the body involved in chanting and dancing may be seen as if it were a musical instrument. In chanting, the movement of the lips, tongue, and all parts that are involved in the modulation of vowels and consonants, can be compared to playing drums.¹⁰³ The dancer could act as if the body was a set of drums around him. In music, the drummer knows that each drum has a different voice, a different rhythmic effect, and a precise place in the space around him. After years of learning and practice, he recognizes the nuances in the sound of each individual drum and establishes a particular relationship with each of them. He also realizes that above the rhythmical patterns he produces, he may hear something like a song, not produced deliberately by him, but which manifests when he has been precise in his task as drummer. Such song is like a rider carried by his drumming. The rider is the perceptible message that, without words, speaks of the essence of the song.

Since my early work on yanvalou with Robart, I recognized the importance of all the parts of the body. I realized the need to develop awareness of actions involved in apparently simple processes, such as walking. For example, during the yanvalou

stepping, when the foot lands, one should carefully observe how the body's weight is gradually placed on the ground because the yanvalou stepping is delicate and, at the same time, rhythmical. In this situation, the sensitivity at the soles of the feet and toes becomes a crucial part of feeling how the weight is released.

Another example is the movement of the spinal column, which is often misunderstood by novice yanvalou dancers because the spine undulations are mistakenly perceived as if they were deliberately produced and emphasized by proficient traditional practitioners. Although there are different types of yanvalou¹⁰⁴, and in some of them, the movement of the spine is indeed more pronounced, in the silent yanvalou proposed by Robart, the spine undulations are subtle. In silent yanvalou, the relationship between the dancer and his vertebral column is not manipulative. Instead, the dancer tries to find the way to keep his spine as relaxed as possible and, at the same time, erect and awake. One looks for the fluidity of movement and instead of controlling it, one allows yanvalou to awaken the intelligence of the body and channel one's energy. Furthermore, in yanvalou there is no waste of energy.

During silent yanvalou, the dancer seeks to maintain the spine and keep the torso relaxed and receptive to the wave of impulses going through the spine and circulating through all the other parts of the body, reconnecting them, and reconnecting the opposites such as up and down, front and back, and right and left. The arms are generally relaxed as the fingertips of the females hold their long skirts and the male's fingertips rest at the center of the front of their thighs. The shoulders are also relaxed. Their movement is a translation and a continuation of the impulses traveling through the spine. It is important for the dancer to perceive the rapport among the different parts of his body through which

the motor impulses travel. Feet, legs, pelvis, torso, arms, hands, head, the articulations of these parts, as well as the respiration, are the channels through which the impulses bearing the dance pass. They are analogous to the group of drums the musician beats with his hands to make music. Both the drummer and the dancer realize at some point in their practice, that what they do has something to do with gravity. The beating on the drum, as well as the stepping of yanvalou are sophisticated falls and rises, waves. When the dancer reaches this level of sensitivity, the whole body becomes not only a conduit of waves but also a transmitter, like an antenna. The body becomes a body of transmission. When yanvalou is well done, all creation is actualized and life dances.

When the body is approached as if it is a musical instrument, its movement becomes more rhythmic. It has alternations and variations that are like respiration. Moreover, the movement enters into closer contact and is coordinated with all the physiological phenomena characterized by a dual action, such as the breath, the heartbeat, etc., including the cellular respiration. The visible form of yanvalou becomes the external manifestation of all dynamic relationships of opposed tendencies, such as contraction and expansion as seen through the lens of Schmitz' vital drive, muscular flexion and extension, gravity and our efforts to overcome it, distractions and our efforts to detach ourselves from them, etc. There is also a process of throwing out roots toward earth and rising toward the sky; giving and taking. Opposites such as cold and hot, joy and sadness, etc., interrelate and coexist. For Robart, yanvalou is the external manifestation of all those movements.

The practice or search for yanvalou in Robart's work is like walking on a tightrope. The dancer has to keep steady attention on his or her actions and his or her will

to go forward, neither ignoring nor letting himself attach to the numerous distractions inside and outside of him. The awareness becomes subtle and gentle. The dance is internal, it happens underneath the skin, and what an observer sees are signs, external manifestations of it. The dance develops into a meditation, a state in which the awareness is steadily focused on specific tasks. The body finds its way to integrate itself into something analogous to a mantra. The dance is embodied. It becomes an incarnated mantra.¹⁰⁵

In the Vodou religion yanvalou has an effusive and spectacular character. It contains dynamism and colors. But Robart is interested in searching for the latent aspects of the tradition, and in her work the latent meditative aspect of yanvalou is awakened.

CHAPTER 9: SPONTANEITY

One afternoon, Robart and I were seating by the table in her kitchen. She began to chant a Vodou song. She did not start automatically, but let the chant emerge gradually. I knew the song from previous work with her. However, by the way it sounded that day; it seemed that the song was articulating itself for the very first time. Throughout all that time Robart was moving her body and delicately gesturing with her face. She was playful and the movements of her body and face were in harmony with the song. At some moment she said, without pausing the chant or the movement, that there were something like “explosions” in the song. She suddenly stood up and began to balance her body side to side, until the movement became yanvalou. The transition between the balancing and the yanvalou was very peculiar. It gave me the impression that the yanvalou was already present from the very beginning and had begun to express itself through the apparently random gestures of her face and the movements of her body when she was developing the chant. As she was doing the yanvalou, first in the kitchen and then in the living room, I followed her trying to imitate her movements. It was remarkable how Robart’s movements were full of grace and ease. But it was not the form that made her movement look like a dance. It was its simplicity and liveliness, which also made her motions look as if she was playing¹⁰⁶.

When she finished dancing, she said that the “explosions” she mentioned early could be risky, because they are very unusual sensations or feelings that could become a game in which the ego is only searching for its own pleasure. She explained that yanvalou may calm those explosions, or rather transform them into something subtle. It may channel one’s energies and bring about a state of serene vigilance. She said that she

is always attentive to those egotistic tendencies, and, more important than the explosions is the source where they are coming from. She added that during chanting the attention to the source allows her to sing for a long time and bring the life into the song¹⁰⁷.

The “explosions” could be considered as a form or manifestation of *élan*, and spontaneity exists when our actions are the product of our conscious and sincere engagement with them¹⁰⁸. This calls for a commitment of the whole subject because the chant mobilizes all of its aspects organically. The Vodou tradition has a vital dynamism that is the motor of the chant and dance, and is oriented by the tradition toward the celebration of the joy of life as a collective action. But, even if one sings or dances alone in the kitchen, one still can retrieve the intention of the chant and dance because the intention is objective, it is part of their nature. The Vodou ritual brings order and coherence into chaos, it wants to honor the essence of life in a coherent way. What is meant by order is that there is always a balancing element. One wants to run and at the same time one holds back and stay, one wants to cry and instead one sings. Even though in the ritual there are cries and jumps they are done consciously and within the order of chaos. The chant mobilizes the totality of being and spontaneity is organic, it is part of a process in which all parts involved interrelate and adapt to each other and to the totality of the situation at every moment.¹⁰⁹

Robart’s approach is based on the practice of Afro-Haitian ritual songs whose formal structures (principle of alternation, rhythm, melody, chorus, words, etc.) are governed by the repetitive mode. Her intention is to enable participants to find the conjunction between the objective nature of these means for action (established by tradition and oriented towards defined purposes) and spontaneity, the pure impulse of the

artist. In her work, spontaneity does not have theatrical quality. It is the expression of unpredictable pulses of creative awareness or the inherent creative drive of a free subject. A subject acting as a deconditioned individual, establishing a living relationship with a continuously evolving reality.¹¹⁰

CHAPTER 10: THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF MERLEAU-PONTY AND DANCE EMBODIMENT

OVERVIEW

In this chapter I situate Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "lived body" within the context of dance embodiment in the creative process of Robart's work. I start with a survey of the idea of the body in our Western culture. Then I elaborate on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, particularly his idea of the lived body in relation to Robart's work. Trying to find links between Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Robart's work is critical because it reveals the limitations in Merleau-Ponty's methodology when one tries to apply it to the embodiment of dances such as yanvalou in the context of Robart's work.

I discuss how Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology emphasizes the relationship between the subject and his outer environment, leaving behind the subject's inner world. I claim that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology prioritizes the relationship between the lived body and the external world, putting little emphasis on the inward awareness of the body. This asymmetry is problematic because it suggests that knowledge is only connected with the external world and with intellect. Furthermore, the imbalance obscures the possibility of acquiring knowledge based on inner kinesthetic and proprioceptive perceptions of the body. This last type of knowledge is crucial in dance embodiment.

In Section 10.4, I relate Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to dance. Then examine how Maud Robart's pedagogy contrasts with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and I propose Robart's pedagogy as an unintended answer to the need to develop a phenomenology that deals with the inner perceptions of the individual embodying a

dance. I have to repeat here that Robart does not use phenomenology in her work and does not want her work to be identified with any type of academic activity; if I relate her work to phenomenology or any other scholar discipline I do it as part of my research work.

10.1 THE BODY FROM ANCIENT TO PRESENT TIME

We come into this world with a body, which is in a continuous process of transformation. We move, grow up, eat, reproduce, work, enjoy, suffer, and go about our business of living, often without thinking about what our bodies are and how they are affected by our culture and by the ideas of others. Indeed, since remote times philosophers, artists, politicians, and those interested in the health and physiological functions of the body have dedicated their minds to reflecting about and studying the human body. Most surprising is that, despite the evolution of human thought, we still act, look at, and even feel our bodies under the light of old ideas, around which our contemporary culture seems to turn and return endlessly.

In the Western Civilization, since times of Plato¹¹¹, the ideological tendency to separate the mind from the body has determined the ways of thinking, acting, moving and being in the world. Since ancient Greek times the dichotomy between mind and body has given primacy to the mind and assigned the body the role of servant. Even the word organism, referring to the human body, derives from the Greek word *organon*, which means instrument or tool.¹¹² This opposition developed into an ontological separation, in which the body is lesser and entirely different from the mind or the soul. The ontological imbalance gave ground to the idea that the true self is the soul or the mind. The *cogito*

ergo sum statement of Descartes originates from the perspective in which the mind has a higher ontological status and defines existence.¹¹³

The ontological dichotomy between body and mind led to the association of the body with the external world. The body became the instrument to cope with it and transform it. The world was assigned as the natural place of the body while the mind was enshrined somewhere under the skin. In my own personal experience, such enshrinement was confusing in the Catholic upbringing of my childhood. When I tried to understand the human soul I was invaded by anxiety, as I felt hopelessly unable to feel or experience my own soul. I did not know how or where to look for it. The idea of the soul was, and still is for me, a great idea, but that is as far as my understanding of it goes because I still have not experienced it as I experience my body.

