

Embodied, Emplaced, Embraced:
Performing the Chain Sword Dance of Blato (Croatia) in Sydney

Jeanette Mollenhauer

PhD Candidate, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, University of Sydney, Australia.

Introduction

Culture, according to the anthropologist David Howes, is a “lived, multisensorial experience” (Howes 2003, 40), and this paper is concerned with a culturally-specific, sensory-laden event which took place in Sydney, Australia, in 2015. The *kumpanjija* is a chain sword dances from Blato, on the island of Korčula in Croatia, and its performance in Sydney is described in this paper. The corporeal stimulation afforded by this event allows both dancers and audience members to engage with people, objects and activities that are “imbued with meaning and affect” (Warin and Dennis 2005, 163), so evoking memories of a former home. Through the bodies of everyone present, a ballroom in northern Sydney is transformed, temporarily and imaginatively, into their beloved town of Blato, and their attention turns to family, friends, events and familiar places in that town. The main purpose of this paper is, therefore, to examine the ways in which the corporeal nature of the dance renders its performance so significant for immigrants who have comfortably phase of their lives in metropolitan Sydney.

The affective link between Sydney settled into a new and Blato can only happen because of another somatic experience which is a shared commonality amongst the immigrants; namely, the movement of bodies across the globe in the

process of migration. This phenomenon is described by geographer Kevin Dunn as “embodied transnationalism” (Dunn 2010, 1); indeed, Dunn states that an embodied approach to migration research has revealed that “bodies are simultaneously mobile and emplaced” (Dunn 2010, 5), a notion which is exemplified and explored in this essay. This research also links performance scholarship with diaspora studies for, as performance specialists Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo suggest, “diasporas are neither discrete nor preformed, but function as historically and politically produced formations that are emplaced, embodied, interactive and performative” (Gilbert and Lo 2010, 156). The paper is about the embodied and emplaced nature of the sword dance performance as the dancers interact with each other and with everyone else who is present in the ballroom.

The particular event described in this paper was held in the northern suburbs of Sydney, with around two hundred people crammed into the ballroom of the Dalmacija Sydney Croatian Club on the evening of 25 April, 2015. As part of my doctoral research, I had the chance to witness a remarkable achievement: the fiftieth consecutive annual performance of the Blato *kumpanjija*, by the only troupe outside of Blato which performs the dance. I was an invited outsider; I have no Croatian heritage, but had spent enough time at this fieldwork site to appreciate the cultural significance of the performance and the dedication required to perpetuate the ritual each year for fifty years. For the other immigrants from Blato, both dancers and audience members, the town itself was re-imagined in that ballroom as the performance was mounted. Through multiple somatic and sensory cues, memories of similar performances in Blato were evoked and everyone rejoiced in their shared heritage.

History and Background in Blato and Sydney

To contextualise this particular performance and its significance, some historical background is required, as well as a description of the dance itself. The island of Korčula, situated on the Dalmatian coast of Croatia, has six towns, each of which has its own sword dance. The origin of these dances is believed to be found in the attacks from pirates and other potential invaders, endured for centuries by the island's population (Marošević 2000, 77). The first record of the "chivalrous society", the name given to the company of young men which performs the dance, was made in a twelfth century document (Viteško udruženje Kumpanjija-Blato, 2017). The military structure is evident, with a captain leading his men, known as *kumpanjoli*, in the choreography, a corporal who reports to the captain and a demonstration of combative expertise by the ensigns (Zebec 2000, 124). Historically, the role of these men extended to the maintenance of civic order and they were held in high esteem in the town. They were called upon for assistance with both private and community building works for the townspeople and the provision of charitable assistance to the less fortunate residents (Marošević 2000, 77). In Blato, the dance is part of a ritual celebration for the patron saint of the town, St Vincenza, on 28 April. Adapted performances, without the Mass which is celebrated on the Saint's day just prior to the dancing, are also mounted during the summer as part of the overall tourist promotional campaign of the island of Korčula.

The dance event consists of two parts: the sword dance and the partner dance. The chain sword dance is danced only by male *kumpanjoli* and represents a battle between residents of the town and various bands of marauders. The men each

have a sword which they hold by the hilt with one hand, while simultaneous gripping the end of the sword belonging to the next person in line; thus the dancers are formed into a chain, connected by the swords. Towards the end of the *kumpanjija*, a mock sword fight demonstrates the victory won by the townsmen. The dance event is highly gendered and patriarchal; while the men dance with their swords, the young women sit demurely at the side of the dance area. Once the sword dance segment is over, the young men fetch the women for the *tanac*, a partnered skipping dance. The *tanac* represents a celebration that the men of the town have been victorious and everyone is, for the present, safe once more.

