

# Reprise: On Dance Ethnography

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In 1991, when my essay, "On Dance Ethnography," appeared in this journal, there was a small body of American research in dance that examined movement in cultural context (1). Since then, a radical shift has occurred in American dance scholarship. Cultural critique, with its attention to ethnicity, race, class, and gender, has permeated the academy, and dance historians have turned to sociocultural issues, blurring the boundaries between the sub-fields of dance. We now have a range of theories, methods, and case studies that address the cultural situatedness of dance and movement, a range reflected in the names applied to the subject: "dance ethnology," "cultural studies in dance," "ethnochoreology," "performance studies," "anthropology of dance," and "anthropology of human movement." While long-established paradigms continue to inspire work from structural, symbolic, and functional perspectives, two new trajectories have risen in ethnographic dance studies in this decade.

One trajectory is sociopolitical; it draws on the rapidly developing ideas and language of cultural studies. Here we talk about dance in terms of the "socially constructed nature of human movement" (Reed 1998, 503) and of "bodily theories—armatures of relations through which bodies perform individual, gendered, ethnic, or community identities" (Foster 1995, 8). We discuss globalization, transmigration, de- and re-contextualization, invented communities, kinesthetic homes, all of which address the way dance works and is worked upon in the changing contexts of world politics. We specify whether a dance affirms, resists, re-creates, challenges, undermines, or re-enforces the status quo, and sometimes whether it does several of these at once, for we agree that dance as social action can be ambiguous (Desmond 1994) (2).

The second trajectory is kinesthetic. Here, we seek deeper understanding of movement itself as a way of knowing, a medium that carries meaning in an immediately felt, somatic mode. This trajectory runs parallel to the ideas and language of the anthropology of the senses (3). We talk of "movement as originative" (Ness 1992, 3), of "the sensible" in relation to "the intelligible" (Bull 1997, 269, after Stoller 1989), and of "somatic ways of knowing" (Sklar 1994, after Csordas 1993). We discuss embodied knowledge, proprioception, somatesthesia, kinesthetic ambiance, kinesthetic empathy, and synaesthesia, all of which address the somatic dimensions of movement knowledge. We in dance have had to establish our own theoretical ground here, for anthropology, following the convention of five senses, has largely ignored kinesthesia (4). Unlike the sociopolitical trajectory, which drew theory from a large literature external to dance, the kinesthetic trajectory grew internally, out of dance methodology. Laban analysis opened the way for exploring the sociocultural significance of qualitative, felt bodily knowledge (5). It is this trajectory, especially the problem of translating somatic knowledge into words, that I will explore here (6).

Two studies of the early 1990s, Cynthia Novack's *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (1990) and Sally Ness's *Body, Movement and Culture: Kinesthetic and Visual Symbolism in a Philippine Community* (1992), brought to public attention how ethnographic studies might incorporate felt kinetic knowledge to address the cultural meanings inherent in movement. Their approaches differ in empha-

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sis. Ness's primary trope is spatial; she analyzes the Philippine *sinulog* in relation to place, Cebu City, and "its enduring patterns of learned collective experience" (1992, 231). In particular, Ness writes that "learning to identify and execute the movement of everyday practice attuned me to distinctive values implicit in the city's activity profile" (1992, 231). Novack's primary trope is temporal. She reveals contact improvisation in and as a socio-historical moment that emerged and faded in late-1960s America. A "kinesthetic ambiance" exists in movement experience, Novack writes, "which helps to create and which calls up the ethos and *mise-en-scène* of a particular time" (138). Contact improvisation was a way of moving that embodied the "touchy-feely, group encounter"(160) ambiance of the era.

