

Continuity and Change— “How Is It That Things Move?”

Toby Miller

Randy embodied continuity and change. On the one hand, he appreciated the importance of history and solidity. He understood the past and was reliable. On the other, he valued the instability and innovation of possibility. Randy was mercurial, and he identified and embraced newness. Put another way, a dialectic between structure and performance, *langue* and *parole*, came almost naturally to him. I encountered these tendencies in many forms.

We met by phone. Randy called because he had been assigned as corresponding editor on a manuscript I had sent to *Social Text*. I remember the conversation well, even though it was twenty years ago. He was funny, humane, and encouraging. The same qualities impressed themselves on me when we edited first a collection of essays titled *SportCult* (1999) and then the journal itself. Writing together was a great pleasure. Randy was agile and profound in his capacity to collaborate and enrich others through his encyclopedic understanding.

Catching waves and playing tennis were physical expressions of these qualities. We shared those experiences in New York and California. Randy’s Southern California roots shone through as he charged helter-skelter into the ocean to catch booming waves. He emerged smiling—and keen to ensure his friend had come up, too. On the court he was extraordinary. Having been a leading junior player in the country’s tennis heart, he had rejected the sport for some time, turned off by the competitiveness that he so abjured in general. He had found a way to reconcile its pleasures with its pains later on.

When we played, it was without a scorecard. Had it been otherwise, he would have won every game, perhaps every point. What mattered to Randy was the pleasure of exchange, the energy and rhythm of hitting together and running about—not winning. So he was an ideal partner for someone of much less ability. He brought out my best in the way I imagine applied to his dancing.

I recall going to a sociology conference in Washington, DC, in 2000. Randy kept the house enthralled with his eloquence, the complex yet scintillating nature of his syntax and semantics. I sat similarly entranced throughout a conversation with him in San Diego that I recorded for the culturalstudies podcast in 2012.¹ We talked over a meal. It’s reality audio—no editing. You’ll hear his humor, word order, sense of play, and

seriousness amid an aural backdrop of service labor, eating, friendship—and admiration, on my part. During the podcast, Randy poses what I think of as his abiding query: “How is it that things move?” It was our last time together in person. We talked once on Skype toward the end, when he said, “It’s beginning to hit.”

In both his early writings on performance and dance and his forays into education policy and Marxist theory, as well as his later engagements with finance and war, Randy’s work put political economy, meaning, and ethnography together. He understood the centrality to cultural studies of knowing institutional, semiotic, and social forms of power. He also saw the inevitable interplay of such determinations with agency—hence his lodestones of continuity and change.

I have two other California memories to share. The first was in 1998. He ushered in my fortieth birthday with detailed road trip advice on a two-week entry into middle age, driving from San Francisco to Los Angeles: where to stop, what to see, and what to avoid. The second is moving to Los Angeles to work at the University of California, Riverside, and discovering its superb dance department. Randy had taught there as a distinguished visitor years before and remained a legend—as he was a decade later when I left. Successive cohorts of doctoral students would nod appreciatively at the mention of his name, by then based on his books.

Randy’s work is valued across countless spheres. I recently discovered one new to me: Amazon says *SportCult* is a work of “classical philology.” That must be one of the few fields where Randy didn’t tread. Until Amazon decreed it so. How is it that things move?

Note

1. The podcast can be heard at culturalstudies.podbean.com/e/a-conversation-withrandy-martin-about-crisis-economy-and-risk/.