The Separatist attitude did not end in the mind and the body. Once science came into the picture, the idea of the separation of the senses further split our understanding of being in the world into five separated faculties. Ca. 350 BC Aristotle proposed the division between the five senses¹¹⁴, which is yet perpetuated in modern culture. Each sense is assigned its own realm of perception, and just as it happened with the body as a unit, each of the senses also become a connection to the world and a source of distraction for the mind. The body becomes the fortress with thick walls protecting the mind or soul from the external world, and the senses are small windows with limited access to the same world. The being, which originally was one, became two separated entities, one of which became the cage for the other and what once may have been all awareness and perception became darkness and fragmented experience.

Despite the lesser role assigned to the body, our contemporary culture seems to be obsessed with the body's external appearance and expression. This is particularly critical in the arts, where there is a high degree of reverence towards the attractiveness of the body form, as well as towards the communication of internal affective states through the emphasis on eye-catching gestures. The use of the body to express intellectual elaborations reaffirms its condition as a tool and object of the mind. The human body is not seen as an entity capable of manifesting its own intelligence and consciousness or as an instrument of knowledge in its own right.

10.2 THE LIVED BODY

There are different ways to objectify and see the body. They all are representations or images constructed to fit and function within particular contexts. The most obvious are the ones established by science, which has developed models of the human body to study its anatomy, physiology and other phenomena. In biology, the living human body, or any other living body, is called soma. The soma includes all the living matter of an animal or a plant except the reproductive cells.¹¹⁵

All images, models, or representations cannot replace our own experience of the body. If for a few moments we distance ourselves from the external images provided by science and take a moment to feel our body, we may realize that the feeling we have is far from such illustrations, and that we are left with the awareness that our body is not an object for which we have an internal representation. That is the body we live in, and what Merleau-Ponty called the lived body. The lived body is always alive and handling perceptions, and we cannot feel its life from a perspective detached from it.¹¹⁶ The lived body is something we can only experience directly because it cannot be separated from

its manifestation to our consciousness through corporeal feelings, which are clearly distinct from external perceptions.¹¹⁷

For Merleau-Ponty, the body and the world are inseparable. This implies that the experience of the body cannot be disconnected from the world and vice versa. He affirms, “I cannot understand the function of the living body except by enacting it myself, and except in so far as I am a body which rises towards the world.”¹¹⁸ This does not mean that perception is only oriented outwards. Inner perception exists and is active, but mostly in function and in response to the external environment. This emphasis is based on his idea that the body plays a constitutive role in experience by grounding consciousness and thoughts on perceptions.¹¹⁹

According to Merleau-Ponty, the lived body possesses a set of skills that enable it to be always ready to anticipate and incorporate phenomena prior to conceptualizations and judgments. He refers to such a set of skills as “habit,” consisting in a kind of non-cognitive, pre-conceptual intelligence without representation, or “motor intentionality.”¹²⁰ Motor intentionality joins the idea of the motor activity of the body with the phenomenological notion of intentionality, which is “aboutness” or being about or directed toward an object. Motor intentionality is body-based intentionality, which is different from mental intentionality, because it is not representational. Merleau-Ponty affirmed, “Habit is not a function of reflective thought, nor is it transparently accessible to reflection in pure consciousness. Rather it manifests itself in the perceptual body as such: it is the body that ‘understands’ in the acquisition of habit.”¹²¹

For Merleau-Ponty the pre-reflective perceptions and experiences precede and are the ground for knowledge and conceptualization. The lived body is neither the image nor

the “living matter extended in the space of science”. Instead, the lived body is “a dynamic synthesis of pre-reflective intentions”¹²² with its own kinesthetic understanding for moving through the world. The lived body is “as if it were built around the perception that dawns through it”.¹²³

10.3 INTROCEPTIVE AND EXTROCEPTIVE EXPERIENCES

The phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty is based on bodily intentionality, or motor intentionality, aimed towards the external world. He is also concerned about the inner world of the individual, as he demonstrates in the following question: “Cannot I find in the body message-wires sent by the internal organs to the brain, which are installed by nature to provide the soul with the opportunity of feeling its body?”¹²⁴ Nonetheless, most of Merleau-Ponty’s effort is placed on the dynamics between the lived body and the world. For him, the body is of the world. “...my body is made of the same flesh as the world (it is perceived), and moreover that this flesh of my body is shared by the world.”¹²⁵

Merleau-Ponty does not spend enough time writing about the body in terms of conscious sensations of itself, such as explicit kinesthetic or proprioceptive feelings. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology still belongs to the lopsided view which gives priority of focus to the mind over the body. But intellectual knowledge and intelligence of the mind are not the only manifestation of human consciousness, and therefore, an adaptation of his ideas or the development of a new phenomenology are needed to describe the phenomena within the body. This alternate phenomenology will be critical to the description of inner body phenomena, which also include the embodiment of dance.¹²⁶

10.4 DANCE AND MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHENOMENOLOGY

For Merleau-Ponty, “Phenomenology is the study of essences. According to it, all problems amount to finding definitions of essences: the essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness, for example”.¹²⁷ Such a statement forces one to wonder if this statement can be extended to finding the essence of dance. Almost unavoidably, this question first leads one to ask what dance is. This predicament is challenging because the idea of dance is different for each culture. Even within the same country, there are a variety of cultures, each with its own notion of what we call dance. Thus, perhaps instead of looking for a universal definition of dance, the alternate strategy is to deal with each individual dance in its particular context, and without intention to define it. At least as a first phenomenological approach, in order to better understand what we perceive as a dance. This attitude evokes the feminist Donna Haraway’s idea of situated knowledge¹²⁸ and its corresponding objectivity, which are acquired by abandoning the “white male” dominant idea of scientific objectivity, and also by abandoning the scientific gaze, which abstracts itself from the observed, objectifying it, imposing a labels or fabricating a concept for it.¹²⁹

When one hears or utters a word, one evokes a host of conscious and unconscious meanings and associations attached to it. If the word “dance” is uttered or heard, ideas of music, body movement, performing, socializing, entertainment, etc. appear in one’s consciousness. All those associations or notions are part of the cultural baggage one carries wherever one goes. When one is in contact with another culture, one sees it through the lens of one’s preconceived notions and prejudices. If one looks at individuals

moving their bodies rhythmically, by automatic association with one's experiences one may say that they are 'dancing' or doing a dance.

But what is the observed phenomenon by itself? Do the idea of what the dancers are doing coincide with one's notion of dance? This question has led me to believe in the importance of temporarily putting on hold our tendency to define dance, and instead of asking ourselves if what people do is dance, we simply should ask ourselves what the people are doing and describe what we see. Perhaps after a process of experiencing and observing we can arrive to find or build a notion of what those people are doing and from there, we can inquire about the essence of their doings. This affirmation may seem simplistic, but simplicity is a good tool for understanding dance.

Looking for essences is to return to "the things themselves [...] to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks".¹³⁰ But in order to perceive the things as they are in themselves, we have to put aside our preconceived notions and judgments about them. We have to do an *epoché*¹³¹ or phenomenological reduction about the phenomena we observe. The phenomenological reduction is the process of suspending judgment, theorizing, abstractions, and generalizations about the phenomena we perceive, and instead focusing on examining our experience. The phenomenological reduction is more than a theoretical system. It is a practical tool, which, in addition to allowing us to perceive the things themselves, helps us to leave behind our worn, habitual, and conventional ways of observing the world. Epoché goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge because, by means of its practice, and the awareness acquired with it, it promotes transformation in the way the individual approaches the

world, as well as in the way he or she acts in it. That is, the phenomenological method promotes a transformation of agency in the individual.

Dance researcher Maya Deren went through a process of transformation in which she grasped the meaning and nature of yanvalou when she wrote, "...these dance movements should not be understood in purely physical terms, as if they were secular pleasure dances... In a sense, then, such a dance [yanvalou] might be understood as a meditation of the body, so that the entire organism is made to concentrate in a concept as definite and as real as the 'waltz frame of mind', but more complex and less accessible to verbal articulation."¹³²

Dancing is not an isolated event in time and space. Any dance depends on a multitude of factors for its existence. We cannot find a dance existing just in itself or by itself. This makes difficult to find the essence of any dance, as if a dance was something independent of its surrounding conditions. Furthermore, dance embodiment is tightly bound to (A) the experience of the lived body, (B) the connection between the lived body and the mind, (C) the relationships between the people participating in the dance event, (D) the changes that such experiences produce in the individual, and (E) the factors concurrent with the dance, such as: absence or presence of music, religious or non-religious context, space characteristics, etc. Thus, although I advocate relying on phenomenology as a tool for dance research, I also underline the need to find a phenomenological method for each individual type of dance, and look not for the essence of a dance, as a thing in itself, but as a phenomena resulting from the interrelatedness among the dancer, space and time, and the body

In Robart's work the essence of the dance and the chant is either identical to or connected with the pulse of creative awareness or élan. In practice, becoming acquainted with élan is not a simple case of dance embodiment because élan is more than a kinesthetic phenomenon. It has also a psychological or affective character, and for some, even a spiritual quality. The experience of élan becomes a process of acquiring a situated knowledge, in which all aspects of the subject (the body, mind, and soul) are involved and interact in dynamic harmony. In Robart's research a definition of dance is less important than understanding that the search for élan may generate knowledge about the essence of dance and being.

CHAPTER 11: ROBART'S PEDAGOGY AND SITUATED KNOWLEDGES

At the beginning of my research on Robart's work, I saw the yanvalou dance as a form that could be learned through imitation and repetition, as a form that could be described on the basis of its external appearance. I also had the naïve belief that, in my research, I could apply the notions of dance embodiment and participant observation I learned in college. But it did not take long for me to realize that, in order to understand Robart's propositions, I needed to set aside my preconceived beliefs about learning, observing, research, and knowledge. It was crucial for me to shift from a detached and purely intellectual attitude to a predominantly practice-based work, which challenged me to develop an acute kinesthetic perception, in addition to trying to find a new approach to my body, no longer based on the body image I had constructed with the help of the culture I live in.