Though their approaches differ, both ethnographers rely on personal movement experiences, not so much to facilitate description of particular steps or choreographies, as to understand the way sensation itself is organized, in the dancing certainly, and also, in Ness's words, as "latent symbolism" of social action (see especially 1992, 119, 129). Both women treat movement as emergent, felt experience that works conceptually and metaphorically in relation to larger patterns of social meaning. Analysis of movement experience becomes a way to reach, somatically and symbolically, those larger tacit patterns. Novack, for example, writes, "As I started to experience an internalized sensation of moving, my image of what my movement looked like for an observer dropped away, and I became immersed in the feeling of tiny changes of weight and the smallest movement of my joints"(152). She is not drawing attention to herself, but to the kind of detailed sensations that carry meaning. While it has been traditional practice to erase the researcher's body from the ethnographic text, "subjective" bodily engagement is tacit in the process of trying to make sense of another's somatic knowledge. There is no other way to approach the felt dimensions of movement experience than through the researcher's own body.

One's body can be transformed by the experience. In my 1991 article (Sklar 1991), I asked what the *danzantes* in the Tortugas fiesta honoring the Virgin of Guadalupe meant when they said they could *feel* the virgin's presence. A back and forth movement between the dancers' accounts of their experience and qualitative analysis of the visible features of the dance provided clues to the dancers' relationship with the virgin (7). Only years after leaving Tortugas did I discover the extent to which I had incorporated that relationship.

I left in 1988, returning many times to help out with the fiesta. In 1995, it seemed time for closure, and I thought this visit would be my last. I arrived at the community house, the *casa del pueblo*, where I knew the women would be preparing for the first night's ceremonies. A young woman was balanced on a ten-foot ladder, stretching to dust the *vigas*, the long logs that support the ceiling. Another young woman held the ladder in place. They were joking and working, in the way I remembered, not in the hurried or efficient way any of us might work at home but with a sense of no-time, as if the moments of dusting hung suspended in the fiesta's arms. The woman came down off the ladder, and then the two moved it, bulky and unyielding, a few inches. The woman went up the ladder again. She readjusted the rag over the broom and poked it into the next section of crack between the *vigas*. I saw the ladder teeter and, without thinking, reached out to steady it. In that gesture, I slipped once again into the familiar rhythms of fiesta work. My body adjusted. In the time it took for that single gesture, I stepped from "outside" to "inside."

The actions of the fiesta—dusting the *vigas*, chopping onions, dancing, walking in the procession—created not just the synchronized rhythms of people habituated to working together, but a transformation of attention. That attention was both diffuse and focused. In it, time was roomy so that impressions and ideas slowed and sharpened. The space of awareness expanded, becoming a cave of generosity. In it, thoughts were held by a shared pulse, sending memories jumping the synapses between us. Imperceptibly, I

had learned to recognize and step into this quality of time. "Tell them this is how we clean," the mother of one of the two young women once instructed me, as a joke. But the joke named a truth: the fiesta's transformative capacity lay in the details of work. If I could indeed tell how they cleaned, I would be showing how the fiesta achieved its effect. Spiritual knowledge, the feeling of the virgin's presence, came as a *doing*, a transformation enacted upon oneself through the details of work.

This idea hinges on a slippery understanding. While the results of movement can be seen and heard, they are primarily received by the person doing the moving as felt experience, as kinesthesia. Movement is unique among media of expression. In other media, the mode of production is different from the mode of reception. We produce sound kinesthetically, via muscular movement, but we hear it aurally; we paint kinesthetically but review it visually. In movement, one does and feels oneself doing at the same time. This doubled act of moving and feeling oneself moving can have uncanny effects. Ness, for example, trying to explain to non-dancers what performing choreographed movement can mean, describes the experience of "becoming" her arm. She reports on repeating an arm movement until she lost awareness of the "I" of everyday life and became "an exotic mind composed by a limb's neuromusculature intelligence, a mind exploring its environment through something other than its eyes and ears" (1992, 5). Awareness of experiencing what one is expressing is the kind of somatic transformation emphasized by disciplines like yoga or breathing meditation. It is an ultimate intimacy, a doing while being with oneself.