The transportation of this dance to Sydney is best understood in relation to the migration patterns from Eastern Europe, especially in the period following the Second World War, which are recorded by Croatian-Australian historians Luka Budak and Walter Lalich (2008). During this post-war era, many people migrated from Yugoslavia, of which Croatia was then part, to Australia. A second wave migrated in the 1960s as a result of high unemployment in their former homeland and the existence of an Australian government scheme which was designed to attract well-trained workers from Europe to fill the workforce deficit in Australia (Budak and Lalich 2008, 91). A concentration of immigrants from Blato may be found in the northern area of suburban Sydney. Migration scholar Rebeka Žabčić (2014) outlines several factors which, either individually or in combination, have influenced those who have left the town and settled in Sydney. In Blato, life had become onerous due to political unrest and economic difficulties, whereas the attractiveness of Australia's temperate weather and comfortable living standards made it an appealing choice for settlement (Žabčić 2014, 135-136).

The establishment of cultural links with others from Blato was a priority for many immigrants; indeed, culturally-specific clubs and organisations served as places of refuge, where shared values and traditions, so honoured by first generation immigrants and taught to subsequent generations, were privileged (Lalich, 2004: Skrbiš, 1999). The Dalmacija Sydney Croatian Club opened on April 24 1965 (Lovoković 2010, 368) and in that same year, the annual dance performance was inaugurated. In Sydney, the event is held on the weekend closest to 28 April, so it does not interfere with the working week. This continued every April until the fiftieth anniversary performance which was held on 25 April, 2015. The Sydney performance has multiple layers of transnational experiential subjectivity which are peeled back and interpreted in this paper, showing how and why this ritual practice is so revered amongst the community of *Blaćani* (people from Blato) who now reside in Sydney. The embodied nature of this ritual, as performed in Sydney and mediated through multiple sensory stimuli, is elucidated, and the culturally-specific meanings which are contained in the performance are described and discussed. Thus, as anthropologist Carol Silverman observes, the means through which memories are engaged, and personal and community identities are re-negotiated amongst members of this immigrant community are identified (Silverman 2012, 41).

Methodology

The particular event described in this paper was part of a broader comparative ethnography of traditional dance practices amongst the Irish and Croatian communities in Sydney, Australia. There are multiple Croatian dance ensembles in Sydney which perform dances from multiple regions of Croatia as well as from Bosnia and Herzegovina, but the dance group at the Dalmacija Sydney

Croatian Club only performs the sword dance of Blato. I visited the *kumpanjija* group in rehearsals, which were held from January to April in 2014 and 2015, and also attended the fiftieth anniversary performance on 25 April, 2015. At rehearsals, whenever I had the chance, I made extensive field notes and posed informal questions to the dancers, musician, senior club members and parents of dancers (many of whom had danced when they were younger). I also conducted semi-structured interviews with those who were willing to talk with me about their involvement with the dancing and what it meant to perpetuate this ritual event in twenty-first century Australia. The Sydney *Blaćani* were so excited that someone was interested in their special dance that they took me in, made me feel welcome, gave free meals and enveloped me in a spirit of openness and generosity. All these aspects of the collected data form the basis for this analysis of the dance event.

The focus of the current paper is on the corporeal nature and representational significance of the jubilee performance, during which I was purely in an observational role. This method of observation, supplemented by archival research and personal interviews, has been used successfully in previous ethnographies, such as Elsie Ivancich Dunin's previous work on various Croatian sword dances (Dunin 2012, 31) and Iva Niemčić's study of the *moreska*, the sword dance from the town of Korčula (Niemčić 2014, 78). Both scholars successfully employed intense and consistent observation, supplemented with interview data and archival analysis, to illustrate the meanings that were embedded in these dance events.

Thus, using detailed observational analysis, I was able to identify and evaluate components of the dance to compile a description of the significance of this

performance for the Sydney *Blaćani*, and so answer the research question: How is this performance rendered culturally significant for the immigrants from Blato who now reside in Sydney? For the purposes of visual data to supplement this paper, the reader is referred to two YouTube videos: first, of the dance being performed in Blato for tourists in July 2014 (Smith, 2014) and second, of the 2013 performance in Sydney (Damjanovic, 2013).

