ALL DANCES ARE ETHNIC, BUT SOME ARE MORE ETHNIC THAN OTHERS: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON DANCE STUDIES AND ANTHROPOLOGY

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Throughout the twentieth century, but increasingly in the last decades, dance scholarship has drawn upon a number of disciplines. In a notable shift away from the predominant study of choreographers, dancers and repertoire, more recent literature has focused upon the roles which cultural factors may play in the production of dance. Examples which spring to mind are the edited collections by Foster (1996), Thomas (1993, 1997), Desmond (1997), and Morris (1996) as well as monographs by Manning (1993) and Thomas (1995). In approaching dance scholarship from such perspectives, there has been a clear transference from the study of dance as culture, in the Arnoldian sense, to that of dance as social production. No longer is culture viewed as the singular mark of civilisation, but all cultures are plural and relative to the peoples who create and maintain them. This potentially results in the non-hierarchical treatment of all dance practices, from street dancing to ballet and from bhangra to butoh. As a consequence, vernacular and theatre art forms of dancing, as well as dance and movement practices which have their origins beyond Europe and north America, equally constitute a legitimate focus for study.

Such a broadening of the field, in association with the development of appropriate theoretical frameworks and rigorous study, is to be welcomed, particularly when it promises the demise of ethnocentrism in dance scholarship. The integration and modification of theories and methodologies from the social sciences to address the cultural production of dance, however, necessitates caution and recognition of the extent and nuances of existing intellectual debates. When assimilating key concepts from other disciplines, without full understanding of the history and range of their use, there is often a tendency, amongst non-specialists of the contributory discipline, to collapse the particular into a supposed general
of shared routes and destinations. This is not to argue in Luddite rebellion against the benefits of interdisciplinarity. The enriched understanding and new directions which can flow from the creative juxtaposition of other disciplinary practices and theoretical perspectives are to be championed: such interaction does not automatically lead to ineffective dilution and shoddy scholarship. But in order to progress knowledge, it is essential to exercise thorough understanding or, at least, respect for the epistemological grounds of each discipline and to issue a caveat against the cavalier adoption of terms and methodologies.

That dance is a culturally constructed mode of human action is, of course, fundamental to the anthropological perspective. Gathering momentum from the 1960s, the anthropological study of dance and human movement systems predates the current fascination with dance as cultural production. Much of the literature cited above does not derive its theoretical base directly from anthropology, for which the relativity of cultures has been a conceptual cornerstone. Nor, apart from the particular case of Thomas, is it principally located in anthropology’s sibling discipline of sociology which has similarly invested critical inquiry into the concept of culture, albeit much more recently. Instead, this dance literature draws variously upon gender and cultural studies, critical theory and performance studies, disciplines which do not share the same aims and histories of anthropology, but nonetheless work with modified and specific uses of culture. Ever since 1976 when Raymond Williams, one of the chief architects of cultural studies, hailed the term culture as ‘one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language’, a proliferation of academic writing has even further muddied the waters; to such an extent that in some quarters the very concept has been declared intellectually null and void. This ‘dangerously unfocused term’ nonetheless remains attractive to dance scholars, many of whom may use it, unaware of its debated status within anthropology.

In the recent burgeoning of dance literature, three texts (amongst several) have been published which provide opportunity to reflect upon the distinctive focus and theoretical orientation of anthropological approaches to the study of dance. The three texts selected here constitute the types of publication which might characterise a particular field of scholarship. They include an ethnographic monograph, *Ballet across Borders: Career and Culture in the World of*

The anthropological treatment of dance employs specific methodologies and theoretical perspectives. Typical mistaken beliefs about the discipline are that it involves the application of cultural theory to dance, or that its sole object of investigation constitutes those dance practices which are constructed as ‘other’ to those which have their dominant origins in the theatrical contexts of north America and Europe. The anthropology of dance, though, is an academic discourse which seeks to understand, through empirical and conceptual inquiry, all dance and movement systems and necessitates the sustained practice of ethnography in order to understand emic perceptions. As anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup argues, the

anthropological project … is to provide ground for comparison and generalisation of social experience on the basis of concrete ethnography … The theoretical project is based in concrete experience. That is why anthropology potentially is an important supplement to historical or literary modes of apprehending the world through texts.ª

