



Sam Gill, *Dancing Culture Religion*

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DANCE HISTORY and theory is the newest field in academia, and its first PhD degree was only granted in 1997. The importance of the establishment of this program was recognized by CORD (The Congress on Research in Dance) and SDHS (The Society of Dance History Scholars) who jointly celebrated the founding of the first PhD program at the University of California Riverside in 1993, during their conference held in November 2013 in Riverside. Prior to the founding of the program, serious dance scholarship was conducted by scholars in other fields like anthropology, ethnomusicology, folklore, history, and theater, in which they were often marginalized. The program at Riverside, and those that followed in other academic institutions, was founded with dance scholarship at the center rather than the margins of other academic fields. This program and others resulted in a remarkable flowering of research and publication across a broad array of dance genres, theoretical perspectives, and scholarly concerns.

As newly-minted scholars, many of us in dance scholarship deeply believe that dance, as a non-logocentric field of research, offers a new lens and perspective for the observation of human behavior on a variety of levels. We hoped that our research would inform that of our colleagues in other fields in the humanities and social sciences, but that has been slow in coming. Jane C. Desmond articulated the importance of dance and movement as a scholarly lens: “So ubiquitous, so

‘naturalized’ as to be nearly unnoticed as a symbolic system, movement is a primary not secondary social ‘text’—complex, polysemous, already always meaningful, yet continuously changing. Its articulation signals group affiliation and group differences, whether consciously performed or not. Movement serves as a marker for the production of gender, racial, ethnic, class, and national identities” (DESMOND 1997, 31). Thus, the appearance of religious studies scholar Sam Gill’s new book, *Dancing Culture Religion*, comes as one of the first serious attempts to incorporate dance research into the study of religion and to incorporate the use of dance and movement research in the study of human behavior.

Although Gill engages with important dance and movement scholars and theorists like Susan Leigh Foster, Sandra Fraleigh, Marta Savigliano, and Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, as well as important European philosophers like Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, his work clearly lies outside of the mainstream of current dance research. This point is crucial and reveals the strengths and weaknesses of his arguments. His statement in the introduction demonstrates this point: “The academic studies of dancing, both theory and ethnographic, are overwhelmingly focused on the high culture art and entertainment form of Western dancing. Dance anthropology is a small field populated largely by scholars who were dancers of ballet or modern who have continued their interest in an academic environment” (3). While this may have been true of a great deal of dance writing prior to the 1970s, when CORD was founded, this has not been the case for over four decades. A survey of CORD publications dating from that period to the present clearly shows that concern with dance ethnology and historical dance genres constituted a major amount of their publications, and this became even clearer when the SDHS, with its emphasis on history, was founded in the 1980s. Dance scholars of today cover a wide range of academic concerns such as ethnography, race and ethnicity, nationalism studies, gender and sexuality, history, literary criticism, politics, and religion, among others.

Clearly, as he states several times, his study comes from his personal engagement in, and passion for, dancing. “A significant motivator for me to think and want to write about dancing and teaching dancing, has been an eagerness to try to comprehend and articulate my fascination with dancing (both doing it and observing others doing it, and even thinking about both), a fascination I share with many” (178). Most dance scholars, including myself, would articulate a similar perspective.

One of the strengths of Gill’s study is that he has spent many years observing and participating in dancing across a broad range of genres: Javanese and Indian classical dances, Native American ceremonial forms, dancing and drumming in Mali and Ghana, and Latin American social dances like bolero and salsa. He uses his extensive observation and participation to make many of his points.

A weakness comes from his unfamiliarity with the breadth of current, and even past, dance scholarship. For example, he focuses his entire first chapter on movement and dance and correctly concludes that while “all dancing is movement, not all movement is dancing” (54); ROYCE, in her seminal study (1977), came to the same conclusion. Individuals dance—which, as he properly observes, is frequently formed from repetitive movement—but he does not include the important caveat

that when an individual dances it is with the *intention* of dancing and not participating in some other kind of repetitive movement. For example, in an Islamic Middle Eastern context in which prayer includes patterned, repetitive movement, and in which dance, especially in public contexts, is viewed in a negative fashion, the intention to dance, rather than performing some other activity, is crucial to the definition of dance. Royce explores the multiple ways in which dance differs from other forms of repetitive movement. During the 1960s and 1970s, defining dance and genres of dance such as “social,” “folk,” and “classical” was a central concern for many individuals engaged in dance studies, particularly in societies in which a word for “dance” did not exist. Most dance scholars have long since moved on from this historical concern of defining our field.

Nevertheless, reading Gill’s work can prove challenging for the dance scholar. His engagement in the ongoing discourse surrounding movement and dance is lively and provocative and may well invite responses from dance specialists.

Gill’s book is divided into the following chapters: “Moving,” “Gesturing,” “Self-Othering,” “Playing,” “Seducing,” and “Dancing.” In his discussion of movement, which begins literally in the womb, Gill enters into an interesting and fresh discussion of the ways in which movement, such as ball-throwing practices and dancing, informs cultural notions of gender and sexuality. The notion of dance as a feminine practice, avoided by men because of perceptions of homosexual identities, constitutes an important, ongoing discourse in dance studies that, as the elephant in the room, has only been recently addressed (FISHER and SHAY 2008).