Embodied: Bodies, senses and the *kumpanjija*

At the *kumpanjija* performance, both dancers and audience members were rallied by the call of the captain as the dancers waited outside of the ballroom. Traditionally, the captain asks permission of the mayor of Blato to perform the dance; in Sydney, the Club president acted in the official role. The mellifluous voice of the captain, speaking in Croatian, signified to everyone present that this ritual had been transplanted from its original location to its current locale, and reminded them of the corresponding performance in Blato itself. The beat from the *tambrlin*, a drum, was the indication for the flag-bearer to commence his solo dance around the room, waving a huge Croatian flag as the full troupe marched in. Then, the young men worked together to produce the *kumpanjija*; a dance which may appear outdated in the context of cosmopolitan Sydney, but which reached deep into the hearts of the immigrants from Blato that evening, stirring memories of previous performances witnessed in Blato and rousing emotions which may have lain dormant since the previous performance.

In this section, notions of embodiment and corporeality are explored, as observed in both the anniversary performance and the rehearsals which preceded it.

In a general sense, as dance scholars Betty Block and Judith Kissell observe, the movement of bodies is “tied to the material, the physical, the kinetic, the spatial, the temporal” (Block and Kissell 2001, 8) and during this performance, the bodies of the dancers interacted with each other and with the audience within the space created in the ballroom in Sydney. However, the bodily movements in the chain sword dance are also culturally specific, representing part of what performance scholar Diana Taylor calls the “ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge” (Taylor 2003, 19, italics in original) of the residents of Blato, since the dance is indigenous to that town. More precisely, within the *kumpanjija* there is a “strong sense of one’s identity to place, which is recognised by the sword dances that are performed in one’s own place” (Dunin 2012, 31).

Corporeal Synchronicity

One of the particular characteristics of the chain sword dance, and which is observable in the video footage (Damjanovic, 2013; Smith, 2014) is the unity which must be exhibited by the *kumpanjoli*, who strive for consistency, both in height when lifting the feet and stride when moving around the performance area. Each of the motifs which are performed in the dance requires complete symbiosis with fellow dancers and acute sensitivity to both the musician and the captain as he leads his troupe of soldier-dancers. Synchronicity and its effects on group members has been studied widely within both science and humanities disciplines. One of the earliest observers of this phenomenon was Emile Durkheim, who writes that “It is the homogeneity of these movements that gives the group consciousness of itself and consequently makes it exist”. (Durkheim 1964, 230).

Building upon this foundational work, other theorists have commented on the relationship between synchronised movements and group coalescence.

Anthropologist William McNeil writes about the relationship between drill, dance and battle, three notions which are intrinsic to the *kumpanjija*. His own experience in the United States military caused him to ponder over the effects of prolonged movement in unison amongst the cohort of soldiers and so he employs the term “muscular bonding” to encapsulate the collective unity generated through rhythmical and simultaneous movements (McNeil 1995, 2). The sociologist Randall Collins ties synchronous movements with the concept of ceremony when he observes that “at the centre of an interaction ritual is the process in which participants develop a mutual focus of attention and become entrained in each other’s present bodily micro-rhythms and emotions” (Collins 2004, 47) and that this “rhythmic synchronization is correlated with solidarity” (Collins 2004, 76). The unity of movement, demonstrated throughout the execution of the *kumpanjija*, fosters the affective solidarity present in the group. During rehearsals, the primary focus of the captain’s encouraging remarks to his dancers is that they must move as one person so as to perform the familiar motifs as fluidly as possible.

The synchronicity of moving bodies encourages the spread of more subtle effects through this group. When the *kumpanjoli* move in unison, there is a “tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, postures and movements with those of another person and consequently, to converge emotionally” (Hatfield, Cacioppo and Rapson 1994, 5) and this harmonisation is evident in the video footage (Damjanovic2013). The concept of emotional synergy links back to McNeil’s ideas; through muscular bonding, there is a “blurring of self-awareness and the

heightening of fellow-feeling” (McNeil 1995, 8) which occurs regardless of the lack of other forms of interconnectedness between the dancers, who are drawn from diverse social, geographical, economic and vocational strata. The unison of movement continues to “enhance...emotional vibrancy” and provide a “fundamental cement” of camaraderie amongst the young men who perform the *kumpanjija* each year (McNeil 1995, 155-156).

