

## II. On Dance Ethnography

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The strength of ethnography and ethnographic criticism is their focus on detail, their enduring respect for context in the making of any generalization, and their full recognition of persistent ambiguity and multiple possibilities in any situation. (Marcus and Fischer 1986:159)

### Movement as Cultural Knowledge

The term “ethnography” literally means “portrait of a people.” Perhaps “portrait” is too thin and two-dimensional a metaphor to represent the goal of ethnography, for an ethnographer seeks not only to describe but to understand what constitutes a people’s cultural knowledge. Cultural knowledge includes, in anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s words, “a people’s ethos—the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood—and their world view—the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order” (1973:89). The ethnographer wants to know nothing less than how a given group of people find or, more accurately, *make* meaning.

To examine dance from an ethnographic perspective, then, is to focus on dance as a kind of cultural knowledge. Dance ethnography depends upon the postulate that cultural knowledge is embodied in movement, especially the highly stylized and codified movement we call dance. This statement implies that the knowledge involved in dancing is not just somatic, but mental and emotional as well, encompassing cultural history, beliefs, values, and feelings (1). If movement encodes cultural knowledge then, for example, ballet can be examined for the messages it embodies about enduring gender conventions derived from the court society of Renaissance Europe and performance art can be examined as a response to the demands of survival in urban America. A dance ethnologist does not limit research to “exotic” genres (Kealiinohomoku 1970). She can regard any movement from an ethnographic perspective.

Dance writing that is ethnographic calls upon local contextual information about social values, religious beliefs, symbolic codes, and historical constructions to illuminate the significance of a dance event. Ethnographic descriptions are “thick,” to use a word coined by Clifford Geertz. Thick description, he writes, “takes us into the heart of that of which it is an interpretation” (1973:18). Speaking as an anthropologist in the interpretive tradition, Geertz has said that it is impossible to determine the “message” of a wink without referring to the social codes that lie behind the gesture (1973:7). In terms of dance, this means that no movement is “natural;” it all refers to socially negotiated conventions.

From the perspective of dance ethnography, it is not enough,

however, to “explain” a movement in terms of social codes. Using Geertz’s example, it is necessary to know not just that a person is winking, but *how* he is winking. Both the “message” and the experience of a wink are impossible to determine without discussion of the movement itself, for the *way* people move provides a key to the way they think and feel and to what they know. Dance ethnography is unique among other kinds of ethnography because it is necessarily grounded in the body and the body’s experience rather than in texts, artifacts, or abstractions. *Whatever methods one uses for gathering data—including Labanotation, qualitative description, or video taping—and whatever theoretical frameworks for analyzing that data, all paths lead from and back to people moving.*

Theoretical approaches to movement analysis vary. Adrienne Kaeppler depends on structural analysis of micro and macro levels of movement to illuminate the complex correspondences between Tongan dance and its underlying poetic metaphors (1972), Joann Kealiinohomoku elaborates on the functions of dance in culture to compare Hopi and Hawaiian movement aesthetics (1976, see also 1980), Drid Williams advocates the use of a linguistic model for dance ethnography (1976), but all these women describe people moving.

An ethnographic approach shares with other perspectives on dance a phenomenological foundation: we all attend to people moving as our subject. The difference lies in what a dance ethnographer seeks to discover: why do people move the way they do, and how does the way they move relate to how they live, what they believe, and what they value? Dance ethnographers put their movement observation and analysis skills to work towards understanding people. That is why we peer beyond dance toward all aspects of life and perceive dance in the contextual web of social relationships, environment, religion, aesthetics, politics, economics, and history. As George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer point out about the ethnographic enterprise in general, it is a “messy, qualitative business” with its emphasis on holistic, contextualized information (1986:22).