Fieldwork, then, in the sense of intensive participant observation, is at the heart of the anthropological study of dance, whether conducted in geographical areas remote from the home of the researcher, such as the study of the Philippine sinulog by Sally Ann Ness, or in the culture in which the researcher was born, as typified by the late Cynthia Novack’s monograph on contact improvisation in north America.¹ To clarify the goals of an anthropological perspective on dance and movement yet further, it is helpful to turn to the succinct characterisation by Adrienne Kaeppler, a seminal figure (along with Williams, Kealiinohomoku and Royce) who, from the 1950s onwards, has advanced the field from a strict anthropological training:
The aim of anthropological works is not simply to understand dance in its cultural context, but rather to understand society through analysing movement systems.\(^8\)

She thus distinguishes the focus of dance anthropology from that of traditional ethnological modes of inquiry and the well-established European discipline of ethnochoreology, both of which have classically begun with dances as the primary object of study.\(^9\)

Perhaps it is this broader concern with culture which has contributed to the apparent neglect of anthropological writings on dance in mainstream dance literature; although the ethnological and ethnochoreological studies of dance have met with a similar lack of recognition, despite their principal emphasis on dance in cultural context. Absent in readers of key writings, or relegated to footnotes in edited collections, the well-established literatures of dance anthropology, dance ethnology, ethnochoreology, and the nascent sociological studies of dance are rarely visible in what has become mainstream dance scholarship.\(^10\)

Different histories of scholarship, intellectual affiliation and geographies undoubtedly account for this restricted engagement; of course, there is an argument that a healthy sign of a mature discipline is its respective sub-disciplines. But, following this line of thought, scholars need to be aware of those sub-disciplines, to know where the major debates lie, to understand the particular orientation accurately and to know where to find the most recent literature.

Researchers in dance anthropology and ethnochoreology often publish in specialist journals such as the Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement (JASHM) or the Yearbook for Traditional Music, and contribute to regular international conferences such as The International Council for Traditional Music Study Group on Ethnochoreology. This latter organisation is the oldest continuing international scholarly organisation for dance analysis having been founded in the early 1960s.\(^11\)

Encouragingly, there is evidence of dialogue between north American and western European scholars in recent edited compilations, as the chapters by Ness in Morris and Novack and Hanna in Thomas demonstrate.\(^12\) Mainstream dance journals such as Dance Research Journal, Dance Chronicle and indeed Dance Research have also carried articles by dance anthropologists in latter years, yet the amount is not comparable with that generated in the 1960s and 1970s in Dance Research Journal.
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ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON BALLET

Sharper visibility is apparent where anthropologists have addressed theatre art forms originating from Europe and north America, as in the work of Hanna and Novack. The work of Daly and Foster in the late 1980s and 1990s on deconstructing the gendered body of ballet is not accidental for there have been parallel academic interests in the cultural construction of the body and, to a lesser extent, movement, among a number of disciplines. Such a topic had been raised much earlier in dance anthropologist Joann Kealiinohomoku’s now classic paper ‘An anthropologist looks at ballet as a form of ethnic dance’. First published in 1970, this article has frequently been quoted in mainstream dance literature (though less frequently engaged with) and has been reprinted on a number of occasions. Indeed, Williams affords it first place in her collection of seminal readings on the discipline of dance anthropology. Often cited as a highly influential argument, the paper is worth revisiting to evaluate its significance in considering the exchange of ideas between dance scholars with roots in different academic disciplines.

Two principal reasons for its comparatively high profile emerge. One obvious factor is that the article is clearly addressed to a dance rather than to an anthropological audience. It has much to say about the cultural aesthetics of ballet and critiques a body of literature with which both ballet and modern dance historians are familiar. By discussing such publications first of all in her article, Kealiinohomoku hooks her intended readership and leads them on to a perhaps less palatable diet of anthropological theory.

The second reason lies in the sheer audacity of that title which provokes attention even today. The boldness of the provocative initial sentence is admirably reasoned throughout by a closely argued critique of the historical texts on dance by such luminaries as Sorell, Martin and Kirstein. This meticulous attention to logical argument and careful scrutiny of sources offers a model of writing about dance which appraises past work critically before offering new interpretations.