When I worked with Robart, she showed me her yanvalou, but in order for me to embody what I was observing, imitation was not enough. I had to bring most of my attention to my body in order to allow the flow of pulsations that generated the dance. Throughout this process Robart gave me simple and practical guidance, which helped me to understand and get acquainted with my inner creative drive and discover new ways to handle the mechanical impulses of my body. She encouraged me to find the source of the dance within myself. All this work provoked a radical shift in my understanding of the yanvalou dance. I went from viewing yanvalou as an external physical and cultural form, to perceiving it as a dynamic interweaving of relationships between my body, my psyche, and the world around me.

Learning yanvalou with Robart is a holistic experience which requires leaving behind the attitude of a detached observer or a dancer who wants to learn a new pattern of movement, and instead, entering into a process which demands highly focused awareness and continuous observation of oneself, not only in terms of body actions, but also in terms of intellectual and affective activity, as well as one's reactions to the world around.

In Robart's work, embodying a dance becomes a process of acquiring situated knowledge.¹³³ Dance is constructed and practiced through a process of apprenticeship that goes beyond learning a movement pattern, because it transforms the agency and identity of the practitioner.¹³⁴

According to Robart, in her pedagogy, life itself guides the game. She says, "Let reality operate in us."¹³⁵ The background of her proposition is the practice of encounters. Encounters with people, with unknown aspects of life and of oneself. It is an invitation to take a step beyond established techniques, methods, and intellectual discussions in order to preserve a space of unexpected experiences, both in content and form, which may arise from the encounter. The key to understanding the nature of her research is taking risks, free from any expectation of result, or intentions to find something to appropriate or show. Her pedagogy is oriented towards the realization that chants and yanvalou are derived from an archaic form of creativity and promote the awakening of subtle dimensions of meaning and being. In her teachings she does not treat the elements of her exploration as objects she can distance herself from, or manipulate. Instead, she allows her exploration to shape its own path.

Robart's exploration is based on oral tradition. That is why it is difficult to write and describe my experience in her work. In her work oral transmission walks in harmony with direct experience. It is only through their conjunction in time and space, that the precise teaching or message can be transmitted. While trying to learn *yanvalou* or a chant, one makes mistakes or needs guidance. In those precise moments the right word, with the right inflection, and even silence, may suddenly lead to a deeper understanding, like making a discovery.

The most representative elements of oral tradition in Robart's context are the chants. Those chants have passed through many generations and their historic roots are hidden in an ancient past. Nonetheless, they transmit a message that transcends time and language barriers because their meaning is not coded in the discursive aspect of language but in the vibrational quality of the human voice and rhythm. That is why Robart is precise and demanding when chanting. That is why she refuses to translate or explain the chants. That is why when she teaches them, her pedagogy is not based on breaking them into easily learned fragments. It is the whole chant that conveys a message. In the second to last paragraph in section 4.1, I describe my experience when I heard Robart chanting for the first time. I explain how, even though I do not understand Creole, the language of the chant, there was something in the way she sang, something in the modulation of her voice that evoked in me powerful images of a place I have never been, but in which I always feel warm, welcomed, and at peace every time I remember them.

CHAPTER 12: ROBART'S PEDAGOGY AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF HERMAN SCHMITZ¹³⁷

12.1 SCHMITZ'S FELT BODY

By means of *yanvalou*, Robart helps the dancer to embody movement and experience it as a process in which he cultivates a new internal perception of himself. In this process, the dancer is continuously involved with and affected by what he is doing. Such involvement is both realized and facilitated by corporeal feelings. This mode of experiencing the body relates to what Schmitz calls the felt body.¹³⁶

For Schmitz the felt body is a feeling body, the carrier of distinct feelings and impulses. It exists by manifesting to the conscious subject through specific impulses the subject feels as belonging to itself in the vicinity of or within its material body. But such manifestation is not based on the five senses input, or what in psychology or analytical philosophy of mind is referred to as bodily impulses. According to Schmitz, the felt body manifests in holistic stirrings within the body, such as vigor and languidness, in one's being physically gripped by emotions and room-filling atmospheres, and equally in one's corporeal orientation in the world in the contexts of perception, action and spatial navigation.¹³⁷

Merleau-Ponty's idea of lived body and Schmitz's idea of felt body are based on pre-reflective experience. However, Schmitz's felt body is different from Merleau-Ponty's lived body because the felt body is an all-inclusive notion, which strives for the unification of the senses, as well as for the return to the unity between the mind and the body. The notion of the felt body is a dynamic theoretical model that allows rich descriptions of subjective experiences of movement embodiment.

12.2 SCHMITZ'S VITAL DRIVE

In Schmitz¹³⁸ phenomenology the vital drive is essential to the felt body. According to him, the vital drive is a pulsating rhythm in the felt body, constantly oscillating between corporeal expansion and contraction, regularly at work in breathing. The vital drive “is formed by the intertwinement of tendencies towards contraction and expansion, running counter to one another”.¹³⁹ This notion relates to Robart’s idea of *élan*, in which the interplay of opposites is parallel to the relationship between the vital drive’s expansion and contraction. According to Schmitz, “the diffusely localized corporeal feelings operate in the form of a pulsating rhythm in the felt body”.¹⁴⁰

In Robart’s work the vital drive duality is represented by the rise and descent of impulses in *yanvalou*, the urgency and its counteraction in *élan*, and in the inner breath of the chant. Moreover, the combined impulses of the chant’s inner breath propagate through the body. The body becomes sensible to them and transmutes them into movement, which also becomes like a respiration. Then, the body expands and contracts in a double movement, like a wave. But what is behind the wave? The wave is the form of something within the singer-dancer. All parts of this body respond to the chant. Robart said, “Sometimes I feel that it is a dance of the brain or my mouth, my chest... It starts in one place and then it repeats itself through the whole body.”¹⁴¹

12.3 ÉLAN AND THE VITAL DRIVE

Élan is directly related to Schmitz’s vital drive, which is a dynamic intertwinement of oscillating pairs of physiological or psychological tendencies. The oscillations can be rhythmical or segmented. An example of rhythmic oscillation is the process of respiration. A segmented oscillation happens when a contraction is suspended,

as in severe fright, in which the vital drive is frozen or paralyzed. If expansion is suspended, as in falling asleep, the vital drive is lax.¹⁴²

Élan and the vital drive manifest themselves as pulsating rhythms in the felt body. In Robart's Élan, the interplay of opposite tendencies (the impulse and its counteraction) is parallel to the relationship between the vital drive's expansion and contraction tendencies. The interplay of opposite tendencies is expressed as a fluctuation or wave. However, the wave is not only an external form, but an inner phenomena. According to Robart, élan is the action of a mysterious inner power that moves the body. Élan is at the origin of everything, it is the meeting point between the dancer and life. By means of the awareness of and connection with élan, the subject may arrive to the moment of creating an opening through which he/she can feel the life and its pulsations.¹⁴³

Experienced phenomena are built by discrete factors. Each individual event is not the product of a unique cause, but a manifold conjuncture of multiple determinants. In Robart's work, schemes of movement, such as yanvalou are constructed through kinesthetic awareness and, what Schmitz calls "corporeal feelings or impulses" of the felt body. During yanvalou the awareness has specific targets, such as the precision of movement, weight control, maintaining a consistent rhythm, as well as observing the traffic of inner creative impulses. In this state, the dancer has no time to look for an external beauty of the dance, intellectualize it, snare it in a rigid form, or allow himself to get caught by self-judgments.

12.4 ÉLAN AND YANVALOU

In my experience with yanvalou, élan is like a gush of energy, a joyful pulsation that organizes the dance. Although such pulsation is connected with the physicality and

motor impulses of the dancer, it transcends them. Quoting the Haitian philosopher Mesmin Gabriel¹⁴⁴ Robart said, élan “connects the center of the person and the source of life.”¹⁴⁵

When yanvalou emerges from a steady kinesthetic awareness unified with the creative pulsations of the felt body, its pattern of movement ceases to be an automatic series of repetitions, and becomes a creative action. In this particular situation, there is tension in between the élan elements because they are connected by active forces, as if they were two hands pulling a rubber band. The tension between the hands is not fixed, it changes in time and space; as when someone plays with the rubber band, alternatively separating and approaching the hands, stretching it and loosening it. In order to stretch and loosen the rubber band, sensitivity to its strength and perception of its shape or length are needed. Similarly, during yanvalou we have to maintain a continuous attention towards the tension between opposites, such as pulsations and their restraints, the pull of gravity and our efforts to overcome it, the tendency to root one self in earth and the tendency to elevate towards the sky, our mental inertia and our will to stay lucid or awake.

Guiding élan through the body is analogous to Cezanne’s modulations of color to make arise a reality through his painting. For Cezanne “art is a personal apperception, which I embody in sensations and which I ask the understanding to organize into a painting”.¹⁴⁶ In terms of élan and yanvalou this can be translated as: élan, or the source of dance, is a personal apperception, which I embody in sensations and which the body is asked to organize in yanvalou.

According to Robart, the dancer should allow life to express itself through dance. Dance should not be limited to a response to sound or other external motivations; it should be considered like a being, and the task of the dancer is to find the way to let it come out through the body. In this way dance is not an external form that we wear but something that issues from within, when the center of the person connects with the source of life. Furthermore, dance is not just related to the mechanics of the body. Instead, it is related to some pre-existing and pre-conceptual invisible layer of knowledge within the dancer.¹⁴⁷

In Robart's research, dance embodiment is a continuous and complex interaction between the individual's consciousness and what he perceives within and outside his body. The dance is articulated by perception, and the individuality of the dancer is modified by his practice. In this framework, the dancer also makes of the process of learning an object of inquiry into the construction and meaning of the dance itself.

The hardest idea for me to embody in practice was, and still is, Robart's notion of *élan*. But gradually I began to recognize that *élan* is rendered perceivable through corporeal feelings and impulses. Thus, the path towards its understanding is a consistent practice, consciously following the observable impulses it leaves as traces.

Élan is not an intellectual figure or theory; it is a practical knowledge we cannot find in books. It is a type of situated knowledge constructed or discovered through practice and a through profound relation with one self. Situated knowledge, as an object, is itself an agent that directly affects the subject. Furthermore, in Robart's research, the journey towards situated knowledge questions the dialectics of subject and object, because it tends to close the gap in between them.