Observations of Sensorial Engagement

During the performance, I noted that multiple forms of sensory engagement were activated. Embodiment must also, by definition, be inclusive of sensorial modes of being, since we perceive and react to our environment through the body’s senses. Anthropologist Thomas Csordas says that “to attend to a bodily sensation is not to attend to the body as an isolated object, but to attend to the body’s situation in the world” (Csordas 1993, 138). In the *kumpanjija*, the dancers sense themselves, their fellow dancers, the musicians and the audience members and, in turn, each of these groups senses the others. The sensorium, according to human geographer Paul Rodaway, contains a compilation of past events, for “sensuous experience...is grounded in previous experience and expectation” (Rodaway 1994, 5). Sociologists Kelvin Low and Devorah Kalekin-Fishman concur, adding that sensory experiences both “provide ways of knowing about one’s social reality through embodied knowledge” (Low and Kalekin-Fishman 2012, 195) and “serve as mnemonic devices of selfhood and belonging to the larger community” (199).

Within the context of this particular performance, the various senses contributed to the emotional concord amongst the *Blaćani* in the ballroom. While the senses of taste and smell were not directly engaged through the activity of dancing, they were operational within the broader context of the evening's event. The sense of taste is regularly engaged at the Club through the cooking of fish in the traditional way of Blato, a menu choice which is offered whenever the Club's restaurant is functioning. However, for the fiftieth anniversary, outside caterers were employed to provide the meal and they were unable to cook the fish, so this element was absent on that particular occasion. The smell of perspiration which ensues from their rigorous practice sessions acts as a symbol of friendship and common purpose; one dancer exclaimed that he enjoyed the fact that when the young men dance, they are all "sweating together" (Fieldnotes, March 14, 2014). The performers in Blato are obviously perspiring as they perform the lengthy dance (Smith, 2014). The sense of smell can operationalise both affect and memory (Low 2013, 698), thus forging an emotional link between Sydney and their Blato. In the same way, the tactile input from holding the swords reminds the dancers not only of their connections with each other and their shared ancestry, but enhances the elicitation of memories of Blato and the *kumpanjija*, as performed by the young men who still reside there.

The sense of sound was engaged in multiple ways. In Sydney, there is no one who is able to play the local version of a bagpipe, called the *mišnjice*, so the *kumpanjija* is accompanied solely by the *tambrlin*. This signifies a substantial departure from the usual practice in Blato, where it is accompanied by the *mišnjice* (Marošević 2000, 78). However, a recording of the *mišnjice* is used in Sydney for the *tanac*, the partnered dance. Thus, it was possible to stimulate the auditory memory,

afforded by the *mišnjice*, as its unmistakable sound was still a component of the overall event. The beating of the drum and the sounds of men's shoes on the parquet floor connected the sense of audition with the synergistic body movements of the dancers as described earlier. A repetitive rhythm is able to engage the affect, the emotions and the body, eliciting feelings of community and belonging (Duffy, Waitt, Gorman-Murray, and Gibson 2011, 23). Thus the sounds of shoes and musical instruments contributed to the shared "affective contagion" (Boyd and Duffy 2011, paragraph 13), which I observed throughout the ballroom.

Finally, the costumes and choreography provided very obvious visual cues about a dance. The dancers wore a mixture of items that were made in Blato and sent to Sydney, and those that were manufactured in Sydney from local materials (see Figure 1). The town of Blato sent new hats for the young men to wear for the fiftieth anniversary; the sight of those hats thus validated the Sydney performance and the transnational connections with those still residing in Blato. In the choreography, some motifs were omitted owing to a lack of available young men in Sydney. However, the condensed performance did not lose credibility through this alteration: each motif was individually recognised and cherished, and the audience was fully cognisant of the pragmatism behind the changes. They understood that a modified *kumpanjija* is better than none (Mollenhauer 2015, 130).



Figure 1. The dancers and audience, 25 April, 2015

Photo: A. Mollenhauer

While it is true that the dancers' bodies enacted the ritual, the effect of the performance on the bodies of the audience members is also salient. The multimodal performance elicited a reaction in the audience, who were, in their imaginations, dancing along with the young men and women who held the floor. The audience was also drawn by the sounds of the drum and the shoes; many were swaying, tapping their feet, clapping or nodding their heads in consonance with the dancers. This phenomenon is described by dance researchers Matthew Reason and Dee Reynolds as "kinaesthetic empathy" (Reason and Reynolds 2010, 50) and refers to the ability of an audience, particularly one which is as familiar with the dance performance as the *Blaćani* are, to imagine the steps and motifs being performed. In this particular case, the audience members knew each step and each motif; they knew what was coming next. It is as if their bodies were attuned to the bodies of the dancers. So, along with the dancers, the audience members' bodies, too, served to embody notions of Blato in the ballroom.