This way of apprehending might be called "dropping down into the body," or redirecting a phrase from anthropologist Thomas Csordas, "a somatic mode of attention" (1993). I use these phrases to refer to a research method; one attends to doings with proprioceptive awareness (8). Proprioception: the reception of stimuli produced within one's own body, especially as movement. To attend in a somatic mode is to apprehend, as felt experience, the kinetic dynamics inherent in movements, images, and sounds. Dancers are familiar with, though not necessarily conscious of, the process. In the world of studios and rehearsal halls, we learn to translate visual and verbal information into movement sensation. A teacher demonstrates a position; we see it and "try it on" in kinesthetic imagination. We learn to "hear" the kinetic dynamics referenced in words, like my mime teacher's metaphor, "the antennae of a snail." The phrase pinpointed the subtle dynamics of a snail's antenna touching an object, vibrating, and retracting in a slow and sustained recoil. We learn to achieve such dynamics in movement. Movement training accustoms us to distinguishing nuances between dynamics, feeling them as kinetic sensation, seeing them in others' moves, and recognizing their reverberations in words. Our bodies become laboratories for experimentation with kinetic details. While dancers may normally perform these cross-modal extrapolations without conscious attention, ethnographic researchers reach for it, aiming, as Ness writes, for the "enduring patterns of learned collective experience" (1992, 231).

In the doubled awareness that was called, in Tortugas, "the virgin's presence," meaning was worked into the rhythms, postures, sounds, and dynamics of doings. In the northern Rio Grande Pueblos of New Mexico, people use the word "doings" for the preparatory and cloistered (or kiva-ed) sacred work done in the days before a public dance. I use the word to mean bodily actions, but I also intend the undertones of transformation. While the experience alternately called presence, or unity, or numinosity may be the same across spiritual traditions, "ways of doing" are different. Presence comes in a multitude of flavors. "The virgin," is different than "Buddha" or "God the Father." Kneeling in prayer before the virgin is a different bodily experience than sitting cross-legged in meditation. Both the natures of the divinities and the ritual practices performed in their names are elaborated in distinct communities to do different work upon soma.

Sacred names have no material referents, but they do have content. That content is the details of doings: the actions, words, postures, rhythms, stories, objects, dynamics,

melodies, images, liturgies, instructions, news, sicknesses, changes, and memories that make up “the virgin” or “Buddha” as embodied knowledge. In Tortugas, presence and doings worked in contradistinction and also in tandem. The quality of time I described in the casa del pueblo was a manifestation of the virgin’s presence, and it transformed the details of doings. In turn, the details of work done in her honor called up the virgin’s presence. While presence was invoked as otherness, it was also evoked as subjective somatic experience. Dusting and dancing, curving over cutting boards and gossiping, the details of action pulled me, too, into the time/space of the virgin’s presence.

There remained, however, the problem of translation. It is not surprising that the 1990s have yielded ethnographic writings in experimental rhetorical modes, for the problem of language is inherent to the kinesthetic trajectory. Perhaps it was dance ethnologist Mary Coros who, in 1982, first struggled with “languaging” the uncanny doubling of her dance experience. She attempted to capture its incipient emergence:

On the Way to the Dance Floor  
I am not as I have just been  
and  
I am not as I am about to be  
My body-being is on its was...to it knows not what ...  
(Coros 1982, 18, cited in Sparshott 1988, 345)

Coros distinguished four kinds of understanding: the immediate, felt “body-being speaking” one experiences while dancing; that same body-being apprehending its own feelings and thinking; a transitional mode of trying to articulate the first two levels; and a conceptualizing, theorizing mode (Coros 1982, 3, in Sparshott 1988, 383).

What Coros calls “body-being speaking,” Susan Foster, a dance historian addressing the same problem, calls “bodily writing,” suggesting that the body is capable of generating not just practices, but also ideas. Bodily writing, Foster writes, has “no facile verbal equivalence” (1995, 9). Rather, verbal discourse “must enter into dialogue with ...bodily discourse” in an “ambulant form of scholarship” (1995, 9; 16). Foster’s rhetorical strategy is to alternate reports from her body, given in italics—“*Sitting in this chair, squirming away from the glitches...*”(3)—with theoretical writing, given in plain text.