### The Tortugas Fiesta: A Case Study

To illustrate one way of treating dance from an ethnographic perspective, I turn to my own recent work, a “movement ethnography” of the annual religious fiesta of Tortugas, a small village within the city of Las Cruces in southern New Mexico. During the fiesta, people say that they can “feel” the presence of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the “dark Virgin” who miraculously appeared three hundred fifty years ago in Mexico City. It was this feeling and the concomitant range of emotions connected to devotion that I sought to understand. Based on

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the assumption that movement, especially in the context of ritual, embodies cultural knowledge, I used qualitative movement analysis as a methodology for understanding people's religious experience.

My goal in the writing was to evoke the experience of participation in the Tortugas fiesta as I came to understand it. This meant, first of all, that sensory, emotional, and conceptual aspects of my own and others' fiesta experience interpenetrate each other not only in actuality but also in my text. Second, rather than rely on lengthy theoretical analysis, set apart from and commenting on, my "data," I have insisted on integrating description and analysis. The description is itself analytical, or "thick," in Clifford Geertz's sense of the term. Embedded in the descriptions are the long analytical process of determining recurrent movement motifs, the selection of relevant contextual data culled from formal and informal interviews, and the constant back-and-forth of induction and deduction that necessarily occurs in trying to make sense of experience.

I developed a movement observation checklist that included questions for interviewing as well as points for observation (2). I recorded dance rehearsals on video tape and studied them systematically in relation to my checklist. At the same time that I observed movement visually, however, I also "felt with" people moving, kinesthetically. Where possible, I participated in fiesta activities. Empathic kinesthetic perception often provided clues not just to the sensations of particular movements, but to the whole complex of concepts, values, affects, and action that comprise the Tortugas fiesta.

The following series of excerpts demonstrate the process I used for analyzing the *Danzante*, a Matachine dance similar to those performed in Pueblo and Latino villages along the Rio Grande in New Mexico (3). I began by describing the dance in terms of steps and choreography, then turned to qualitative analysis, then followed a clue that came from my own kinesthetic response to the dance and led to questions about the meaning of the dance. This process, condensed here, took me away from the dance itself and to another aspect of the fiesta performance.

Eighteen men, more used to manual labor than dancing, bounce, stamp and kick in unison through a winding and unwinding longways choreography. Most of the men are tall and hefty, and they must move through the repetitive and constraining steps and gestures with speed and in unison. The impression is of barely contained potential energy enclosed and restricted by a tight space. This restriction acts so that when the potential energy becomes kinetic by being pushed through the choreography of the dance, it emerges as if under high pressure. It is intense, driving, and high powered. At the same time, because of the predictable regularity of the music, dance patterns, and two-line formation, it is also mesmerizing.

Like boxers, the men perform a small bounce in the knees with each step. Letting their full weight drop heavily down on each step, they then rebound in a small and loose bounce. There is no airiness to the step, however, no jumps or leaps. The rebound stays close to the ground. The low bouncing, moving toward the final stamp and kick, creates a momentum. When the men stamp, it produces an explosion of

energy. The explosion is reinforced by the sound of their stamping. It is like a grunting shout. The percussive punctuation of their stamping and the knocking of their rattles on the beat increase the feeling of contained yet driving power.

At the same time, however, I sensed a quality of softness and vulnerability in the men's dancing that was difficult to locate in the movement itself and that contradicted the overall assertiveness of their dancing. Taking my own subjective response as a clue, I set out to discover the source of these gentler qualities. From the relaxed and unstudied expression on the men's faces and the unfocused look in their eyes, it was clear that the men's attention was neither on the execution of steps nor on the effect their performance had on spectators. They weren't paying attention to how their movements carved the space around them or to the dance's aesthetic effect on spectators. Their minds were occupied with something internal.

At this point I shifted from attending to the visible and kinesthetic aspects of the dance to answering the question: on what are the men focused? I spoke to the dancers. Fred Salas, the *monarca*, or dance leader, was clear about what the experience of dancing was for him.

When you're dancing, it's the same as dancing with the Virgin. It's something like if I were talking to her, expressing our gratitude for what she had done. . . . In other words, every time we're dancing there, it's like we were saying thank you and talking to her, giving her our thanks. (Salas 1986)

Fred's statement made it clear that the dancers' minds were focused on Our Lady of Guadalupe. Not only was he thinking about her, Fred implied that his dancing worked as a kind of prayer, invoking the Virgin's presence.

