

“They Jump Up of Themselves” Gesture and Identity in Central Australia 2

Sam Gill

Now, let's return to Central Australia and the Aboriginal jumping dance. We can appreciate that this dance form is a technique of body distinctive to these people. This gestural aspect of their dancing is at once how the religion and society insinuates itself into the very tissues of these people. This jumping dancing is not something just anyone can do, should they want. It requires highly repetitious training and performance before it is done efficiently and correctly according to the expectations of the culture. Thus this jumping-dancing is both a way that religious society transforms individuals into members of society, but it is also the means by which members of the society enact their role, their identity.

I am inspired by the phrase “they jump up of themselves” which is used to describe some aspect of the figures in the stories. I believe the phrase to be an Aboriginal-inspired casual description of an aspect of these story figures that I believe to be equivalent to the term *unbambikula* and also related to the term *altjira*. This homely phrase has similarities to the adjectival understandings of these terms as they have been understood since Kempe, “something that has no origin, mysterious, something that has always been so, also always.” What is for me so interesting about the insights suggested by this English language phrase is that it points to an action distinctive of these figures, a type of movement, a gesture that is distinctive to them. To me this attention to movement inspires the consideration of an interestingly different approach to these stories, to the cultural practices associated with identity, and more. My approach here is to focus on gesture as key to agency and identity.

Now to return to Australia with a sense of gesture in mind. I want to reconsider the terms *ungambikula* and *altjira*, not as the name of the figures in these stories or any class of beings but rather as pointing to a distinctive gestural feature that distinguishes these figures. I do so intending to provide some insights and, more importantly, a different approach not only to this specific example, but with the suggestion that the approach has broad implications. It is difficult for us to avoid introducing temporal reference, yet the rendering of the term as “they jump up of themselves” suggests that there are no predecessors, no others directing their movement, that they are “it.” I'll return to this matter a bit later, but here I want to ask, what do these figures do once they are about? In other words, what other gestures do they practice? Following Jonathan Smith in his critique of Eliade, I have carefully analyzed the body of stories that are associated with *tjilpa* identity (the wildcat people). There are 90 places designated, most by name, in this series of stories. The basic gestural patterns are these. Once the figures in the story are present, having “jumped up of themselves,” they travel as groups from one geographically designated location to another. The names used to designate these places are known geographical locations. The 90-story segments track the movement of four different groups. The gestures or gestural patterns that designate what occurs at these locations are notable. At all 90 locations they erect a pole. They perform ceremonies of various types at 54 locations. Circumcision as part of initiation is done at 21 locations. Other gestures that were performed at but a few locations include changing language,

drinking blood, sexual intercourse, and painting bodies. While not obviously gestural the presence of sexually transmitted disease was indicated for a few locations. The sequence or itinerary of these locations becomes tracks across the geographical landscape identified with the traveling figures. The travels are often referred to in ethnographic accounts as “wandering” without adequate justification for the implications of randomness. The travels are on some few occasions indicated as occurring underground.

Now before doing some additional analysis of these gestural patterns, I want to briefly discuss what has long been a controversy in anthropology, the sex education of aboriginals at the time of contact. While much ink has been shed over this matter, it is not the sex education matter that interests me here, but rather the cultural practices that motivated the anthropological discussion. I am interested in the gestural aspect associated with how aborigines acquired identity with specific land tracks, countries, or ritual organizations. I’m carefully avoiding calling these “totems” because this too has been an energetic discourse in anthropology that I simply want to avoid.

The gestural practice I am referring to is that identity is bestowed *in utero* when the Aboriginal woman feels herself pregnant. The practice is that, as the woman travels about the landscape gathering, when she feels herself to be pregnant, she considers that a *karuna*, usually understood as a spirit child, residing in the land associated with those who “jump up of themselves” selects her and jumps up into her impregnating her. The land identity of the *karuna* gives an essential identity to the fetus. I suggest that we might well be justified in removing the temporal marker that indicates that these *karuna* were at some time before left behind by those beings that are identified with the land and simply settle ourselves to be comfortable with a non-temporal understanding that identity is connected with the land gesturally and that gesture is described as a “jump up without preparation or motivation.” So there is a gestural homology between the stories of the identification of particular tracks of land and the beliefs of how individual aboriginals gain identity in terms of the land. There is nothing I see as essential to adding any sort of temporal markers to these events.

Okay, leaving this idea regarding acquisition of individual identity hanging for a bit along with its obvious connection to the *ungambiukula/altjira* “jumping up” gesture, I want to return to those other gestural practices that occur at the various locations as described in the stories, the gestures of erecting a pole, performing ceremonies, performing circumcision (the practice is actually subincision), and so on. As Erin Manning has shown, gesture is a means of creating space and time, that is, creating a world.¹ This certainly aligns with the motivation that was pursued by the early missionaries, the ethnographers, and the students of religion. Yet, there is an important difference. Gesture is not a creator of space and time and world on a single one-time basis, performed by deities *in illo tempore* or by deities at the *axis mundi* who then disappear into the sky. Rather gesture is by its nature a repeated and repeating chain of actions, a loop or reciprocation, that both delimits space and time but is also constantly reaching out to contact the given environment to adjust and respond to exigencies. Gestural patterns are then the means by which identity and value and meaning are constructed through interaction with features of

¹ Erin Manning, *Relationescapes: Movement, Art, and Philosophy* (2009), p. 15.

the environment, yet they always are also a reaching out to adjust and respond to the exigencies in the changing environment.