After practicing yanvalou for a few years I realized that, instead of being just a sequence of external gestures, it is a process that unfolds through my life. It goes beyond the framework of its practice, and penetrates the everyday consciousness. It has grown within and transformed me. Now, I don't understand it in merely physical terms, as if it was only a sensual experience, because through the practice of yanvalou, my body, senses, and mind unite; and I can glimpse that the pulsations that nurture it flow from deep within myself.

12.5 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Phenomenology is a versatile tool for dance research because it is not a rigid system applicable in the same fashion to all observable phenomena. Merleau-Ponty pointed the limitations of phenomenology and indicated its “being in a original state, as a problem to be solved and a hope to be realized”.¹⁴⁸ The history of ideas can be perceived through different perspectives. It can be seen from the standpoint of someone standing at the front of a line of events. It can also be perceived from a perspective outside the line, in a position perpendicular to it. From this last perspective, it is possible to simultaneously see all the points that constitute the line. From such perspective, phenomenology may be seen not as something stuck in a moment of history, but as an entity that endures changes because of its adaptability to different contexts. Its presence may be traced through multiple times and cultures, perhaps under different names. That is why Merleau-Ponty wrote; “...phenomenology can be practiced and identified as a manner or style of thinking that it existed as a movement before arriving at complete awareness of itself as a philosophy.”¹⁴⁹ Thus, we can recognize in Robart's pedagogy the main elements of a phenomenological praxis with the particularity that epoché is not only

intellectual but also somatic or kinesthetic. In Robart's work epoché becomes a holistic process, which includes the suspension of preconceived judgments, as well as preconceived body actions. That is, an epoché that acknowledges the intelligence of both the mind and body.

When I asked Robart if epoché is related to élan, she did not answer, but smiling said that it may be the door towards its comprehension. But she did not define élan. Instead she said, "God put élan and inertia in one's body, and one has the choice to rest in inertia or rely on élan to realize one's potential."¹⁵⁰ Élan involves all aspects of the person, it is around all of them. It is around the ego. It is also the beginning of action and a qualitative jump in our way of perceiving, doing and being.

She also said that, élan may mean ardor, fire, fervor, to jump, or gushing towards liberty. It is like an incandescence pouring out towards organicity in freedom. It is the will to come out from our limited condition and towards the unknown. It is not looking for pulsations but going beyond that, beyond individuality, a propulsion towards god. Even a simple action like running, is more engaging and full of life if there is fervor and passion in the runner.¹⁵¹

CHAPTER 13: SPANDA AND ÉLAN

For Robart, yanvalou awakens a secret and mysterious inner potential of the body and the world. It sets in vibration an inner power not limited to the individual body, but related to the whole universe. This power is not felt through ordinary consciousness. And all the changes in consciousness happen because of one's connection with it. The source of élan is the power of life that recognizes itself in the individual. It manifests itself in a multitude of forms, but departs from the same source. Thus, élan is not only the movement of the physical body.¹⁵²

Robart's notion of élan is close to the idea of Spanda in Kashmir Saivism. Spanda is a Sanskrit word with various meanings. According to the concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy Spanda means vibration, flutter, throb, and self-movement. It also means Śakti; pulsation; creative pulsation; apparent motion in the motionless Siva, which brings about the manifestation, maintenance, and withdrawal of the universe.¹⁵³ In the Kashmir Śaivism philosophy, Spanda, Āgama and Pratyabhijñā, integrate what is called the Trika (threefold) system of Śaivism. In the Spanda branch, the word Spanda is used to describe the principle of movement in the universe, as well as the reflective aspect of the divine consciousness.¹⁵⁴

Saivism is based on the worship of Siva, who is often accompanied by Śakti. Siva (the pure and destroyer; the auspicious one; stitcher; benignant) is considered the supreme god and the creator and destroyer of the universe. Shakti (from the Sanskrit root "to be able") is power; capacity; energy; potency; force; the divine cosmic energy which projects, maintains, and dissolves the universe; the spouse of Siva, the primordial cosmic

energy representing the forces of the universe.¹⁵⁵ The dynamism that élan implies, puts it closer to Śakti. However, élan has also a conscious aspect, which places it close to Siva.

The Kashmir Saivism claims that only consciousness exists and manifests itself in the multiple forms of matter and individual beings, and that Siva is the supreme, the highest, and absolute consciousness and ultimate reality or Anuttara, which in Sanskrit means, "beyond which there is nothing;"¹⁵⁶. Siva himself, as consciousness does not have form, hence, it is not known by the intellect. According to the Saivism philosophers, Siva can only be described on the basis of high states of awareness. These states may have been achieved through specific Saivism practices. Here is relevant to say that even though Robart does not adhere to Saivism, her research points toward those or similar states.

In the Saivism symbolism, Siva is the essence or foundation of phenomenal existence, the universal transcendental nature of everything. Śakti is the manifest form of Siva.¹⁵⁷ In the Spanda School Siva is identified with the light of consciousness (prakasa), which is also his creative awareness. Śakti is identified with reflective awareness (vimarsa) and the two of them are inseparable.

Spanda is a continuous pulse that issues from the conscious nature of Siva, goes down into the gross material forms, and back to him, "...the pulse is divided in two halves, -one outpouring, expanding, extending, flowing, spreading out, emerging and unfolding, and the other is its reverse".¹⁵⁸ In Robart's framework, élan is a pulse, an urgency, a call, and at the same time a response to it. Although

Spanda is also identified with Śakti as the pulse of consciousness, self-luminous, and the activity and power of Siva. Thus, Siva possesses "a phenomenological identity as

the Light of all things and as the awareness (vimarsa) which perceives itself and so is conscious of them”.¹⁵⁹

Saivism identifies two types of experiences, the pre-reflective which occurs before the elaboration of thoughts or judgments; and the experience proper or personal experience, which is based on both the pre-reflective experience and thinking activity. Prakasa, the light of consciousness, allows for things to manifest and be directly experienced to the conscious individual. This direct experience precedes and is the ground for the construction of thoughts.ⁱⁱⁱ However, prakasa is not enough for identifying the direct pre-reflective experience with the personal experience. This is patent in the Saivism systems, where experience is not possible without reflection. In order for the phenomena to be accessible to consciousness, the reflective awareness or vimarsa is needed. Vimarsa is the inherent ability of consciousness that accounts for the perception of phenomena and by virtue of such perception consciousness becomes aware of itself.

In the Spanda doctrine, the paradox of the absolute or Siva, being both immobile and in motion, is resolved. Movement and repose coexist. However, in the Spanda framework, movement or vibration of the absolute consciousness is not the gross manifest movement but a “subtle movement”, because although the absolute does not move, it manifests itself as motion. Moreover, the absolute transcends not only matter but also space and time. Therefore, its pulsations are outside the limits of those categories; “in reality nothing arises and nothing falls away. It is the vibrating power of consciousness which, though free of change, becomes manifest in this or that form and thus appears to be rising and falling away”.¹⁶⁰ Spanda and élan are inner activity of

ⁱⁱⁱ This pre-reflective concept also exists in phenomenology. Author’s note

consciousness, and liberation from ignorance and recognition of one's divine natures are attainable through the experience of divine consciousness.

CHAPTER 14: KATA AND YANVALOU

OVERVIEW

The Japanese word *kata* means form, pattern, direction, or prototype. Katas are precise, repetitive sequences of movements apprentices of a particular craft learn through systematic training. In Japanese philosophy, katas are a conservative force standing against impermanence or *anitya*,¹⁶¹ the Buddhist notion that considers all that exists in a constant state of flux. Similar to katas, yanvalou is a repetitive pattern of movement. The word yanvalou literally means, “come to me” in the language of Whydah or Ouidah in Benin. The yanvalou dance and the chants belong to the Vodou Rada rite in Haiti, and are invocations directed toward divine or transcendental realities. The practice of kata in Japanese arts and martial arts, as well as the practice of yanvalou in Robart’s research, propitiate a fluid state of being in which the individual breaks through the impermanent veil of reality and form to access a spiritual realm.

14.1 KATA AND SATORI

In the Japanese *budō* or martial arts, katas are kinesthetic actions that enable the student to learn the correct ways to stand, move the body, handle weapons, and breathe. Each discipline has a vast variety of katas, which individuals perform either alone or in pairs, and under the strict supervision of a teacher. Despite the fact that knowing how to fight was a matter of life or death, in *budō* both fighting and learning how to fight were ways towards enlightenment or *satori*.¹⁶² Thus, enlightenment was accessible through consistent training and mastery of the katas. The emphasis on practice, instilled by Zen Buddhism, made the martial arts a process-oriented discipline, which, in combination

with meditation and the Zen lifestyle, created the conditions for a spiritual life. The warrior's awareness of death affirmed the importance of being mindful in the present.

Yanvalou in Robart's context puts in motion all aspects of the dancer. It involves the body and its movement, as well as perception, intellect, and emotion. Yanvalou is also a process, articulated as both a conscious call for and a response to élan. It funnels all individual attributes and joins them with the pulsation of life. This fusion is pursued through mindful efforts and may bring about a qualitative change of consciousness, a way of perceiving the fullness of life, and, as in satori, seeing the world as it really is.

14.2 KATA AND INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT

The repetitive nature of the katas is not necessarily associated with monotony and stagnation. The nature and function of kata have direct relationships with the development of the individual, because deliberate repetition represents an effort for improvement, leading to a unity of mind and body. Repetition is an indispensable strategy for the individual to successfully absorb a technique in his or her body and mind: he or she will eventually arrive at the point where there is neither doubt nor hesitation in their actions. A high level of proficiency and confidence is crucial in fighting, because any wavering could result in injury or death. Repetition is the way toward a mode of being in which the warrior does not stop to think about how to act, attack, react, or defend him or herself.

The ultimate goal of repetition is to develop skill and precision of movement, so that at the time of fighting, the body is quick, unhesitant, and fluid. Fighting calls for a state of heightened awareness in which any self-consideration or egotism has to vanish, in order to allow impeccable action and spontaneity.