Without going beyond observation and talking with the men, it would have been impossible to know that the dancers' attention was on the Virgin, that their attitude was one of gratitude, and that their dancing was a kind of praying. This was still not enough, however, to satisfactorily explain my sense of the dancers' softness and vulnerability. I turned to the altar that is the central focus of the fiesta and is always before the men when they dance. On the altar is a statue of a man kneeling before a portrait of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Everyone in the community knows from childhood the origin story represented here. The "dark Virgin" miraculously appeared on a hilltop to Juan Diego, a Nahuatl-speaking Indian, requesting that a church be built there in her honor. Combining qualitative movement analysis of Juan Diego's kneeling figure with conceptual information about the narrative of Our Lady of Guadalupe revealed the affective dimension of the dancers' inner focus.

Juan Diego's posture is specific and revealing. His back is rounded in an attitude of humility while he

leans eagerly forward. Poised at the uncomfortable midpoint between sitting back onto his right foot and lifting himself up onto his left, his body seems to be filled with the tension of expectancy. Even the toes of his right foot are curled under, ready for standing up. By contrast, his right arm hangs limp at his side and, together with his rounded back and the backward tilt of his head, suggests total submission. The contradictory combination of melting and eagerness gives the overall impression that the man is made helpless by the presence of the Virgin and at the same time inspired to action.

In the quality of their devotion to the Virgin, the dancers emulate Juan Diego. As Fred Salas said,

We're trying to follow in the steps of what Juan Diego did . . . we're trying to portray ourselves as humble. We're trying to be thankful. (Salas 1987)

The statue at the feet of the Virgin, then, is a self-image of the dancers. The humility, devotion, and eagerness to serve that are communicated concretely in the kneeling figure of Juan Diego are also the feelings that motivate the *Danzante* dancers. This is the emotional and conceptual subtext of the dance: surrender to the Virgin with humility and devotion. What I could, at first, only identify vaguely as "softness and vulnerability" was actually the tender and devoted core of feeling the dancers had for the Virgin.

The content and quality of the dancers' inner focus had been impossible to perceive through movement analysis alone. The dance needed to be approached via a combination of conceptual, kinesthetic, and affective pathways. Only by drawing on the understandings I had gained in conversations and by looking beyond the dance itself to the fiesta context, especially the key narrative and image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, was it possible to appreciate the meaning of the *Danzante* performance and the quality of the dancers' experience.

### **Ethnography and Self-Reflexivity**

The contribution an ethnographic perspective brings to dance research in general is at least twofold. It offers the researcher an enlarged view of what is going on in any dance event, for its subject is not just a dance but the whole dance event, not just a dance event but the whole cultural process. By placing dance in the context of other human behavior, the ethnographer goes beyond form to the deep strata of meaning that underlie every dance event and that are frequently taken for granted by performers. Thus, an ethnographic examination expands the significance of what we mean when we say "dance."

Less obviously, an ethnographic perspective implicates the researcher in the dance event. Like the physical scientist who must account for the effects of observation on what has been observed, the ethnographer, as spectator, becomes part of the performance context and must consider her own place within the whole. Because she uses herself, not a calibrated microscope, as the instrument of perception, she is constrained to cast a self-reflexive eye on the assumptions and values—her own cultural tools for understanding—that she brings into

fieldwork.

Joann Kealiinohomoku discovered, for example, that behind the portrait many Euro-American dance writers, such as Walter Sorell, Lincoln Kirstein, and Walter Terry, had been painting of "ethnic dance" was the backdrop of ballet. These writers based their discussions of dances that were not ballet upon their own lifetime familiarity with ballet. Thus they used the term "ethnic" as a euphemism for "pagan" or "savage" to distinguish "their" dance from "ours" (1970:24). Kealiinohomoku's point is that every dance form is an ethnic form because it relies on the cultural traditions within which it developed. My point is that, not only does every dance genre emerge from and depend upon cultural traditions, so does every dance researcher and writer. Cultural background influences what one perceives and how one interprets what she perceives.