Kealiinohomoku is not afraid to engage with and evaluate work of past writers and to establish scholarly procedures comparable to other disciplines hitherto rarey visible in dance literature.
The significant departure signals the energy and rigour of younger students trained in well-established (by comparison with dance studies) neighbouring disciplines to which they had recourse in order to ask, generate and find answers to questions about dance and movement. This growing professionalisation and drive to advance the integrity of dance scholarship was finding expression, a voice to which the publications and conferences of the Committee (later Congress) on Research in Dance (CORD) of the 1970s bear testimony. Kealiinohomoku was by no means alone in the development within dance anthropology, but given her focus upon an esteemed Western theatre art dance form, she was able to speak to the more mainstream community of dance scholars. Furthermore, although she draws upon the theoretical outlook of anthropology, dance remains at the centre of her discussion. Her concern with history and impatience with the socio-geographical naivety displayed by many of those writing evolutionist accounts of dance identifies her Boasian inheritance and the breadth of her reading which, following the example of Kurath, draws together European and north American perspectives. Kealiinohomoku’s most significant intellectual contribution to dance in this article is that she provides the first thorough and accessible critique of the evolutionist legacy which had so bedevilled the majority of texts written on dance. That she does so at a time when the social sciences had long bypassed evolutionism and were well advanced in overturning the next dominant paradigm of functionalism speaks volumes for the lateness of dance scholarship in drawing upon other intellectual shifts in academia.

As a result of the critique of social evolutionism, the way is paved for the concept of cultural relativity, an inheritance from the Boasian school, to be introduced into dance scholarship. No more should the elite values of European art stand as the pinnacle of human endeavour, but all cultural practices should be valued according to the aesthetics of indigenous communities. This is admirably demonstrated in Kealiinohomoku’s cross-cultural comparison of European ballet and Hopi dance culture of Northern Arizona. The culturally specific nature of both becomes obvious, revealing ballet no longer to be obvious and ‘natural’, but the result of precise historical and social circumstances whose choreographic traces belie their origin in the aristocratic courts of Renaissance Western Europe. The seemingly universal status of ballet is re-
vealed as an ethnocentric and imperialist veil. In the writing of this article, Kealiinohomoku presented a route towards democratisation of the study of dance.

With the passage of almost thirty years it is easy to point out difficulties with Kealiinohomoku’s argument. These principally concern her concept of ethnicity which she views as unproblematic. The inclusion of genetics in her definition of ethnicity would no longer be acceptable in scholarly circles. Nor too by extension would her treatment of the category of ethnicity, as an essence rather than a deployable construct dependable on historical and social circumstances, remain uncontested. Yet in bringing into dialogue standard texts of dance scholarship and basic anthropological sensibilities, Kealiinohomoku provided an authoritative and pioneering statement for the future.

Beyond Kealiinohomoku’s undoubted achievements in advancing these findings, it is interesting to note that the direct attacks on the damage of lingering evolutionism in dance by Youngerman and Williams some four years later are rarely cited in subsequent mainstream literature. Their targets were the then frequently quoted World History of the Dance by Curt Sachs (1937) and the recently published Dance in Society by Frances Rust (1969) which, despite its hopelessly outdated theoretical framework, constitutes the first book length monograph to use a sociological framework for dance. Neither text deals principally with ‘western’ theatre art dance and it is these which have continued to dominate dance scholarship and higher education curricula since the potential democratisation of dance study ushered in by Kealiinohomoku.

To paraphrase Orwell, all dances are ethnic, but some are more ethnic than others.

This is by no means an argument that anthropologists should ignore ballet and Wulff’s Ballet across Borders offers an opportunity to assess how an anthropologist’s methodology and interpretations might differ from that of cultural analysts of dance. First and foremost, a distinguishing feature is the intensive fieldwork by which an anthropologist seeks to represent the view from inside the community. Dividing the results of her ethnography into six chapters, Wulff first introduces herself as a former ballet student who trained to almost professional standard before injury caused a change in career direction. Following her introduction of the four companies -- the Royal Swedish Ballet, the British Royal Ballet, American
Ballet Theatre and Ballett Frankfurt - Wulff proceeds to address their transnational context, the ballet vocation as work, the culture of classical ballet, performance production and the touring and technological aspects of the companies. Her acceptance amongst the dancers through watching class, attending rehearsals, being backstage, touring, going to parties and so on have clearly provided ample data. The result is an accessible text, threaded through with verbatim quotation and incident.