Emplacement: recreating Blato in a Sydney ballroom

In Sydney, the performance space was the ballroom of the Dalmacija Sydney Croatian Club, whereas in Blato, the dance is performed in the piazza, outside of the church and in open air. So, factors such as the sights of the town, the warmth of the sun and the smell of olive groves, were no longer present, as the dance was performed indoors and during the evening in Sydney. The empty ballroom, with its brick walls and timber floor, is rather unremarkable, but for the duration of the event, the ballroom was re-imagined as Blato. Through the bodies which were in it and through cues which reminded those bodies of the town from which they or their predecessors came, memories of the dancing which takes place in the piazza in Blato were elicited. While bodies inhabited the space of the ballroom, they were also generative, according to geographer Derek McCormack (McCormack 2008, 1823). The particular bodily configurations of the young men dancing with their swords, the young women sitting to the side and the position of the audience who witness the performance all contributed to the place-making processes achieved during the evening.

The re-configuration of the town of Blato through the dance event was mediated by the movements and sensory expressions made by the dancers. Their bodies were representative of Blato, and so it was through those bodies that Blato was emplaced into the ballroom, for “bodies and their biographies are co-constituted in and through space” (Duffy et al 2011, 23). Several times during rehearsals, the captain exhorted his troupe to “think about what it’s like at home in the piazza!” (Fieldnotes, March 7, 2014) and to draw inspiration for the performance from that thought. Significant places which are etched in the memory may “become written on

the body [and] become part of us, quite literally” (Farrar 2011, 725). Therefore, the *Blaćani*, through their perpetuation of this ritual, were able to refashion the space of the club ballroom “to reflect significant places of the past, places through which their identity was formed” (Main and Sandoval 2015, 83). They were prompted through the place-making processes to remember the church, their families and friends and the piazza in the centre of Blato where the performance is mounted *in situ*. The complex interactions between bodies and senses served to configure place memories; both bodies and senses acted as referential markers which connect the home of the past (Blato) with the home in the present (Sydney).

The loss of several sensorial components of the original performance surroundings means whatever *can* be reproduced is of vital importance in the construction of sensory memories. While there is nothing in the physical structure of the ballroom which marks it as belonging to Blato, the club members have added their own visual reminders. Several large painted murals adorn the walls of the ballroom. The largest mural hangs on the wall towards which most of the audience is oriented during the performance, and is shown in Figure 2. The middle panel depicts significant scenes from Blato (the church, the piazza and olive groves), Sydney (the Harbour Bridge, the Sydney Opera House and a kangaroo) and the migratory experience (aeroplanes and a ship). These murals pictorialize the connections with Blato, personalise the performance and link the two locations.



Figure 2. The main mural Photo: J Mollenhauer, 13 March 2015.

Thus, when the dancing bodies enacted this ritual in the manner which is so familiar and in a context which contained the visual reminders of Blato as illustrated in the murals on the ballroom walls, Blato itself was re-conceptualised in the minds and bodies of both dancers and audience members during the annual dance event. Social anthropologist Paul Connerton writes, “Our memories are located within the mental and material spaces of the group” (Connerton 1989, 37). The memories of the *Blaćani* who now reside in Sydney and which are intimately linked with the geographical reality of Blato, are operationalised each time the dance is enacted. The moving bodies and stimulated senses are the catalysts of ritual significance in the performance of the *kumpanjija*; as Connerton attests, commemorative ceremonies prove to be celebratory only through their “performativity [which] cannot be thought without a concept of habit; and habit cannot be thought without a notion of bodily automatisms” (Connerton 1989, 5).

The performance was bereft of the physical landmarks of Blato, yet, the combination of bodies, senses and places was potent, reminding the *Blaćani* of the location and era in which they first witnessed the ritual (Shelemay 2006, 22). Place-making serves to “reify both our individual and collective identities” (Farrar 2011, 725); through the reminders of Blato as a physical space which has been experienced by first generation immigrants through their childhood memories and the second generation by the multiple visits reported during the personal interviews, all who were present at the celebration evening were encouraged towards communal thoughts about the town of their ancestry. It is this purpose which is served through the ongoing perpetuation of the *kumpanjija* in Sydney; the *Blaćani* experience the dance in mind and body, and so they remember Blato.