The writer's cultural knowledge is as much a part of the relationship between researcher and dancer as the dancer's. By including the researcher as part of the dance event, the ethnographic perspective facilitates self-reflexivity. Why am I here? the dance ethnographer must ask. In what ways is my understanding of the movement I observe the same or different from that of the dancers or other spectators? For whom do I write? Would those I write about recognize their dance in my text? If not, then what message do I give about the relationship between the community I write about and the community I write for? These are all questions about context, and they are essential to an ethnographic examination of dance. In the process of researching the "other," the ethnographer often meets herself. I turn now to a discovery I made during fieldwork about the motives for my own research.

While growing up, Catholicism was total enigma to me. Although my parents considered themselves to be humanists with respect for the differences between people, somewhere in my childhood I assimilated a prejudice against religions that proselytize, especially those whose histories are bloodied with conquest and missionizing ventures. Why then did I choose to do fieldwork in a predominantly Catholic community?

Justifying my choice with practical rationales, it was only after I had arrived in Tortugas that I realized a large part of my choice had been made for personal and not academic reasons: I wanted to confront my own prejudices. If I could deeply "feel with" those people I'd grown up placing at a distance, then I would have taken a step toward narrowing the parochialism that separates us from each other. I would be acting, to use Minnie Bruce Pratt's words, "so as to change the unjust circumstances that keep us from being able to speak to each other" (Bulkin, Pratt, and Smith 1984, quoted in Martin and Mohanty 1986:210).

In attempting to understand the "other," I was forced to reflect on myself. Once I understood how my research was motivated personally as well as academically, I could consciously articulate the strategies I had instinctively developed for observing movement. In particular, these involved "kinesthetic empathy," or "feeling with" as well as visually observing, movement. This technique was a way to study movement, and it was also a way to develop understanding of the experi-

ence and meaning of dancing. For example, it was only by going through the unfamiliar kinesthetic experience of kneeling before the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and unexpectedly feeling myself melt into a shivery connection with her, that I was able to understand the experience of “feeling the Virgin’s presence” that many fiesta participants reported. A talk with a woman I’d become close to affirmed that my feeling was similar to hers, although our ways of thinking about it were different. The experience served as data for me, a clue to the meaning of the phrase, “experiencing the Virgin’s presence.”

Since the ethnographic enterprise is an attempt to understand dance from the perspective of those who do it, it brings

the researcher into engaged relationship with those studied. From within that relationship, it is impossible not to consider the ethical implications of one’s writing. In James Clifford’s words, “as readers and writers of ethnographies, we struggle to confront and take responsibility for our systematic constructions of others and of ourselves through others” (1986:121). We are catapulted beyond our small community of dance scholars. Because the ethnographic perspective brings with it the acknowledgement of the human in the dance, it engages the dance researcher in a humanizing process that dissolves the blinders of parochialism.

## NOTES

1. I was introduced to the concept of dance as a “way of knowing” by Allegra Fuller-Snyder, one of my teachers in dance ethnology at the University of California, Los Angeles. Snyder suggests that if dance is looked at conceptually as part of a larger framework of meanings, that examination will likely reveal that dance embodies assumptions people often take for granted about what is real, true, and good (Snyder 1974).

2. The checklist was based on a variety of sources in addition to my own experience. Most important were a previous

checklist published by Joann Kealiinohomoku (1974), Marcia Siegel’s qualitative movement analysis system as she taught it in the Department of Performance Studies at New York University, and Elsie Dunin’s movement observation guidelines taught in the Dance Department at the University of California, Los Angeles.

3. The excerpts are extracted and condensed from my dissertation, *Enacting Religious Belief: A Movement Ethnography of the Annual Fiesta of Tortugas, New Mexico* (Sklar 1991).

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