Advertised on the cover as ‘ballet’s biography’, the intention of this monograph is to present the dancers’ lives offstage as they pursue their careers in a transnational context. But anthropology is not biography, nor is it autobiography, despite the self-reflexive turn of postmodernism. The anthropologist is required to evoke the lives, perceptions and world views of the people and is expected to provide new theoretical insights, solidly grounded in empirical data which relate to existing debates in the discipline, and to open up fresh inquiry. Wulff has not previously focused on developing methodologies and theoretical frameworks for the anthropological study of dance and movement. Instead, she declares her interest to be dancers rather than dance, curiously eliding the focus of dance scholarship and that of the anthropology of dance into one and the same. Perhaps space pressures have resulted in this erroneous generalisation since the sub-subsection entitled ‘The Anthropology of Dance and Dance Studies’ constitutes just slightly over one page. This is a pity as it precludes a detailed evaluation of existing work which her fieldwork could address. Her quotation of Evans-Pritchard may reflect the state of dance ethnology in 1928, but it is certainly not the case of the past few decades where the focus on people who dance has been a noteworthy feature of dance anthropology and ethnology. Wulff does point to more recent work in the footnotes, but this is a missed opportunity to integrate her own evaluation of such literature.

When practising anthropology ‘at home’, that is, in an environment already familiar to the researcher, responses to the published findings may often be more immediate. Wulff has chosen to study the dancers of a genre which operates within highly literate and technologically orientated societies and which comes with its own traditions of scholarship and critical response as she notes. In reviewing this book for a readership of dance lovers and scholars, an important question to ask is to what extent this anthropological
perspective delivers insights beyond sources already available to such an audience. Many readers of this journal will regularly attend ballet performances, take or have taken class, read reviews and specialist periodicals, watch television documentaries on ballet companies and ballet stars, and indeed have friends or existing professional contacts with the four major ballet companies which Wulff has elected to study. Coming from a relative position of insider knowledge herself, Wulff reflects on the ambivalence and power of her continuously changing role in relation to the dancers and this discussion is the most ethnographically revealing, even if obvious at some levels.

Although Wulff’s focus is on the dancers, it is impossible of course to avoid comment on the dancing. It is here that dance scholars, in particular, will find too much of a naivety of expression and insufficient historical understanding to be fully persuaded of the value of this particular ethnography. When dancers are characterised as ‘the French dancer, Sylvie Guillem, who lifts her leg very high’ (p. 19) and Graham and Wigman’s dancing is described as ‘expressive and barefooted, with large swinging motion, occasionally using verbal utterances’ (p. 44), then there are significant problems of knowledge and representation. A proper understanding of dance history, accessed through scholarly secondary sources, is essential before writing for an academic audience regardless from which discipline they may appear. Traditionally, of course, anthropology has had an uneasy relationship with history. In a reaction to the evolutionist and racist paradigm of nineteenth-century ethnology and in its focus upon cultures which were not dominated by literacy, classical anthropology has eschewed diachronic dimensions. Such theoretical strategies of depicting cultures as continuously existing in the present is now recognised as complicit and constitutive of colonialist domination; it may have been conceived as politically expedient, however unwittingly, to deny a people their history. In anthropology today, there is greater recognition of the moral imperative to address histories, although it often occupies a low profile in studies of ‘elite’ communities in Europe and north America.

If Wulff’s pursuit of her ethnographic communities over four countries is relatively unusual in that it dispenses with anthropology’s classical notion of bounded cultures, then it shares a mode of investigation with contemporary dance ethnology and folk-
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loristics in which a cultural practice may be explored over time and space. This choice of field sites might have been usefully extended theoretically through a more philosophical consideration of what constitutes the field and self in a transnational world. Mostly content to identify correspondences between ethnographic data and existing theoretical discourses, Wulff fails to debate the theoretical import of her findings in a more sustained manner. The size of the monograph – four companies in less than two hundred pages – has no doubt hindered this development; so too, perhaps, the shortage of time which has elapsed between fieldwork and publication. Anthropological research is noted for its timescale not only with regard to the duration of fieldwork but also for the reflection and distance required from that intensive experience to make judgements and representations which will help further the discipline. Another limiting factor, but ethically essential, might well have been the protection of individual dancers from the gaze of the critical and immediate audience. No doubt too this determined the selection of well produced photographs which reflect a public rather than a private image. Only two of the author’s own photographs are included in the centrefold of twelve, suggesting the difficulties of negotiating private and public images whilst maintaining faith and friendship with the consultants who constitute the ethnographic community. Similar commitments may well lie behind the lack of information on the dancers themselves as people beyond the ballet who may manage and perceive class, family, religious and political affiliations.