The notion of kata is present within most daily life activities in Japan.¹⁶³ But its essence is beyond mechanical actions, because it is a link that connects the brevity of form with content hidden underneath its appearance. Kata incorporates the physical, spiritual, and natural realms, creating a balance among them. It also brings together praxis, philosophy, religion, and art in everyday life.¹⁶⁴ Katas are the practical expression of the Buddhist idea that the universe is the embodiment of Buddha's mind, and therefore they manifest the enlightenment, which humans already possess by making them aware of it.¹⁶⁵

14.3 IMPERMANENCE AND YŪGEN

In the Japanese culture, cherry blossoms are revered for their ephemerality. The cherry blossoms represent the brevity and fragility of a continuously changing reality. The idea of evanescence, or *hakanasa*, is related to the Buddhist idea of impermanence, as well as Japanese mythology. In the Shinto mythology, the gods put a mantle of evanescence over *Ninigi*, the progenitor of mankind, when they threw him from heaven.¹⁶⁶

Tankas are short Japanese poems charged with meaning. They are written manifestations of the Japanese fascination for evanescence. In terms of quantity, tankas are economic. A standard tanka is only thirty-one syllables long.¹⁶⁷ In terms of quality, tankas are rich in imagery evoked by words. With a few well-chosen words, tankas are not only effective expressions of a particular moment, but an attempt to break through the veil of evanescence to reach the essence of reality. This could also be explained as a way to transcend evanescence by means of evanescence. This attitude is also expressed through the image of a cicada shell, or *ususemi*, shed by the insect when it undergoes

metamorphosis into its mature flying form.¹⁶⁸ The cicada shell is a frequent motif in Japanese philosophy and art; it is an epithet that expresses the brevity or impermanence of the world or reality. *Tankas* and the image of a cicada's empty shell do not deny impermanence. Instead, they are attempts to transcend the world of form through form itself. They follow the intuitive attitude that perceives a fascinating mystery underneath the surface of phenomena, a world worth the price of the rigors of formalism. In Japanese aesthetics, this principle is known as *yūgen*, "a beauty of shadows and darkness or mystery and depth."¹⁶⁹

Reflecting on impermanence through art opens the door towards *yūgen*. Japanese art relies on simplicity to make expression effective: only a few words or brush strokes can unlock meaning hidden under the veil of appearance, and consequently awaken many transcendental thoughts and feelings. But what is underneath the veil of appearance? What is such mysterious beauty?

*The true person is
Not anyone in particular;
But, like the deep blue color
Of the limitless sky,
It is everyone, everywhere in the world.*¹⁷⁰

In this poem, the image of limitless sky is associated with the nature of being. However, the association does not remain in the abstract. By the expression "deep blue color," the image is charged with concrete evocations from lived experience. The poetic images infuse a mysterious life in both the sky and the experience of one's self. What remains is a feeling of wonder and beauty, as if by means of the few words and images of

the poem, one touches a truth that cannot be expressed with words. Because of the carefully structured images, the ego, normally acting as a filter or doorkeeper at the threshold of experience, is momentarily silenced. The ineffable silence or emptiness that is left is the environment from which the notions of universal unity, eternity, and divinity are born.

14.4 NOH THEATRE

Noh theatre, or, *nogaku*, is the classical Japanese musical drama that has been performed since the 14th century. The word *noh* or *no* is derived from the Sino-Japanese word for “skill” or “talent.”¹⁷¹ It evolved from various popular, folk, and aristocratic art forms, including *Gagaku* and *Bagaku*, which are court music and dance related to the Shinto religion.

Unlike the Western tradition, in the Noh theatre, each performer practices his or her fundamental katas, in the form of songs, recited texts, movements, and dances, independent from the others, and under the tutelage of a senior member of the school. In the same way that the martial arts, katas in Noh are the basis for movement and action. Each kata is given a name and becomes a building block or module in performative structures.¹⁷²

14.5 YŪGEN IN NOH

According to Andrew A. Tsubaki, aesthetician, actor, and playwright Zeami Motokiyo,¹⁷³ majorly influenced Noh with his introduction of *yūgen*.¹⁷⁴ For Zeami, *yūgen* was not a static concept. It evolved along his experience and aesthetic reflections on Noh. At the beginning, he considered *yūgen* as something external, related to “the colorful and

brilliant quality of performance [...] the beauty of gentle gracefulness” and correlated it with the Noh ideals of *monomane* (mimesis) and *hana* (flower).¹⁷⁵ The concept of *hana* is still used in Noh context as a metaphor to qualify a superb Noh performance. As Zeami aged, his notion of *yūgen* went beyond the surface of “gentle gracefulness and referred to it as the subtle quality which is described in terms such as *hie* (chill) and *sabi* (impersonal loneliness)”.¹⁷⁶

The meaning of *yūgen* depends on the contexts in which the word is used. The word is composed by *yū* or “dark,” and *gen*, meaning “black” or “deep.” *Yūgen* is often used to indicate a delicate vision that shows what is usually hidden or invisible.¹⁷⁷ In Buddhist and Taoist contexts, it may indicate the profundity of a truth.¹⁷⁸ According to Michael Marra, the notion of *yūgen* in Japanese philosophy represents the Shinto presence of the sacred in the natural world and the presence of Buddhahood in the immediacy of the present body.¹⁷⁹

In Noh, *yūgen* may lead to the realization of *sunyata* (emptiness), a truth hidden underneath the external display of the performance. *Sunyata* is the awareness that all experiential phenomena, as well as the experiencer, are devoid of a permanent and eternal substance or essence. Emptiness may be intuited through the performer’s particular ways of doing his or her actions. For this purpose, the performers try to attain *mu* (nothingness), a state that allows one to be focused both on a thought or an action, with an intensity one would not be able to achieve if one is consciously thinking. The performers strive for frugality and directness in their minds and bodies. Tsubaki adds, “even in their daily life, so that whatever they wear, whatever they say, and whatever they do, everything about their living will be aimed at attaining nothingness.”¹⁸⁰

Nothingness was an expression of the character of the rural warrior class, as opposed of the external beauty of the aristocracy.¹⁸¹ The Sunyata of Noh is not emptiness but an open and receptive way of being, achieved through a quality of form that allows ambiguity or multiplicity of meaning. It is a form that negates itself in order to become the potential birth of all possible forms or a point in the space where all lines of the universe intersect. It reaffirms the emptiness of beings and the coexistence of all forms and events by reason of their interdependent origination.¹⁸² “Noh’s emptiness is that quality of form that allows the possibility of all other forms to come to mind. The Zen goal of achieving nothingness, or mu, is to create emptiness in a way that it is radically receptive.”¹⁸³

14.6 KATA AND YANVALOU. COMPARISON

Yanvalou reveals that the human body is a means whereby a human being coalesces with the divine. The purpose of the dance is practical and at the same time requires a close relationship between the dancer and his or her body; an impeccable inner awareness and deeply rooted spiritual conviction. A devoted yanvalou dancer cannot afford to turn his or her attention outward to please external spectators. My own experience has taught me that one has to be finely tuned in with the motions of the body and mind, as well as with changes in one’s affective states. The dance happens underneath the skin, deep within the muscles, the bones and the heart; it is a spectacle made for an inner audience.

Compared with katas, the yanvalou scheme is short and simple. What differentiates it from kata is that instead of being a movement imposed on the body by an external necessity, such as fighting or performing, yanvalou is a movement that departs from within the body itself. It appears when the dancer opens his or herself to the

possibility of letting the dance manifest itself from the body's necessity to express life. In Robart's context, the dancer's attitude is similar to the Noh performer's search for a state of nothingness in order for the dance to become the potential birth of all possible forms, or a point in space where all lines of the universe intersect. Once I saw Robart dancing yanvalou and her body resembled a fire in which the flames were in continuous motion and alive, displaying an ever-changing variety of forms. All she was doing was repeating the simple yanvalou pattern. Nonetheless, through the myriad of forms her dance was evoking, I glimpsed a steady presence, like an invisible, visceral perception that I felt in my entrails as a mountain.

Unlike the metaphysical rational transcendence we tend to associate with philosophy or religion, transcendence in the context of Robart's work and in Noh's katas can be comprehended by means of the empirical reality of the body. Her work is based on the concrete and limited existence of body, which includes its capacities of chanting and dancing. That is why Robart sees the body as the conduit to enter the original ground of art and being. The notion of transcendence in Robart's pedagogy is close to the concept of *yūgen* in Japanese aesthetics. It suggests a hidden reality, which is pregnant with meaning. It is through the body's evanescent means of vocal sound and movement that one can access it.

14.7 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Kata and yanvalou share some similarities. They are rooted in a need to access a profound numinous context. They express the human need to connect with a transcendental realm that gives meaning to the impermanence of our lives. However,

unlike Noh katas, yanvalou in Robart's work is not a spectacle; it is an individual experiential action. It is not meant to be shown to an audience but to simply be done.

The transmission of Noh katas is a formalized activity. It aims to secure both continuity of a tradition or style, and secrecy. I see this as a reflection of a need for control. Perhaps this need is related to Japan's social and environmental threats, such as wars, earthquakes, and typhoons.

Repetition is crucial in kata and yanvalou. However, it is important to note the distinction between the way kata and yanvalou address repetition. On one hand, kata's repetitiveness is associated with meditation, perhaps justified by its Zen Buddhism influences. On the other hand, yanvalou is an invocation or prayer in which the body and its rhythmic movement play a crucial role. With all this, I can venture to say that whereas kata reflects the meditative attitude of Zen Buddhism, yanvalou is closer to Pure Land Buddhism, which emphasizes devotion and faith. Kata and yanvalou are both meditative forms, but kata is the way of the mind that wants to control, while yanvalou is the way of the heart that yearns for the return to or reconnection with an inner enigmatic power.

Perhaps the point where yanvalou and kata agree and diverge at the same time is form. Mastery and precision of form are not only technical elements but also ritualistic requirements. In ritual contexts, there is a time and place for everything, including the placement and timing of the different parts of the body and their movements. In Noh, the external form of katas is critical, in order to weave and dissolve into each other. It is this dissolution that leads to *yūgen* and allows access to the divine. Noh goes from the external form towards an inner cognitive realization. In Vodou chants and yanvalou, the action starts from the inside, in which one opens his or her body and mind for that which

is within to come out. The essence of yanvalou and Vodou chants is inner awareness. They are prayers and invitations for the divine to visit our transient world. Katas work from a mental perspective placed above the body. The perspective of the Vodou chants and yanvalou is beyond and underneath the skin: the source of the dance precedes the intellect and the body.