Marta Savigliano italicizes, too, in invented tango scenarios that embody the political complexities and personal ambivalences with which she, an Argentinian living abroad, grapples. Stage directions, in italics, pit the analytical “choreocritic” against groups of tango dancers, historical figures, an historian, and a chorus. The unitalicized text shouts autobiographical, historical, Marxist, feminist, and poetic “bursts, splashes, and puddles”(1995, 6) as a kind of exorcism to “decolonize” the author. Where Savigliano calls on somatic memory to serve adamantly political “motives”(221), Julie Taylor, writing as an American expatriate in Buenos Aires, calls on somatic memory to dig up subterranean experiential meanings of the Buenos Aires tango in the terrible reality of post-purge Argentina. Her pages, a small photo in the bottom corner of each, work like a flip book to hint at emotional and relational subtexts; inserted tango lyrics link others’ voices with her own; and her own voice, often rhythmically rich, evokes both personal and collective memory. Savigliano would agree, however, with Taylor: “To dance the tango you remember with your body” (1998, 80) (9).

While she was putting together the panel on “Alternate Sensibilities” for the 1996 American Anthropological meetings, the anthropologist Katherine Young queried me: “Does writing extend the experience of fieldwork, through the body, onto the page, or do we shape the contours of writing to those of experience, as an aesthetic gesture to create sensuous access to experience through its representation?” “Both,” I wrote back. “But rather than being an ‘aesthetic gesture,’ writing is an aesthetic *embrace* that invites sensuous opening, almost as if words need to be irresistible, to partner bodily experience at all its levels of intensity, intimacy, and multiplicity.” In spite of the cliché that

what is danced cannot be spoken, the transformative effects of movement are not necessarily ineffable. Words remain permeable to their somatic reverberations. It is possible to see, for example, “She rushed to the grocery store” as a visual image; however, it is also possible to feel the kinetic sensation that informs the word “rushing.” One can use words to evoke their somatic references. Considered this way, there is no conflict between somatic and verbal experience because they are mutually generative, part of the same epistemological process. The process constitutes meaning-making, and body-making. The body is itself a process, one that organizes as it apprehends, and becomes what it organizes.

Dipping into memory from a space of somatic attention, one can allow the permutations of “thoughtforms,” including kinetic sensations, to *take* form as words (or pictures, or choreography). Here, the verbal process imitates the doubling Ness described for kinesthesia. Just as moving while feeling oneself move creates the uncanny experience of doing while being with oneself, so, too, does word-ing that reverberates with somatic memory create a sense of uncanny intimacy, as if the world is made numinous. One *feels* the meaning of words, as movement and rhythm, texture, shape, and vitality. The object is made subject. And words become *the* word, creating what they name. The word made flesh. Words as sacred. Revising one’s relationship with language.

Rhythm, in words as in dancing, engages kinetic sensibilities. I discovered this by accident. After writing words about Tortugas that were merely “mouse tracks,” empty traces of the living organism that had once passed by, I was writing one morning in a jazz club. I stopped to listen to the piped-in jazz. The vibrations of the bass moved through the floor and up the barstool, engaging my foot, organizing my heartbeat into a sympathetic pulse, and conniving my body into the production of words in rhythmic poetic form. The rhythmic writing shifted awareness away from the everyday stream of verbal thoughts, bringing attention to the stream of sensation in all sensory modes, now flowing in words. Eventually I was able to induce this somatically synchronized state simply by giving full attention to the in and out of breathing. Invariably, my consciousness shifted, slowing down, until thinking unfolded not as a quick firing of words but as a watery dance of sensory particulars.

Remembering the *Alabanza Guadalupana*, the virgin’s “birthday song,” sung during the Tortugas fiesta’s final procession, I wrote:

The women walk steadily, slowly,  
and create the center.  
Their voices  
carry the crowd,  
the news,  
the day,  
working them together  
with their footfalls  
into the clay dirt of the street,  
kneading them  
into the virgin’s presence.  
    *La Gua-da-lu-pa-na,*  
    our mother who art in *heaven...*  
She fills the spaces between thought,  
sifting memories like flour.