Ethnicity and sexuality are addressed in this ethnography although lesbians, in line with the public image of female dancers and the official mores of an earlier age, appear to be non-existent in this world. If these aspects listed above are of little relevance to the dancers, then some statement to this effect would be welcome – it is the anthropologist’s task to reveal what may be hidden or not vocally apparent. In Ballet across Borders, Wulff has offered a wide-ranging overview of the factors which impact upon a dancer’s life within high profile international ballet companies; it is hoped that the valuable ethnographic data will furnish the author with further published considerations.
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ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON DANCE AND HUMAN MOVEMENT SYSTEMS

Whereas Wulff’s ethnography is intentionally limited to selected case studies of dancers in a particular genre, Williams’s approach has been a consistent thrust since the 1970s to develop the theoretical dimensions and understanding of dance and human movement systems from an anthropological perspective. As a student of Oxford social anthropologists Evans Pritchard and Edwin Ardener, Williams makes no concessions to those who are not prepared to engage fully with intellectual debate and rigorous conceptual underpinning in the study of dance. This is particularly evident in her sole-authored book, *Ten Lectures on Theories of the Dance.* Anthropology and Human Movement. The Study of Dances provides a further means of encouraging students to develop such critical modes of inquiry and to establish good scholarly practice where often there have been woolly minded romantic notions, particularly in regard to those of the universality of dance as a means of human communication. This collection of readings in the anthropology of human movement heralds four proposed volumes for use in final year undergraduate and postgraduate courses in the anthropology of human movement, dance anthropology, dance ethnography, anthropology of the dance or dance ethnology. The volume includes ten chapters: four by scholars who, in the 1960s, pioneered an approach to movement which Williams identifies as a sub-field of sociocultural anthropology in the late 1960s (that is, herself, Kealiinohomoku, Kaeppler, and Royce); two from established anthropologists, Schieffelin and Middleton; one by a philosopher well known to those working in dance studies (Best); one from a more recent anthropologist of dance, Franken, and two explanatory chapters provided by the editor herself. The geographical areas include Mexico (Royce), north America (Kealiinohomoku), Tonga (Kaeppler), New Guinea (Schieffelin) and east Africa (Middleton).

Although the eight previously published selections are reasonably accessible, the beauty of this collection is that the material is already organised as a tool for the seminar room. Each chapter is contextualised in terms of the author’s biography and followed by a reprint of the original with occasional small amendments. The content is then summarised with each line of the précis numbered.
so that students may locate key terms and ideas; appended to this is a related set of questions, designed to interrogate the student’s conceptual understanding. The whole book is thus structured in an educationally incremental fashion to facilitate intelligent articulation and reflection both on ethnographically diverse examples of dance practice and the aims and objectives of the anthropology of human movement. The potential for cross reference between articles is paramount, owing to the ethnographic richness and theoretical issues raised by each. Initially, I suspected the précis of each contribution to be redundant; student feedback, however, has revealed that, at undergraduate level especially, this strategy establishes excellent future learning habits. In any case, the book can obviously be used in a less prescribed fashion amongst more informed and experienced students.

Given Williams’s identification of the field, her choice of authors and their work is by no means surprising. She cogently discusses her editorial rationale in an introduction which groups the contributors according to theory, philosophy, fieldwork and approaches to the relation of micro- and macrolevels of society. The focus is strictly anthropological. As she states in relation to the extract from Schieffelin’s *The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers*:

not only are students expected to learn about *dances* through the use of this text, they are also expected to learn something about how anthropologists think.22

In this respect, Williams’s own chapter on comparative method is particularly enlightening, expanding her argument from Royce’s well-known (but now in need of updating) introductory text *The Anthropology of Dance* to emphasise

the need for an explanation of the realities of ‘person’, ‘agency’ and the language-based nature of human actions.23