Embracement: nostalgia and its significance

Nostalgia is a contested notion, with some arguing that the concept involves looking backwards and longing for a supposedly ideal lifestyle which was enjoyed during that past. When the *Blaćani* in Sydney gather each April, they are not acting in correspondence with Jerzy Krupinski’s idea of a “broken clock syndrome” (Krupinski 1984, 933) nor with Kalpana Ram’s “phantom limb syndrome” (Ram 2005, 123). These notions suggest that immigrants’ memories are idealised and have not permitted their conceptualisation of their former homeland to be modernised, choosing instead to indulge in romanticised valorisations of their former lives. There is no sense that the Sydney *Blaćani* consider their past lives in Blato to be vastly superior, nor do they intend to return there to live. The immigrants are content with the choice to live in Sydney, but they do not wish to forget Blato or the historical traditions which are embedded into the ritual of the *kumpanjija*. The nostalgia for

Blato is culturally-arbitrated (Low 2013, 689); the meanings which are evoked through the sensory cues provided in the dance may only be profoundly understood by those whose heritage is based in that town.

The embodied and emplaced nature of the *kumpanjija*, as described in the previous sections with reference to the 2015 performance, makes it an ideal locus for the intersection of tradition and modernity. The connections between the senses and the memory facilitate the construction of a shared space of intimacy in which reminiscences of childhood, family and homeland may coalesce. There is, in the performance, a meeting point of former and current identities which are not mutually exclusive: the *Blaćani* are, to use the ideas of psychologist Jens Brockmeier, “putting past and present selves together...in a process of provisional reconstruction” (Brockmeier 2002, 15). The nexus of sensory experiences and recreated personal and collective memories, therefore, “offers further insights into processes of ‘embodied identity work’ that are closely related to the maintenance and continuity of selfhood” (Low and Kalekin-Fishman 2012, 692). The *kumpanjija* represents the nexus of both identities (Croatian and Australian): the performance validates their connection with their cultural heritage and informs their desire to perpetuate the ritual dance of their home town even whilst living in the modernity of Sydney.

Hence, the nostalgia which these immigrants feel for Blato is of the reflective kind, as described by literary theorist Svetlana Boym (2001, 49); there is a conscious meditative viewing and acceptance of change, understanding it as both a process to be experienced and an integral component of moving forward through life. Thinking about a home of the past does not imply that the Australian *Blaćani* are longing for a reputedly superior place and time; they are well-grounded in their current lives in

metropolitan Sydney. When the *kumpanjija* is performed, the elicited “sensory signification is a continuing development, not a simple reliving of once-learned associations” (Howes 2003, 44). The performance is a locus within which past and present, historical and modern, traditional and current intersect. Transnational affective connections do not prohibit the simultaneous negotiation of cultural identity within the place of settlement following migration; indeed, as anthropologist Takeyuki Tsuda observes, the two processes may exist in a symbiotic relationship (Tsuda, 2012, 646). Thus, these modern young people who are professionals and tradespeople, who drive in the traffic congestion of Sydney and embrace modern technology, are prepared to allocate time to rehearse and perform a dance which is centuries old.

Outsiders and “ethnic salience”

While the focus of this performance analysis has been the immigrants from Blato, there were also people present who have no ancestral connection with that town. I was one of several audience members who were “outsiders”, along with my husband and a government official with whom we were sitting, and perhaps several others about whom I have no knowledge. The dance has little significance even for Croatian immigrants who are not from the town of Blato, since it is embedded in the historical narrative of that town alone (Dunin 2012, 31).

When a dance or music performance is mounted for a cross-cultural audience, writes dance researcher Andriy Nahachewsky, the “ethnic salience” is increased (Nahachewsky 2016, 308) and the symbolic implications of the dance may not be fully understood by everyone in the audience. There is, therefore, a vital difference in the depth of performance appreciation between insiders and outsiders.

Ethnomusicologist Di Roy notes that the spectacle and disciplined accomplishment of the performers may be identified and acknowledged by everyone in the audience (Roy 2012, 287). However, dance anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler believes that embedded symbolism is perceptible only by those who have either inherited or acquired the requisite culturally-specific understanding of the history and context of the dance being performed (Kaeppler 2010, 192). There may have been others present that night who had no connection with Blato, but I can only report on the two who were sitting with me, my husband and a government official.