Repetitiveness in Noh's katas and yanvalou is an essential aspect. One may think that repetitiveness in Noh has motivations outside repetition itself. For example, skill or beauty. But one has to remember that in both Japanese martial arts and Noh theatre, the practitioner was always (either in practice, performance, or battle) striving for nothingness (mu) and in search for enlightenment (sunyata). In both Noh's kata and in Robart's pedagogy, repetition is a disinterested gratuitous action, the dynamic search to go beyond the ephemeral elements of reality, which include mind and body, to experience a receptive state of being. In these contexts, repetitiveness is not a monotonous or colorless activity; it demands force, will, and sacrifice. Sacrifice is used here, not in the sense of resignation, but in its original etymological meaning: sacred doing or action. Repetition in Noh and in Robart's research "is clothing that never becomes worn, that fits snugly and comfortably, that neither pulls nor hangs too loosely."¹⁸⁴

CHAPTER 15: CONCLUSION

Robart calls her silent experience, described in section 3.2, “la experience fondatrice” or the foundational experience. It was the starting point of her research. However, instead of taking an outer or purely abstract path of inquiry, she took a pragmatic approach and went inward into her own experience. She made of her personal research a caring quest about dance and chant as the expressions of inner life, investigating their embodiment as it is lived rather than conceptualizing it. She tried to find and understand their essence not as an ultimate intellectual content but as a structured, lived experience which is revealed in such a way that we are able to grasp its nature in an unseen way. This subjective experience is related to what Robart calls the Tradition (with a capital T), a handing down of knowledge different from that of “tradition.” The reason she calls it Tradition is because it transcends cultural differences and time, it is always there and available to everyone, and is a gift, which in the same way as freedom, is given to each person at birth. Her experience was a connection with that gift. But as a gift, the recipient is faced with the question of what to do with it. Similar to an inheritance or a state one receives from a family member, the recipient either makes the best of it or wastes it. There is also the question of sharing it and how to do so. Thus her research became an effort of making the best of that gift and finding ways to share it while keeping its pristine quality. According to Robart, she cannot call Tradition her tradition, because it is not something to be appropriated or owned. Rather, its essence is that of transmission, or to be passed down.

The compelling element of her foundational experience was the sensation of fullness and abundance generated by the realization that “yanvalou was silence: the

movement of silence.” When she left her homeland and culture, such awareness became her guide. By turning her attention towards the memory of her foundational experience, the feelings of the original realization returned and with them, a gentle and powerful rocking of her body, or the silent yanvalou. From her early personal research in France, she tried to stabilize it, without the ritual apparatus that accompanies the traditional yanvalou in the Vodou context. According to Robart, since then her silent yanvalou became a hymn to silence. She added that it is the same with the chants: as the dance, they are receptacles of silence. Thus the fullness and essence of what she calls “the intrinsic quality” of chanting is reached when one can enter a space of silence, as in yanvalou.¹⁸⁵

Explaining the link between chanting and yanvalou, Robart said, “You must go beyond the conventional notions of singing and dancing. The core elements of my exploration are the ‘silent dance’ hidden in the song, and the ‘silent singing’ that arises from the interior of yanvalou. Understanding the meaning and the exact scope of those two experiences is an active intention, which keeps alive the practice and the research.”

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The type of awareness required in Robart’s work has nothing to do with a static meditation. Instead, it is a state of engaged wakefulness and the ability to integrate different elements of experience, while having a lucid apperception of the essence of mental and bodily conditions. The suspension of judgment or, epoché in Robart’s context, should not be confused with a submissive awareness, which limits itself to motionlessly acknowledging feelings, thoughts, and kinesthetic perceptions.

In conjunction with its dynamism, such awareness calls for quality. The aspect of quality is associated with the choice of focal points. Quality is critical for the understanding of élan. If one focuses on the body as the source of pulses, the iterations of the dance or the chant become mechanical and lifeless. If one is taken by emotion, one may be in danger of being overcome by sentimentality. If one is taken by cogitations, the experience may be reduced to theorizing.

According to Robart, élan issues from a deeper source within the subject. That is why I relate it to the notion of spanda in Kashmir Saivism. Spanda is a continuous pulse that issues from the conscious nature of Siva, goes down into the gross material forms, and back to him, "...the pulse is divided into two halves, one outpouring, expanding, extending, flowing, spreading out, emerging and unfolding, and the other is its reverse".¹⁸⁷

The development of a different perception is necessary to understand the importance of chanting and dancing in Robart's work. Additionally, the modulation of chant and dance depends on a particular approach to the body and to the execution of conscious actions.

These tasks are difficult and require practice and time. Robart's pedagogy includes not only the chants and the dances themselves, but also other exercises and individual practical propositions in order to assist individuals in her work. After a few years of working with her, I realized that with time and patience a process of transformation began to take place. Such transformation has been fundamental not only for the understanding of Robart's work but for also making sense of my own personal experience.

What Robart started as a personal quest became a new approach to form in dance and chant, in which form is not a final product but a part of a process of searching for the force that actualizes itself through the human body. Her quest opened the door into a view in which the body, bypassing intellectualization, may become a vehicle for the artistic expression of the force of life. This perspective puts aside the ordinary view of the body, which considers it a tool of the mind, and gives one the possibility to perceive it as an intelligent entity, an open field of consciousness in its own right. No longer separated from the mind and no longer as the gap between the inner and outer world, but a place where they join in a rhythmic dynamism.

A crucial point in my research was the realization that the creative pulses or drive in the dance and the chant are not limited to physical or kinesthetic phenomena. Instead, they are a deeper, latent need that pushes one to move and act, like the impulse that makes a plant move towards the sun. It is an innate urge that all humans and perhaps all other sentient beings share. It may be felt as a joy to sing or dance, or a need to pray. But there is one truth: it is something one has to perceive and surrender to, like devotion, passion, and love. It is what makes one go beyond our ego and individuality; it makes yanvalou and chanting, even walking or running, a call and a prayer.

15.1 RETURN TO MY INITIAL QUESTIONS

To my initial question: to what extent is the transformation of identity and agency of an individual through dance possible? And, what are the pedagogical elements that favor such transformation? I can affirm that transformation is possible but its extent depends not only on dedication but also on the quality of awareness and effort. In

practice, Robart's work is both an artistic activity and a comprehensive pedagogy to help individuals understand the nature of creativity and the creative inner drive or *élan*.

In order to gain such understanding, one has to consider that physical changes, in terms of appearance or fitness, are not the focus of Robart's work. Furthermore, the changes the body may undergo are not necessarily visible. More important than the physical changes is the general wellbeing of each individual. In my interviews with the Central Team and other participants, they say that the work sessions are nourishing for them. In general during the interviews, they articulate their gratitude for the work. Some of them express themselves emotionally, saying they had deep experiences in which they discovered something important about themselves.¹⁸⁸

How is this process evident in the resulting perceptible forms of chant and dance?

I can only answer on the basis of my subjective experience. In the chant, the process is evident through the precision of the singing, and above all, by a particular vibratory quality. It is a quality that evokes beauty and meanings I cannot easily verbalize. Usually the chants take a long time to develop. The chanting sessions last between one and three hours each day. In the case of dance, its assimilation is not revealed through visual virtuosity or skill. Instead, after a long period of becoming acquainted with it, a particular change begins to appear. Besides the dance form, a kind of demeanor or presence emanates in the individuals. It is a positive presence, which is spontaneous, graceful, simple, and seems to be connected with something deeply human.

Learning *yanvalou* is not a matter of copying a movement or pattern. It is helpful to think of its assimilation as a process that develops through the life of the dancer, or as

a natural phenomenon, which is part of the psychological and biological development of the subject.

I practiced yanvalou for a long time, for many hours and with various teachers. My first approach was to imitate the external form, from what my eyes could see. I went through all the stages of apprenticeship, starting from chaotic spine undulations, wondering if I was ever going to learn it. When Robart started to teach me, I realized her way was simple, subtle, and full of kindness. Her dance was calm and at the same time powerful. Her movements were repetitive but not mechanical. On one occasion, she told me that “yanvalou is energy that one can canalize through attention (awareness). This energy goes where the attention guides it. In Haiti, yanvalou is also a name given to this energy, to which specific deities are connected: they are this energy”.¹⁸⁹

In regards to the form of yanvalou, Robart said, “look for the form which is simple, small, pure, original (pristine). That is the way to approach something greater. Yanvalou is the key to open oneself to more universal things. Yanvalou is also the form through which the transmission of knowledge and tradition are made: it is a form of communication.”¹⁹⁰

I recall a very important experience linked to the work on yanvalou with Robart. It is a teaching that cannot be limited to a specified time, but was a discovery for me, which came after much time and effort. I called this discovery “the secret of the dance”. Based on that event, I wrote the following words:

After a long period of practice, I discovered that through yanvalou, the body, the senses, the mind and the soul, all reach a point of convergence where they merge. But this union is different from the ordinary, since perception is also altered. The

space and environment are perceived as something that is full of life, where one feels that the body has the consistency of a river and the heart is an ancient abode in which silence, peace, my ancestors, and the keys of wisdom dwell. The external result is a simple movement, which has fluidity and strength. One feels that this movement is the root of all creative movement and all dances: the course of a river, the flight of birds, planetary cycles... the dance of man.¹⁹¹

I lived that experience in Robart's work. At the time, I was unaware of concepts like phenomenology and epoche. Yet by studying phenomenology now I know that according to German philosopher Martin Heidegger, this field of study deals with openings into the essence of phenomena, the unconcealment of art, and its ability to open the truth of beings. In Heidegger's essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*, he wrote:

The art work opens up in its own way the Being of beings. This opening up, i.e., this deconcealing, i.e., the truth of beings, happens in the work. In the art work, the truth of what is has set itself to work. Art is truth setting itself to work. What is truth itself, that it sometimes comes to pass as art? What is this setting-itself-to-work?¹⁹²

APPENDIX A: TYPES OF YANVALOU

OVERVIEW

The types of yanvalou briefly quoted in this section are only a few of its variations. In the Vodou ritual, forms are not rigid and may change accordingly at different points in the ritual, Yanvalou forms also change regionally, and even within the same region they are not static.