Hold.  
The mothers hold the line,  
walking in step with the song,  
vacuuming the rug

and making tortillas  
that are round.  
It is the test.  
Are you holding?  
Marcía, the granddaughter,  
died her hair purple.  
Someone said  
she had joined a satanic cult.  
I don't believe it,  
she has only dyed her hair purple (10)

In my slowed and lucid, rhythmically organized condition, somatic memory expanded. The resultant associative thinking was the voice of my dancing body. Writing as meta-dancing.

“Writing down the bones,” to borrow a phrase from poet Natalie Goldberg (1986), is certainly not the only way to report on remembered somatic understandings, yet it is a logical development of the kinesthetic trajectory. If, as I have suggested here, the way to approach the felt dimensions of movement experience is through the researcher's own body, then bodily memory, with all its qualitative and associative nuances, is one of the dance ethnographer's primary resources. This understanding has evolved in the 1990s from the kinesthetic trajectory. We find ourselves now querying our own bodies both for information and for ways to “language,” in Mary Coros's words, “body-being speaking.” My sense is that in the next decade, when dance ethnographers, both insiders and outsiders to the communities in which they study, come together to share findings, the conversation will be not only of form and context, but also of, and as, body-beings speaking.

*Acknowledgments:* I am grateful to Renee Rothman whose qualifying exams in anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, both affirmed my understanding of the kinesthetic trajectory and helped me think more deeply about it. Special thanks to Julie Malnig for her thoughtful and perceptive editing suggestions.

### Notes

1. For an overview of U.S. ethnographic research in dance prior to 1990, as well as in the 90s, see Frosch (1998). Reed (1998) and Farnell (1999) also offer overviews for the 1990s.
2. See Reed (1998) and Desmond (1994) for bibliographies. Jane Cowan's *Dance and the Body Politic in Northern Greece* (1992) was generative in this area.
3. See especially Stoller (1989), Jackson (1989), Howes (1991), and Csordas (1990; 1993).
4. See, for example, Howes and Classen (1991), whose provocative guidelines for addressing cultural differences in terms of “sensory profiles” fail to include kinesthesia.
5. “Feeling,” here, does not refer to emotions like happiness, anger, or sadness, but to kinetic effects, the way energy is experienced, in Laban terms, through the combined factors of time, weight, effort, flow. Child psychologist Daniel Stern calls the qualities of energy inherent in all actions, “vitality effects,” and their unfolding over time, the “activation contours” of experience (1985, 55-58). Suzanne Langer calls them the “play of powers made visible” (1983: 35). While these vitality effects are visible, they occur primarily as felt, bodily understandings. See Sklar (forthcoming, chapter 9) for a fuller discussion of these ideas.
6. Arguably, there is at least a third trajectory, developing out of structural approaches and currently focused in the “anthropology

of human movement.” Brenda Farnell describes this approach as attending to “dynamically embodied action in semantically rich spaces” (1999, 342). She provides a thorough historical overview and review of current work in this area. Farnell emphasizes movement as an expression of human agency, and, indeed, the theme of agency weaves through all the trajectories in the 1990s.

7. Sklar (1999) gives a more extensive study of the Tortugas *danza*.

8. Csordas intended the phrase differently. Positioning himself at the dialectical juncture between Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s subjective perception and Pierre Bourdieu’s collective practice, Csordas explores collective ideas about embodiment. For him, “somatic modes of attention” refers to the “culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one’s body in surroundings that include the

embodied presence of others” (Csordas 1993, 138). Among appropriate subjects of research, Csordas lists erotic attraction, the concept of fatness, attention to body position and movement, meditation, pregnancy, and hypochondria (139).

9. Other 1990s rhetorical experiments on kinesthetic knowing include Barbara Browning’s (1995) *mélange* of movement analysis and personal narrative on Afro-Brazilian samba, Michelle Kisliuk’s effort, in reporting on BaAka “pygmy” song and dance, to “make the reader aware of the process of turning experience into text” (1998:vii), and Sally Ann Ness’s self-conscious attempt to render field notes as “memory work” (1996).

10. This excerpt is taken from a longer poem published in the journal *Body/Language* (Sklar 1998).

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