My husband was a complete novice, having no prior knowledge of the dance. Methodologically, his presence was useful as he was able to observe more of the emotions and reactions of the audience while I concentrated on the performers. In relation to the dance itself, he remarked that he had not believed that real swords were being used until he saw sparks fly in the final part of the dance where the dancers clash swords in a representation of battle scenes. This single observation, he recounted, made him realise the esteem with which the *Blaćani* view this dance: he said that they could have made do with fake swords, but was impressed that they had gone to the trouble of ensuring that every dancer uses a real sword. His comment represents a recognition of effort and dedication on the part of performers. All of his remarks and observations enriched my field notes about the performance.

The government official had, at least, some insight into the migration experience. As the child of immigrants from Austria, she was able to empathise with the *Blaćani*, since she had a comprehension of the processes of migration and resettlement. During the meal, she asked me many questions about the meaning of the dance and the commemoration of St Vincenza. As a result, she was able to use

my knowledge to deliver an informed and empathic speech when requested by the Club president. In her case, there was an empathy based on the shared experience of immigration and the community bonding which arises from perpetuations of rituals and traditional practices (Dunin, 2012, 35; Silverman 2012, 83). Her insights were also recorded in my notes.

My deeper appreciation and analysis of the performance was only possible due to the prolonged fieldwork prior to the anniversary performance. Without the ethnographic data collected through the fieldwork, including a visit to Blato in 2014 and ongoing consultations with Croatian-American dance ethnographer Elsie Ivancich Dunin, my analysis of the anniversary performance would have been less detailed. Successful and rich research by investigators who are outside of the cultural group being studied is certainly possible, as is evident in the work of dance researchers Linda Dankworth and Ann David in their respective studies (Dankworth 2014, 96; David 2014, 26-27). This was the situation in which I worked. My prolonged time in the field site and employing multiple data collection methods resulted in a more comprehensive and nuanced description of the anniversary performance than what would have been possible otherwise.

Conclusion

The annual performance of the Blato *kumpanjija*, the only performance of the dance outside of Croatia, has provided an important opportunity for investigation of the ongoing significance of ritual traditions in an immigrant community in multicultural Sydney. The Club itself is a focal point for those people who have come from Blato to Sydney, many of whom gather each weekend to have dinner and socialise. For many immigrant groups, the physical construction of a culturally-specific club

afforded the opportunity for bonding with others who have shared the experiences of migration and resettlement (Skrbiš 1999, 54). Within these intimate spaces, argues migration scholar Hannah Lewis, special events afford the opportunity for “‘community moments’ that are a significant space for negotiating relationships between and affiliations to ‘here’ and ‘there’” (Lewis 2010, 572). Lewis’ findings were certainly replicated in the dance event at the Dalmacija Sydney Croatian Club on 25 April, 2015.

The observation of a ritual such as the *kumpanjija* has, therefore, provided the *Blaćani* with a more concentrated symbolic representation of their shared heritage. As described in this paper, the chain sword dance has provided an important example of the role that traditional dance forms, practised in receiving society contexts, can play in the personal and social lives of immigrants. Australian dance researchers Rachel Fensham and Odette Kelada write that such a dance performance “realises, or relives, transnational migratory journeys that have taken place in the dancing body” (Fensham and Kelada 2012, 396). Thus, it supports the immigrants in constructions of identity and place within their chosen, post-immigration settlement location (Silverman 2012, 41). With respect to the sword dance, the multiple sensory cues contained within the performance are not simply culturally-specific but are location-specific, drawing the cognition towards Blato. Thus, the performance serves to imaginatively contract the spatial distance between Sydney and Blato.

In the lives of the *Blaćani* who now live in Sydney, the *kumpanjija* represents a juncture of former and current lives and affiliations. The immigrants have not sought to return to Blato permanently; their lives are entrenched in Australia, but the

honour of being connected to Blato is maintained through the annual gathering for the performance. In 2016 and 2017, no dance event was held; three senior *kumpanjoli* had retired in 2015 and there were insufficient willing dancers to mount a further performance. Yet, a senior club member told me recently that he has enlisted sixteen young men who will perform in 2018; he hopes to inspire a new generation to carry on, for the honour of Blato. Time will tell if he has succeeded.

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