If this volume can illuminate anthropological theory and method in relation to dance and, indeed, stimulate dance students to engage with the original texts, then it will have served a scholarly purpose. Scarecrow Press is to be congratulated for championing this branch of research, but it is a pity that the publication is currently available only in hardback, with a seemingly limited distribution in the United Kingdom, and at a price beyond the pockets of most students.
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This is equally true of Farnell’s *Human Action Signs in Cultural Context: The Visible and Invisible in Movement and Dance*, a collection which owes its provenance to a panel devoted to the book’s subtitle at the 1988 American Anthropology Association, at which all but two of the papers were presented. The book is divided into two sections, containing seven ethnographic studies in the first part and two commentaries written upon them in the second. In a lucid introduction which succinctly contextualises the development of human movement studies, Farnell envisages the potential combination of two previously separated fields of inquiry: ‘the anthropology of dance and nonverbal communication to a more inclusive anthropology of human movement’. Nonetheless, she dismisses the label of ‘school’ for her selection of contributors, in light of the span of their theoretical perspectives: ethnoscientific structuralism, semiotics, cognitive anthropology, linguistics, sociology, psychology, and folkloristics. What the authors do share are approaches which indicate a ‘theoretical shift from an empiricist and observationist view of human movement to an agent-centered perspective’ and which are contiguous with a broader socio-cultural anthropology in which humans are perceived as meaning-makers. Most importantly, language is not positioned in a dichotomous relationship with the body. The focus upon the visible and the invisible underlines movement as an initial point for investigation, resulting in inquiry which integrates dance and culture.

Perhaps the best known to dance scholars is Adrienne Kaeppler whose exegesis of Hawaiian dance addresses the theme of visibility and invisibility through a consideration of inter-related indigenous aesthetic and moral values. These values of *kaona* and *no’eau*, meaning respectively indirectness and knowledge, are explored through an analysis of the hula. As ever in her writings, Kaeppler’s treatment of movement as a culturally codified system results in a careful exposition which is both ethnographically illuminating and of theoretical consequence in approaching dance as structure through linguistic analogy. Williams similarly operates through linguistic analogies, although her debt to structuralism is the more obvious in her theoretical concept of structural universals. Careful not to treat these as binary oppositions but as a ‘structure of interacting dualisms’, Williams’s comparative study of the treatment of space in the diverse systems of Tai Chi Chuan, ballet and the Latin Mass explores specific difference through a universal frame-
work. As the founder of semasiology, an approach based upon Saussurian linguistics, she demonstrates the use and semantics of space in the three systems, from the premise of an agent-centred spatial orientation. In this, Labanotation proves an integral tool of analysis in an anthropologically framed investigation which demonstrates that movement in and of itself conveys no meaning.

Developing Williams’s theoretical concept of the human action sign is an essay by two of her students, Rajika Puri and Diana Hart-Johnson. As respective exponents of bharata natyam and Graham, the authors examine cultural presuppositions of improvisation and composition in dance. This essay has already been published in 1982, since which time there has been subsequent work on phenomenological perspectives on improvisation in dance and developments both in the practice and scholarship of bharata natyam. Nevertheless, this is an informative essay, again based on a comparative anthropological approach. Some care though needs to be exercised in relating strategies of improvisation to culturally dominant values. Graham’s actual compositional strategies through occasional delegation to her dancers and the public perception of her as single author may be viewed as symptomatic of western individualism, but this is not necessarily indicative of all modes of dance production in north America – just as the expression of the individual being subsumed into that of the greater society in India may be too simplistic. There needs to be greater contextualisation and specificity in interpreting ethnography – a difficult balancing act between recognition of cultural fundamentals and their actual practice. Extensive and detailed ethnographic research in the quest to understand emic views and values is essential, enabling passage from the visible to the invisible. Friedland’s essay on African-American children’s dancing/movement play in Philadelphia indicates an initial level of such investigation. Whereas previous scholars have tended to concentrate on the more visible theatricalised adult performances of black vernacular dancing, Friedland’s work suggests that significant social commentary and status through movement play is more evident within urban black communities in north America amongst children and adolescents.

Three of the remaining ethnographic studies are not concerned with dance per se but investigate sign language: they highlight theoretical issues of vocal language and structured movement, mind and body in European-derived analytical discourse, and the
value systems accorded to movement, which often differ from that of the researcher. Two fascinating papers, if perhaps less immediately applicable to dance studies, are MacDonald’s essay on Wiradjuri culture in Australia which reveals how fighting is seen as less harmful than words thus inverting European assumptions, and Kendon’s chapter on Australian Aboriginal sign language, a favoured communication mode for use in more delicate social situations. Farnell’s own study of Plains Sign Talk in north American Assiniboine culture demonstrates how human action and meaning can become invisible to the dominant culture through a Cartesian and evolutionist legacy which locates movement as precursory to speech. Through an examination of signing in everyday interaction and story telling from an agent-centred perspective, she considers Assiniboine values and uses of the circle and four cardinal directions to reveal how in Williams’s words the spaces in which human acts occur are not simply physical spaces. They are simultaneously physical, conceptual, moral, and ethical spaces.