1. YANVALOU-DOS-BAS (LOW BACK YANVALOU)

“...Is danced with the body leaning forwards, knees bent, and with undulations which seem to spread from the shoulders down the back. Sliding the feet sideways with a pause on the fourth beat[...]. The undulations of the yanvalou are much more pronounced in the *yanvalou-dos-bas*, to such an extent, indeed, that it is taken for an imitation of waves or a serpent. Thus it is often danced in honor of Agwé or Dambalah-Wedo. In this dance the body is considerably bent and the dancer goes gradually lower until he is virtually squatting with hands on knees.”¹⁹³

2. YANVALOU NAGO

This dance is characterized by “... pirouetting, swaying, and fast foot work. It is in thenago that relaxation, one of the primary qualities of the Haitian dances, conspicuously manifests itself. Without muscular relaxation, the difficult combination of shoulder movement (forward and backward), loin movement (side to side), knee bending, swaying, and pirouetting would be physiologically impossible.”¹⁹⁴

3. YANVALOU Z'ÉPAULE

Also known as dahomey or z'épaule dahomin (shoulders yanvalou), and yanvalou debout (upright yanvalou). According to Metraux, this type of yanvalou "... is a dance characterized by the play of the shoulders. The dancer, the body upright, rolls his shoulders ever more rapidly following the beat of the drums."¹⁹⁵

4. YANVALOU JENON (KNEES YANVALOU)

This type of yanvalou is described by Roumain as "[...] characterized by an alternate movement of raising and lowering the bent knees, is in fact a limping dance."¹⁹⁶

5. YANVALOU KASE OR CASSÉ (BROKEN YANVALOU)

"In this yanvalou, the dancers take an upright position and move in circular way to the right, and then to the left."¹⁹⁷

APPENDIX B: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH PROJECT

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa
Consent to Participate in Research Project:
The Role of The Yanvalou Dance In the Work of Maud Robart

My name is Pablo Jiménez and I am a student in the Dance program at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Part of the elaboration of my graduate thesis is to conduct research. The purpose of this research is to inquire into the implications of the practice of a dance removed from its original context. Specifically, it will focus on the yanvalou dance from Haiti within the framework of the Haitian artist and researcher Maud Robart. I am asking you to participate in this project because you are directly involved in Maud Robart's research.

Project Description

If you participate you will be interviewed once. The interview will last for about 30 to 60 minutes. The interview will be recorded using a speakerphone and a digital audio-recorder. The purpose of recording this interview is to transcribe it in order to have a written record and analyze it. If you wish to participate, you will be one of the participants or collaborators in Maud Robart's work that I interview. One example of the type of questions asked is, "Why did you decide to join or participate in Robart's work?" If you would like to preview a copy of all of the questions that I will ask, please let me know now.

In addition, video recording will be taking place in order to have an archival record of the dances and dance-related activities.

Benefits and Risks

There are no direct benefits to you by participating in this research project. However, the results of this project will be important for the elaboration of my thesis. If, however, you are uncomfortable or stressed by answering any of the interview questions, we will skip the question, take a break, or stop the interview.

Confidentiality and Privacy

All data from the interviews will be kept in a secure location. Only my professors and I will have access to the data, although legally authorized agencies, including the University of Hawai'i Human Studies Program, have the right to review research records.

After transcribing the interviews, all the audio-recordings will be deleted. When I report the results of my thesis and in my typed transcripts, your name or any other personally identifying information will not be used. Instead, a pseudonym will be applied. If you would like a summary of the findings from the final report, please contact me at the number listed near the end of this consent form.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this research project is voluntary. You can freely choose to

participate or decline. In addition, at any point during this project, you can withdraw your permission without any penalty of loss of benefits.

Questions

If you have any questions about this project, please contact me via phone (808) 354-4038, or e-mail (pjimenez@Hawai'i.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant in this project, you can contact the University of Hawai'i Human Studies Program by phone at (808) 956-5007 or by e-mail at uhirb@Hawai'i.edu.

Please keep the prior portion of this consent form for your records. If you agree to participate in this project, please sign the following signature portion of this consent form.

Tear or cut here

Signature(s) for Consent:

I agree to participate in the research project entitled, "The Role of the Yanvalou Dance in the Work of Maud Robart."

Pease check the appropriate box:

- Yes, I give authorization to be audio recorded.
 No, I do not give authorization to be audio recorded.

- Yes, I give authorization to be video recorded.
 No, I do not give authorization to be video recorded.

I understand that I can change my mind about participating in this project at any time by notifying the researcher.

Your Name (Print): _____

Your Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

Thesis Title: The Role of the Yanvalou Dance in the Work of Maud Robart

List of Questions for Interviewees

1. Name
2. Country of origin
3. Age
4. Gender
5. Professional/educational background
6. How long have you been working with Maud Robart?
7. How did you hear about her work?
8. What did you hear about her work?
9. Why did you decide to join or participate in Maud Robart's work?
10. What is your role in Maud Robart's work?
11. What is the importance of Maud Robart's work for you?
12. What have you learned in it?
13. Is dance important for you? Why?
14. What is yanvalou?
15. Have you seen or experience yanvalou outside Maud Robart's work?
16. Why is yanvalou important in Maud Robart's work?

NOTES

- ¹ Oxford Dictionary Online
- ² Recorded conversation. Jan 19, 2013
- ³ Skype conversation. February 17, 2014
- ⁴ Skype conversation. March 15, 2014
- ⁵ Ibid
- ⁶ Robart's notion of "pulse of creative awareness" or élan (Section 7.2) is close to the notion of Spanda. The word Spanda is a Sanskrit word with various meanings. According to the concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy Spanda means vibration, flutter, throb, self-movement. It also means Śakti; pulsation; creative pulsation; apparent motion in the motionless Śiva, which brings about the manifestation, maintenance, and withdrawal of the universe (Grimes 298). In Kashmir Saivism, Spanda is a continuous pulse that issues from the conscious nature of Siva, goes down into the gross material forms, and back to him, "...the pulse is divided into two halves, -one outpouring, expanding, extending, flowing, spreading out, emerging and unfolding, and the other is its reverse" (Dyczkowski 1992: 178). Accordingly, reality becomes a continuous oscillation between evolution and decline, and the role of Siva as creator and destructor or worlds is reaffirmed.
- ⁷ Grimes 298
- ⁸ Biblioteca Teatrale 35
- ⁹ Robart. Skype conversation. March 22, 2014.
- ¹⁰ Yuka Amano 529-545
- ¹¹ Robart. Phone conversation. February 17, 2014.
- ¹² Haraway 599
- ¹³ Don Ihde is an American pragmatist-phenomenologist who talks about vision in his book *Listening and Voice* (included in the Literature Review), as sense, which, historically, thinkers have given priority over the other senses.
- ¹⁴ Haraway 581
- ¹⁵ Yasuo Yuasa in *The Body*, a subsequent item in this review, also addresses those binaries.
- ¹⁶ Haraway 583
- ¹⁷ Haraway 584
- ¹⁸ The phenomenologist Alvin Herman Schmitz, in the article "Emotions Outside the Box". "The new phenomenology of feeling and corporeality" (Included in the Literature Review) proposes a new approach to phenomenology aiming to regain sensibility for the nuanced realities of lived experience. According to him, phenomena are not the "things themselves" of Husserl and Heidegger, but rather things as they appear from a particular (historical, cultural, local, etc.) conceptual framework. (Schmitz 3).
- ¹⁹ Haraway 592
- ²⁰ These type of dynamics were explored in depth by the Japanese philosopher Tetsuro Watsuji and are also explained in Yuasa Yasuo *The Body*. Included in Literature Review.
- ²¹ Yuasa 31
- ²² Yuasa 3
- ²³ Ihde 298
- ²⁴ Ihde 298
- ²⁵ Phenomenology of Perception 94
- ²⁶ Phenomenology of Perception 89
- ²⁷ Lewis and Staehler 167-168
- ²⁸ Merleau-Ponty. Basic Writings 134
- ²⁹ Ibid
- ³⁰ Inouye 65
- ³¹ Inouye 66
- ³² Inouye 68
- ³³ Schmitz 3
- ³⁴ Ibid
- ³⁵ Schmitz 5

³⁶ Schmitz 9

³⁷ Pakes 99

³⁸ Fraleigh 12

³⁹ Davidson 7

⁴⁰ Davidson 46

⁴¹ In the film, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, the word “god” is mistakenly used to refer to the *loas*. The *loas* are not gods but spirits, representative of Bondye (God God) the highest principle in the universe, which is the origin of both the cosmic order and human action.

⁴² Fleurant 1996 17

⁴³ Fleurant 1996 189-202

⁴⁴ Fleurant 1996 29

⁴⁵ Jerzy Grotowski (11 August 1933 - 14 January 1999) was a Polish theatre director

⁴⁶ Schechner-369

⁴⁷ Wilcken 22

⁴⁸ Dunham 72

⁴⁹ Fleurant 1996. 152

⁵⁰ Home Robart 06/20/13.

⁵¹ Malraux

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Pablo Notes 0617/12

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ When Robart told me about her experience, she also remembered an event from her early childhood. It is about a woman dancing alone in the street, whose silent quality of movement is close to her own experience with *yanvalou*. She explained:

“I was at the terrace of my home looking towards the street. Way into the distance I saw a woman approaching, she was dancing and she was alone. At that time I was a young child and I did not know anything about possession: I thought she was either crazy or drunk. But she was advancing and eventually passed in front of my home. I saw her arriving with a very fluid dancing and in a total silence. That dance she made in silence remained in me as a very strong souvenir. Even though people say that the Haitian folks are people that chants and dances, outside the framework of a ritual, feast, or ceremony, this way of dancing in silence is unusual because it inhabited its own space.” Robart. Recorded conversation. July 6, 2013.

