

Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance
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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

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.

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