In his discussion of gesturing, Gill claims that it is basic to an understanding of dancing:

Gesture is like this. One would think that repetition to the extent of the movement becoming automatic, rule-bound, conventional, would simply wring from it all possible creativity. This is an essential perspective we need in order to appreciate dancing which is necessarily highly repetitive, yet always creative and new ... we gain knowledge through acquired gestural routines, through our dancing; the gestural sequences of dancing are not limited to just expressing ourselves by means of these gestures.... They are also always heuristic or interrogative and always shape the dances (64–65).

He further refines his meaning of gesture in relation to dance: “While gesture may enact these qualities of movement, I believe it is not only possible, but even beneficial to consider gesture understood as culturally situated patterned movement. It is in the consideration of gesturing that we begin to see how movement takes on specific cultural function” (66). Ultimately, Gill claims that gesturing is crucial to the study of human movement and dance and he observes, “I believe movement, gesture, dancing transform the very tissue, muscles, and neurons that comprise our identities, basis for meaning, our vitality or life-force” (97–98). Thus, for Gill, gesturing underpins the very notion that dancing and other movement practices proceed from culturally-learned gestural practices.

Gill turns to philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “flesh ontology” to open his discussion of what Gill calls self-othering, a concept that he uses to theorize his discussion of dancing. He characterizes self-othering in dancing:

The dancer—the named human being with distinctive personal history and physical appearance—imagines or knows a dance. The imagined or known dance is of the interior of the dancer as invisibles, ideas or emotions. The danced body—that is, an often costumed moving sentient form—physically manifests the ideas as the dance, the actual or the visible. The dancing is the virtual self-moving, self-othering structurality that emerges in the gap that both separates and unites the dancer and dance (114).

I cannot foresee to what degree this concept will engage dance scholars, but it calls for conversation.

While his observations about movement have been echoed in other studies, his engagement with gesturing and play, to which he devotes lengthy chapters, engage squarely with current concerns in dance scholarship and he adds important insights to the discourse. He suggests that “Play is then already there as a vitalizing perpetually moving interactivity that gives energy and potential to all things” (151). To illustrate his discussion of play, he uses examples from Native American ceremonial practices that include the role of masks and masking (chapter 4). He concludes that Native American religious practices are “playful” and that “Dancing is a near synonymy with religion for Native Americans” (165). Thus, gesturing and play may well provide fruitful directions for dance scholars.

I found Gill’s discussion of seduction highly thought provoking, particularly since he clearly divides seduction from sexual activity that many dance scholars address. Using the Costa Rican bolero, a slow, romantic dance as one example he states, “Bolero is seduction.... Seduction even in this barest introduction refers to engendering a desire that is never fulfilled. Seduction is only seduction so long as it continues to seduce” (173). In this chapter (chapter 5), Gill challenges dance scholars:

While, as Susan Foster and others show, dances can be ‘read,’ given the difference I am maintaining between dances and dancing, I suggest that in light of understanding dancing as seduction, as seduction being dancing’s distinction and its function as a source of power, we gain much more appreciation for what distinguishes dancing by looking rather at the how (and that) dancing prevents and confounds being read, at least in some final sense of being clear, being finished, being captured, in producing some explicit meaning, in laying it bare (181).

He does not buy Martha Graham’s dictum that “movement never lies,” because he notes that dance, “could hardly be an art form without artifice” (177). He claims that dance is seduction: “Dancing seduces by offering the promise of meaning—how often do we hear the meaningless statement made of a dance ‘oh it was so meaningful’—yet, it never delivers any explicit statement of meaning. Rather it absorbs meanings offered it and endlessly seduces observers and dancers to continue observing and dancing and seeking meanings that are never adequately fulfilling” (181). He concludes with a statement that might drive some feminist scholars wild in his section entitled “Seduction is Feminine,” claiming that “Dancing is finally feminine” (188). In his “reading” of dancing, throughout his study he valorizes the feminine over the masculine to be sure, but nevertheless his study throws down the gauntlet to many dance scholars.

One cannot deny the fervor and passion with which Gill engages in dance: “Dancing and studying dancing have revealed to me hints about how to comprehend the amazing profundity and complexity of dancing. My feelings about dancing are those of a new religious convert. I see dancing as at the core of what constitutes us as human beings. I believe dancing to be the realization of human potential. I believe that dancing has the potential to offer new paradigms for the study of culture and religion” (193). In his final chapter, “Dancing,” Gill demonstrates the multiple ways in which dance engages with religion, his field of study, and how other scholars might profit from studying dance and dancing. The importance of this book for dance scholars is that it engages with dance from outside the field, and Gill amply demonstrates this with his engagement with his own field of religion and the multiple ways in which dance intersects with religious practices, even embodying them. He states, “Since dancing is often intimately connected with religion, even with traditions that forbid it, there is much promise for religion and dance studies” (55). His study demonstrates the multiple ways in which scholars outside of the field can profit by the use of the works of dance scholars. Food for thought.

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