The gestures that are described in the stories that give identity to the land share attributes with the gestures practiced in aboriginal ritual. Aboriginal rituals are performed at these locations enacting the identity-creating gestures of the location by the people who share identity with the land-track identified with this place. It is supposed that both the stories and the rituals change through the repetition of gestural practices. These gestures then constitute an important agentive aspect of aboriginal culture as they constitute techniques of body that are the basis for identity.

The concept of self-othering developed in earlier lectures is important to our understanding of Arrernte ritual. In the Arrernte dancing they are not commemorating or imitating or remembering the actions of beings that acted sometime in the past. Rather the Arrernte dancers are, in acts of self-othering, these beings ongoing in their importance in forging identity and value to land and people. The Arrernte take advantage of that magical paradoxical character of dancing to be at once themselves and beings of an entirely different order and in doing so both participate in the ongoing agentive creating of the world and in that human endeavor of discovering and comprehending the value, meaning, and importance of the world they are also creating.

I want now to circle back to pick up the gestural designation as *ungambikula/altjera* of the story characters, the jumping up of the *karuna*, and add to that the distinctions of aboriginal ritual dancing. I want to present a couple of videos to offer some further inspiration. These, of course, are contemporary dance examples and so they offer only inspiration because we cannot be certain they accurately reflect pre-contact dance practices. The first is part of a 1993 video series "Dancing;" I presented it in the last lecture. ... Let's look at it again.

Notice that Jiri Kylian, choreographer from The Netherlands, describes the remarkable way in which these dancers jump. He says "they jump without preparation" a gesture that he finds quite remarkable, so remarkable indeed that he says it may take a lifetime to understand. It inspired his acclaimed dance, "Sinfonietta, Symphony in D, Stamping Ground." Now let's look at one other video. This is a contemporary stage performance of Aboriginal dancing.

While these dancers do not so much jump up, their movement appears to share these same qualities of acting suddenly without preparation. Notice that their open leg posture and the sudden contraction of their knees has a similar gestural quality to the jumping. The knees instantly move together seemingly without preparation.

Gestural practice actually insinuates itself on the tissues of the practitioner. Carrie Noland observes a graffiti writer at work and makes the following observation, "In the magnified scope of the graffiti gesture, writing affords the writer an opportunity to impress the individual shape and vitality of the body's motor power onto the contours of the cultural sign. Yet if the writer performs the motion repeatedly, his own body will eventually be inscribed, the muscles and ligaments physiologically altered,

by the gestural routine that expresses and confines his body at the very same time.”² To jump without preparation, to spring one’s knees together without preparation, is not simply a movement that one learns to do, it is a technique of body inscribed by cultural practice onto the very tissues of the person. One’s identity is, through gestural practice, literally bodied at the level of muscle tissue and sensorimotor neurological loops that connect brain, muscle, skeleton in ways that shape movement and posture.

Now I want to think more about the implications and valuations of this gestural patterning. To understand gesturing that we refer to as “they jump up of themselves” or “they jump without preparation” we need to see that this is not about results accomplished by the gesture, as in designating space. Perhaps other gestures do so such as the erection of a pole. Nor is this jumping gesture about the trajectory of the movement on a grid, as in moving from one location to another through a designated path. There are other gestures that are associated with this movement. Rather, I think we might appreciate that “they jump of themselves” is more about the movement in itself. It is about incipience ... movement about to happen. It is about potential, or better, potential energy. It is about the vitality factor of movement. It is about movement on the brink of moving, engaged but at the point of not quite yet. These qualities correlate with life-force or vitality and thus seem entirely appropriate for understanding both the figures active in stories associated with tracks of land, as well as the *karuna* that vitalize new life in a woman, as well as the enactment of ritual and ritual dancing. This key gesture is about the quality we can identify as vitality.

Brian Massumi offered insights into this shift in his provocative 2002 book, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. His book explores the “implications for cultural theory of this simple conceptual displacement: body—(movement/sensation)—change.”³ He shows that cultural theory has tended to bracket the middle term—that is, movement/sensation—and thus it “has significantly missed the two outside terms,” that is, body and change. His work is to add movement itself back into the picture, yet it must be movement as “qualitative transformation” rather than simply “displacement.” While Massumi does not identify his exploration of movement in these terms as gesture, it is clearly consistent with the notion I have been exploring. And the implications of this perspective which he develops in some detail are clearly important.

To understand the Arrernte dancing in terms of gesture has a number of advantages, I think. We no longer need attempt to negotiate that unfortunate and uncomfortable placement of “ancestors” in some “mythic past.” We can understand that the ritual performances are characterized by the same gestural patternings with the same vitality affects as are the story figures. We can avoid the Eliadian understanding that perfection and order were established by the gods in the beginning at the center of the world and that all movement since is somehow a descent into chaos, a loss of order, a degradation by history; that ritual is primarily a method of eternal return or a recovery of the perfect condition. The study of religion exemplified by Eliade, on the one hand, and Smith, on the other, is at stark tension in most respects, yet they both share the importance of “place.” To know the character of the place on

² Carrie Noland, *Agency & Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (2009), p. 1.

³ Massumi, p. 1.

which one stands is to know that person's religion. Smith frequently invoked Archimedes dictum, "Give me a place to stand and I'll move the world." He often cited Levi-Strauss making a similar point that meaning correlates with having a place and being in it. In contrast to this emphasis on place, a concern with gesture/movement places emphasis on body, on incipience, on dynamics and energetics, on change and it does so without dismissing the momentary importance of place in either time or space. Gesture unites body/spirit/mind neurophysiologically. Gesture joins the visible and invisible in an intertwining unity that is chiasmatic, a gap, yet not a lack, not a painful absence. The space/time distinction is significant only in that both are negotiated in the gestural and postural patterns that both express personal and group identity and that offer the forms in which change can be both absorbed and initiated.