At one level, this is familiar to anthropologists, but it is the systematic study of movement, undertaken by specialists in dance, which signals a radical departure from existing anthropological work on cultural conceptualisation of space. The use of Labanotation as an ethnographic tool is significant here and illustrates further Farnell’s important essay on ethno-graphics which, because it was published in an anthropological journal, has not come to the attention of most dance scholars. This is a pity since this 1994 article is an extensive and articulate case for the use of Labanotation in the understanding of culturally codified movement systems. It is also one of the most thoughtfully argued critiques of mind/body dualisms and recent attempts to overcome such thinking.

The final two essays in this collection offer more sustained discussions of the theoretical implications of the concepts of action sign systems and language. Urciuoli’s concluding comments on oppositions as processually dynamic and on categorisation as more indicative ‘of the classifiers’ ideology of meaning and person’ (p. 208) than as a means of exploring systems themselves shifts the frame of reference towards an interactive study of signification as cultural processes in which hierarchy is situational. Varela’s ‘Cartesianism revisited’ offers a critique of Merleau-Ponty’s exis-
tentationalist philosophy, Maxine Sheet-Johnstone’s notion of improvisational dancing and its uncritical acceptance by anthropologist Michael Jackson. Varela contends that whereas the idea of the ‘lived body or bodily intentionality is sensitivizing’ (p. 217), it remains conceptually problematic, as it relocates agency from the mind to the body. His solution is to seek direction in Merleau-Ponty’s later work in conjunction with the new realist philosophy of Rom Harré. In brief, Varela advocates a concept of person and agency which is essentially social and which enables analysis of human movement systems to transcend Cartesian dualism. His essay deserves close reading and wider debate by dance scholars, given the current interest in issues of agency and ‘the body’. Overall, this is an important collection which addresses the social in the production of movement systems through situated ethnographic detail and philosophical argument.

With the appearance of these three texts each pitched at a particular level of readership, the intellectual traditions and specific methodology of an anthropological approach to the study of dance as social production are quite clear. Of course, fruitful borrowings do occur between neighbouring disciplines but there should be no confusion that the inclusion of the word ‘culture’ or simply interviewing people constitutes an anthropology of dance. Nor indeed is the discipline concerned exclusively with the study of dance and movement which has its origins or indeed its principal practice outside of Europe and north America. It was perhaps inevitable that the canon for the study of dance in British and north American institutions began with a repertoire deemed to be art and thus worthy of academic investigation. I make no argument that the results of this and continuing research into the theatrical art dance of European and north American derivation should be swept away. It must be recognised, however, that the challenges of alternative modes of moving, evaluating and understanding continue to increase through greater social and geographical mobility and require inquiry which is not vested in ethnocentric ways of looking at the world and its peoples.

Ways of studying and what is selected to be studied benefit from periodic interrogation within a discipline, in order to take stock of achievements, maintain relevance to a changing world, re-invigorate and perhaps re-orientate the directions of study, all within a scholarly framework of rigour and sense of purpose.
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These three recent publications are the tip of an iceberg of a well-established, substantial and expanding literature which, as scholars seek to develop the discipline of dance and movement studies, needs to be brought in from the margins to inform and stimulate future research and debate.

NOTES


4 Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, London: Fontana.


9 For a characterisation of ethnochoreology see Anca Giurănescu and Lisbet Torp, ‘Theory
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14 See, for example, Ann Daly, ‘The Balanchine Woman: Of Hummingbirds and Channel Swimmers’, *The Drama Review*, 31, 1. 1987, pp. 8–21 and Susan L. Foster, ‘The Ballerina’s Phallic Pointe’ in her edited collection, *Corporealities*, pp. 1–24. In general, such readings draw upon semiotics and psychoanalytic theory rendered through feminism.


17 Page 544; for an overview of ethnicity see the reader edited by John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.


19 Pages 16–17.


22 Page xi.

23 Page 159.

24 Page 9.
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25 Page 2.
26 Page 49.
27 Page 52.