Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance

by Deidre Sklar

Published in DCA (Dance Critics Association) News, Summer 1991

(Republished in *Moving history / Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*, edited by Ann Cooper Albright and Ann Dils. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2001)

In the course of preparing the oral defense for my doctoral dissertation--a "movement ethnography" of a religious fiesta performed annually in Las Cruces, New Mexico--I elaborated a list of working premises for an ethnographic approach to movement analysis (Sklar 1991). These premises, I argued, are the essential theoretical parameters for considering movement or dance in cultural context. I offer these working premises here to encourage an examination and widening of the frames through which we look at and conceptualize dance and movement.

1) Movement knowledge is a kind of cultural knowledge.

To speak of movement as a way of knowing implies that the way people move is as much a clue to who they are as the way they speak. The postures and movements of people in an Episcopalian church congregation, for example, are not only different from the postures and movements of people at a Pentecostal meeting, they embody different social and religious realities. Likewise, someone performing the body postures and moves of ballet embodies a piece of "cultural knowledge" that is different from the knowledge embodied by a performer of the hula. If I move in an Episcopalian church the way I would in a Pentecostal, or if I dance in a ballet with the moves and aesthetic appropriate to a hula, I would immediately be recognized as "not belonging."

The way people move is more than biology, more than art, and more than entertainment. All movement must be considered as an embodiment of cultural knowledge, a kinesthetic equivalent, that is not quite equivalent, to using the local language. Movement is an essential aspect of culture that has been undervalued and underexamined, even trivialized. It is time to deal with movement in a culturally sensitive way and to give movement a more central place in the study of culture and culture a more central place in the study of movement.

2) Movement knowledge is conceptual and emotional as well as kinesthetic.

Especially in the codified and stylized movement of dance and ritual, movement embodies ideas about life's "large questions:" Where do I belong in the world? How do human beings behave? Where do I come from and with whom do I go through life? What do I value? Embedded in the kneeling, sitting, and standing scenario of an Episcopalian church ritual is cognizance and acceptance of Christian doctrine. Embedded in the forms and aesthetics of ballet, as Joann Kealiinohomoku points out (1970: 31), are the concepts and values of European chivalry, in which are embedded, in turn, powerful conventions about idealized man-ness and woman-ness. The moves of church and stage literally embody culture-specific ideas about nature, society, and the cosmos.

Further, the postures and movements of church and stage don't only embody people's ideas of order and meaning, they triggers emotions about these as well. For, beneath concepts, movement inevitably involves feeling. Simply to move is to feel something as the body changes. More important, habitual patterns of movement are colored with associated emotions. For a person who has gone to an Episcopalian church every week of her life, the sensory triggers of church performance, including the required uncrossed legs and straight spine, the smell of incense, and the proximity of other bodies, call up emotions. So, too, does the sight, sound, and vicarious kinesthetic sensation of watching a ballet for someone accustomed to ballet. However, although a virtuoso ballet duet might bring tears of joy to an audience weaned on ballet, it would be unlikely to have the same effect on a Hawaiian weaned on hula. The concrete and sensory, in other words bodily, aspects of social life provide the glue that holds world views and cosmologies, values and political convictions, together. From this follow two related premises:

3) Movement knowledge is intertwined with other kinds of cultural knowledge.

4) One has to look beyond movement to get at its meaning.

When a man in church slips into a kneel, he is not just doing something with his body; he is honoring a divine being. As a researcher, I need to know something about that being to understand the man's experience of kneeling. I might be able to identify a quality of humility in

his kneeling posture, but I couldn't know that both the kneeling and the humility have to do with the complex relationships between living human beings and a divinity called Jesus Christ. Unless I asked somebody. Likewise, I couldn't know that the moves of ballet refer to codes of chivalry and medieval court rituals, unless someone told me or unless I opened some books. The concepts embodied in movement are not necessarily evident in the movement itself. To understand movement as cultural behavior, one has to move into words. Nonetheless, and this is my final premise:

5) Movement is always an immediate corporeal experience.

Although one must resort to words to understand the symbolic meaning of movement, talking cannot reveal what is known through the media of movement. The cultural knowledge that is embodied in movement can only be known via movement. This is why I am uncomfortable with the currently popular semiotic metaphor which treats everything as "texts" to be "read." The metaphor is certainly useful, but it overvalues the visual while ignoring the kinesthetic. What I know through kneeling in church is different than what I know through reading the bible even though the two are connected. Putting my body through the motions of kneeling, getting down on my knees, provides me with a unique bodily experience that cannot be duplicated in words. In order to understand the knowledge embodied in movement, one must approach movement as immediate corporeal experience.

In my own research, I tried to understand the movement experience of people whose cultural assumptions were entirely different from my own. How, then, could I come to understand, or even appreciate, their movement experience? My answer was threefold. I observed and analyzed movement in detail and qualitatively, for it is the "how," rather than the "what" of moving that gives clues beyond visual effect toward the sensations and feelings of moving. Second, I immersed myself in the actions and concepts of people's everyday lives for almost two years, talking with people, not just about dance, but about virtually everything. Finally, and most important for approaching the lived-through experience of dancing, I relied heavily on a process that I call "empathic kinesthetic perception."

Empathic kinesthetic perception suggests a combination of mimesis and empathy. Paradoxically, it implies that one has to close one's eyes to look at movement, ignoring its visual effects and concentrating instead on feeling oneself to be in the other's body, moving. Whereas visual

perception implies an "object" to be perceived from a distance with the eyes alone, empathic kinesthetic perception implies a bridging between subjectivities. This kind of "connected knowing" produces a very intimate kind of knowledge, a taste of those ineffable movement experiences that can't be easily put into words. Paradoxically, as feminist psychologist Judith Jordan points out, the kind of temporary joining that occurs in empathy produces not a blurry merger but an articulated perception of differences (Jordan 1984:7).

At the same time that I perceived empathically and kinesthetically, however, I also relied on words. I asked dancers what their experience had been and also how they interpreted their experiences. Talking served as a check against the dangers of projection. My research went back-and-forth between mimesis, observation, and conceptualization, combining the empathic kinesthetic techniques I'd developed with more traditional research methods.

In summary, based on the premise that movement embodies cultural knowledge, I am advocating an approach that considers movement performance not just as visual spectacle but as kinesthetic, conceptual, and emotional experience that depends upon cultural learning. Since we all inevitably embody our own very particular cultural perspectives, we must do more than look at movement when we write about dance.

Note: I wish to acknowledge the help of Marcia Siegel who both introduced me to qualitative movement analysis and suggested that I share this paper with the Dance Critics Association.

References Cited

Jordan, Judith
1984 "Empathy and Self Boundaries," Work in Progress #16, Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies, Wellesley, Massachusetts.

Kealiinohomoku, Joann
1970 "An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance," Impulse 1970: 24-33. San Francisco: Impulse Publications.

Sklar, Deidre

1991 Enacting Religious Belief: A Movement Ethnography of the Annual Fiesta of Tortugas, New Mexico. Ph.D. dissertation: New York University Department of Performance Studies.

Snyder, Allegra Fuller
1974 "The Dance Symbol," CORD Research Annual VI. New Dimensions in Dance Research: Anthropology and Dance - The American Indian: 213-224. Tamara Comstock, ed. New York: CORD.