⁵⁷ A system with many parts that depend on each other and work together” Merriam-Webster Online

⁵⁸ Skype conversation March 7, 2014

⁵⁹ Maud Thesis Recordings 2013

⁶⁰ Pilgrim 34

⁶¹ Maud Thesis Recordings 2013

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ *Transforming the Dance Researcher: Maud Robart and Haitian Yanvalou*, presented at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology NOFOD and SDHS international joint conference in June 2013

⁶⁴ Ihde 33, 58

⁶⁵ In an email I asked Robart what are the chants and dances for her. She replied:

The chants and *yanvalou* are a treasure for me. They strengthen the relationship I have with myself and with my origins. Above all they connect me to the Origin. Origin for me is the space (inside and outside ourselves), which is separate from the historical time. This treasure of songs and bodily movement is older than the culture that spawned it. It opens me to broader and subtler aspects of the fundamental human condition, and to the wild side of creation. This is why I like to develop this research with people of all nationalities and cultures, in order to explore with all our humanities broader opportunities for welcoming, enjoying, experimenting (even through fleeting impressions) the fullness of life. Those magical moments are rich in sensations, perceptions, and give us a great sense of freedom. The treasure I refer to must be approached with respect and with a rigor compared with the one applied in scientific

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- research Robart, Maud. "RE: Why Robart commit herself to this research" Message to the author. Dec. 13, 2013. E-mail.
- ⁶⁶ Marra 1999: 247
- ⁶⁷ Ibid 145
- ⁶⁸ Ibid
- ⁶⁹ Maud Thesis Recordings 06/2012
- ⁷⁰ Heidegger 35-37
- ⁷¹ Jiménez 2006
- ⁷² See section 6.3
- ⁷³ Vera 7
- ⁷⁴ Haraway 581-584
- ⁷⁵ A series of movement schemes related to dancing and chanting. It will be discussed in Section 6.3
- ⁷⁶ See Section 6.2
- ⁷⁷ Field notes 6/6/6/12
- ⁷⁸ See section 6.3
- ⁷⁹ Not discussed in this thesis
- ⁸⁰ See Appendix C
- ⁸¹ See Section 6.3
- ⁸² They have participated in several workshops and are familiar with Robart's work.
- ⁸³ In the context of her work with groups of people, Robart set the following rules: white, clean, and elegant clothing for the work on chants and dances (women wear blouse and skirt; men white pants and shirt); for the Exercises and the Spirals light pants and a tea shirt. Additionally: avoidance of unnecessary chatting and avoid social playing. At Robart's home we were less informal and did not wear white clothing. Nonetheless, we were disciplined and kept talking to a minimum. The reason for the white clothing in the chants and yanvalou is the intention to make everyone equal and elegant at the same time. The white color is also influence of Robart's connection with the Vodou culture in her country. In the Rada rite the participant wear white clothing. The reason for the tea shirt and light pants is the need of comfort and freedom during movement ←
- ⁸⁴ The word Yanvalou actually has meaning in four categories of action in Haitian Vodou; they are rhythm, song, movement, and dance. Yanvalou is often described as movements that resemble or represent some aspect of nature; it is a dance that is performed at various times during Vodou ceremonies; it is also a rhythm that is included in Haitian Vodou ceremonies; and Yanvalou is a song that is sung for the lwa/spirits. It embraces all these things simultaneously." (Burroughs 7)
- ⁸⁵ See Chapter 14 and Appendix A
- ⁸⁶ Ibid
- ⁸⁷ Creole is a French-based vernacular language that developed in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. It developed primarily on the sugarcane plantations of Haiti from contacts between French colonists and African slaves. It has been one of Haiti's official languages since 1987 and is the first language of about 95 percent of Haitians, especially in rural areas" Encyclopedia Britannica.
- ⁸⁸ See Section 7.3, Chapter 10, and Chapter 12
- ⁸⁹ *Ideas* 191
- ⁹⁰ Robart. Skype conversation 03/20/14
- ⁹¹ Ibid
- ⁹² Jiménez Field Notes 23
- ⁹³ Robart. Skype conversation 03/21/14
- ⁹⁴ Jiménez Field Notes 23
- ⁹⁵ Robart 17 Jun. 2012
- ⁹⁶ Robart. Skype conversation 03/22/14
- ⁹⁷ Ibid
- ⁹⁸ Ibid
- ⁹⁹ Mascaró 106
- ¹⁰⁰ Robart 25 Jul 2012

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- ¹⁰¹ In the field of education, Vera proposes, “that subjectification (i.e. the construction of the subject) is not only relevant for human development and social wellbeing, but is a source of knowledge in the Humanities.” (Vera: 9)
- ¹⁰² Robart 17 Jun. 2012
- ¹⁰³ Ibid
- ¹⁰⁴ See Appendix A
- ¹⁰⁵ Robart 25 Jul. 2012
- ¹⁰⁶ Jiménez Field Notes 5
- ¹⁰⁷ Jiménez Field Notes 7
- ¹⁰⁸ Robart 11 Jul. 2012
- ¹⁰⁹ Robart. Skype conversation 03/21/14
- ¹¹⁰ Robart Workshop Pamphlet
- ¹¹¹ In Plato’s dualism the soul as imprisoned in the body. Ideas or Forms are the true reality, and are experienced by the soul. The body cannot access the abstract reality of the world; it can only experience shadows. See Shields 131 137.
- ¹¹² Oxford English Dictionary.
- ¹¹³ For Descartes the mind and the body are completely different entities. He states his main argument in the Sixth Meditation of the Meditations of First Philosophy.
- “[O]n the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing, and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it”. See Descartes 54.
- ¹¹⁴ Aristotle 22-24.
- ¹¹⁵ Encyclopedia Britannica.
- ¹¹⁶ The lived body, “. . . cannot be scientifically observed from a distance, because it is already spatially involved, maneuvering through rooms, handling equipment, sensing who or what is in front or behind and so forth.” (Aho 8).
- ¹¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty stated, “I can understand the function of the living body only by enacting it myself, and only insofar as I am a body” See Merleau-Ponty (2002) 75.
- ¹¹⁸ See Merleau-Ponty (2002) 87.
- ¹¹⁹ “The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment [...] I am conscious of my body via the world”. See Merleau-Ponty (2002) 119.
- ¹²⁰ Merleau-Ponty (2002) 64.
- ¹²¹ Merleau-Ponty (2002) 144, Carman 219.
- ¹²² Aho 9
- ¹²³ Merleau-Ponty (1975) 9.
- ¹²⁴ Merleau-Ponty (2002) 88.
- ¹²⁵ Merleau-Ponty (1975) 248.
- ¹²⁶ Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, as it is, can be applied to the description of the embodiment of some types of dance. Despite pointing to its limitations, scholars such as Sondra Fraleigh, in her article *Researching dance: evolving modes of inquiry*, have applied Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology in dance creatively. See Fraleigh.
- ¹²⁷ Merleau-Ponty (2002) 8.
- ¹²⁸ Haraway 583.
- ¹²⁹ Ibid.
- ¹³⁰ Merleau-Ponty (2002) 9.
- ¹³¹ See Lewis and Staehler 5.
- ¹³² Deren 240-41.
- ¹³³ Hunter 151, Haraway 593.
- ¹³⁴ In *Art as Experience* Dewey underlines the relationship between individual’s action and transformation. See Dewey 275.
- ¹³⁵ Robart. Skype conversation 03/22/14

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- ¹³⁶ See Schmitz 5-17 for an insight into his notion of the felt body.
- ¹³⁷ Schmitz 5.
- ¹³⁸ Alvin Hermann Schmitz. German philosopher and phenomenologist. See Literature review
- ¹³⁹ Schmitz: 5
- ¹⁴⁰ Ibid
- ¹⁴¹ According to Robart, this process leads one to realize that the impulses, the perception and the movement become finer. The perception breaks through the limitations imposed on it by our ordinary awareness, and becomes infinite. (Robart 14 Jun. 2012)
- ¹⁴² Schmitz 9.
- ¹⁴³ Robart. Skype conversation 13/22/14
- ¹⁴⁴ See Gabriel, Mesmin
- ¹⁴⁵ Recorded interview. Robart 21 Jun. 2012.
- ¹⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty and Baldwin 277.
- ¹⁴⁷ Jiménez *Field Notes* 15.
- ¹⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty (2002) IX.
- ¹⁴⁹ Ibid VIII.
- ¹⁵⁰ Robart. Skype conversation. 03/22/14.
- ¹⁵¹ Robart. Skype conversation. 03/22/14.
- ¹⁵² Ibid
- ¹⁵³ Grimes 298
- ¹⁵⁴ Rajendra viii
- ¹⁵⁵ Robart. Skype conversation 03/22/14/.
- ¹⁵⁶ Grimes 44
- ¹⁵⁷ Dyczkowski 1987: 51
- ¹⁵⁸ Ibid 1992: 178
- ¹⁵⁹ Ibid 1992: 51
- ¹⁶⁰ Ibid 1987: 89
- ¹⁶¹ Inouye 31
- ¹⁶² See Heisig et al
- ¹⁶³ “There are dozens of other kata. In fact, there is hardly an area of Japanese thought or behavior that is not directly influenced by one or more kata.” Ibid 1.
- ¹⁶⁴ Ibid 1
- ¹⁶⁵ King 3
- ¹⁶⁶ Metevelis 133-134
- ¹⁶⁷ See Inouye 12
- ¹⁶⁸ Ibid 17
- ¹⁶⁹ Odin 282
- ¹⁷⁰ Heine 112
- ¹⁷¹ Encyclopedia Britannica
- ¹⁷² In Noh, katas can yield various degrees of realism, from a stylized gesture, commonly used to express grief (shiori) to more abstract movements, which gain more meaning or connotation only when combined with the text chanted by the actors or the chorus. It is this degree of abstraction that allows these latter movements to be multifunctional: they will acquire a meaning depending on the reading of the spectator in the context of the play. See Pellechia.
- ¹⁷³ c. 1363 – c. 1443
- ¹⁷⁴ See Tsubaki 55
- ¹⁷⁵ Ibid 55, 57
- ¹⁷⁶ Odin 282
- ¹⁷⁷ Marra 247
- ¹⁷⁸ Ibid 145
- ¹⁷⁹ *Sokushin jōbutsu*: to become enlightened in the present life Ibid
- ¹⁸⁰ Tsubaki 63
- ¹⁸¹ See Nose 1

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- ¹⁸² Interdependent origination (Pr̥tīya – Samutpāda) is the Buddhist idea that everything comes to be in dependence on causes and conditions. Nothing is self – sufficient. There are no essential forms reproducing their own kinds and no causal powers over and above what actually happens. See Bartley 17.
- ¹⁸³ Inouye 68
- ¹⁸⁴ Kierkegaard 3:10
- ¹⁸⁵ Robart. Recorded interview. July 6, 2013
- ¹⁸⁶ Ibid
- ¹⁸⁷ Dyczkowski 1992: 178
- ¹⁸⁸ Maud thesis recordings 06/2012 and Maud thesis recordings 2013
- ¹⁸⁹ Yanvalou is often described as movements that resemble or represent some aspect of nature; it is a dance that is performed at various times during Vodou ceremonies; it is also a rhythm that is included in Haitian Vodou ceremonies; and Yanvalou is a song that is sung for the lwa/spirits. It embraces all these things simultaneously.” (Burroughs 7)
- ¹⁹⁰ Maud thesis recordings 06/2012
- ¹⁹¹ Jiménez 161
- ¹⁹² Heidegger 35
- ¹⁹³ Dunham 48
- ¹⁹⁴ Courlander 114
- ¹⁹⁵ Metraux 190-191
- ¹⁹⁶ Roumain 21
- ¹⁹⁷ Fleurant 1996. 151

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