

## Review Essay

*Ten Lectures on Theories of the Dance*. DRID WILLIAMS. 1991. Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, New Jersey. xviii + 423 pp. including bibliography (pp. 387-408), appendices, glossary, subject and author indexes (pp. 287-423). Hardback edition only (U.S.) \$42.50. ISBN 0-8108-2219-9. REVIEWER: Marjorie Franken.

### Preliminaries

In many ways, reviewing this book is to review a long and varied career. Williams formally studied five styles of dancing in depth, she did many courses in undergraduate philosophy at University of Wisconsin, Madison, then read graduate philosophy of science at the same time she studied social anthropology in England. After 30 years as a professional dancer, she became a social anthropologist, studying in Oxford, where she finished a Diploma, a B.Litt. (equivalent to a Master's degree) and a Doctoral degree in 1976. Later, she completed a Master's degree in Library and Information Sciences (1985) at Indiana University.

It could thus be said that she participated in the growth of American modern dance, the linguistic reorientation of 20<sup>th</sup> century sociocultural anthropology and the computerization of the Laban script for movement-writing. She has pioneered, along with Adrienne Kaeppler, Joann Keali'inohomoku, Anya Royce and Judith Hanna in the establishment of an anthropology of the dance (although she would add that she sees the dance as a sub-field of the anthropology of human movement). The benefit of all that experience and study is now available in *Ten Lectures on Theories of the Dance*, a masterful synthesis and critique of the present state of dance scholarship and its anthropological connections.

Dancers who have qualifications in anthropology and the anthropologists who study dancing have a lot in common. Most of them are females and both groups are tiny and isolated, even within the larger community of the arts or anthropology. The work of both dancers and the anthropologists who study dances, whether at home or in other cultures, isn't taken seriously. It is often considered trivial or frivolous and worst of all (by 20<sup>th</sup> century American standards), unscientific and non-profit-making.

In spite of these common positions of low status and marginalization, and their mutual recognition of this common plight, dancers and anthropologists who study dances seldom seem to connect in any productive way. Recent published attempts, for example, Cowan (1990), Ness (1992) and Novack (1990) have all been faulted for letting one side or the other of the partnership down (see Foster (1992), Franken (1994 and 1996) and Feld (1992)).

A sound theoretical basis from which to build hypotheses and methodologies and a framework within which to advance an enduring set of theoretical innovations has been (and still is) sorely needed. Williams's book provides that foundation plus an evaluation of relevant works and past attempts at theory-building. The author clearly indicates a path leading out of the bewildering maze of false starts, current and antediluvian. Unfortunately, because Williams takes a long view (from early 19<sup>th</sup> c. philosophers to contemporary research) and advocates a complete re-thinking of the collaboration of human movement studies within anthropology, the book will probably be avoided by many of those to whom it is addressed.

### The Book

*Ten Lectures* is long and detailed. The book is, after all, a written version of the lectures for a graduate course in anthropology of the dance and human movement studies first given at New York University between 1978 and 1984. It always demands close attention (and sometimes hard thinking), and it assumes as well a very extensive general university-level education. As if that weren't enough, it also flies in the face of a school of thought that has recently arisen among dance scholars. That is, that the goal of anthropological studies of dances is to recreate the dancers' experience (see Foster 1992 and Sklar 1991).

Williams explicitly says (and carefully) explains "... this kind of argument is based, in my view, on a serious misunderstanding: one is not trying to reproduce the experience of dancing in an anthropological examination of it" (p. xi). Those scholars who misunderstand the nature of anthropological explanations and theory who pursue this line will probably not bother to read the book, imagining they have already found "the answer". As her Doctoral thesis advisor, Edwin Ardener, told her, she may well only get her scholarly due posthumously.

These facets of the book, ranging as they do from personal experience (the "personal anthropology paper" in Appendix I (pp. 287-321), to the philosophy of academic scholarship in general, make the book challenging to review as well as to read. There are many parts--each deserving comment, comparison and evaluation. My task here, however, is to review a book, not conduct a graduate seminar! Having described the necessary limitations of this review, I will proceed with what must be an inadequate description of a ground-breaking, even paradigm-reconstructing work.

The main body of *Ten Lectures* (pp. 1-286) is exactly that: lectures developed for graduate courses taught over several years in at least 4 universities, N.Y.U., Indiana, University of Sydney (Australia) and Moi University (Kenya). The

author's intent was to provide a teaching tool that was accessible to the non-specialist, although one with a very solid university background--and a most valuable teaching and reference tool it is, complete with Glossary pp. 379-386), an encyclopedic Bibliography (pp. 387-407), a Subject Index (pp. 409-418) and an Author Index (pp. 419-423). These are all welcome references in a confusing field. As a teaching text, *Ten Lectures* is several cuts above Royce's (1977) and Hanna's (1976) texts, which are intended for undergraduates, and are therefore less theoretical and sophisticated in argument. They aren't as wide-ranging in academic literature of all kinds either.

In one sense, although each chapter is a self-contained lecture and deals with a particular type of theoretical approach to dances, the whole book can be seen as one giant lecture on the state of dance scholarship. Williams compares the growth of this (potential) sub-discipline to the development of anthropology itself. Similar stages of theoretical preoccupations occurred, beginning with early 'armchair' theorists such as Lady Frazer (Lilly Grove, Sir James's wife) who wrote in 1895, passing through an "origins" phase (see, for example, p. 45 on Segy) and on to a horde of "butterfly collecting" works (still the biggest part of dance literature today). Finally, the reader arrives at a critical point where review, evaluation and real theory building began with the early 20<sup>th</sup> c. functionalists in mainstream anthropology, however, this point is still to be reached for anthropological studies of the dance.

Williams compares her task in *Ten Lectures* to Evans-Pritchard's task in *Theories of Primitive Religion* (1965):

The mode of classification that I use in these lectures follows very roughly a style of classification that ... [he] used.... And I must say that my treatment of these authors on the dance is, like Evans-Pritchard's treatment of authors on the subject of primitive religions, " ... severe and negative".... Following him, I believe readers will not regard my criticism as too severe when they see how inadequate, ludicrous and just plain silly is much of what has been written about the dance, yet all of it is still trotted out in colleges and universities ... (pp. 12-13).

In particular Williams points out how the lack of theoretical foundations and critical scholarly exchange has kept studies of dances in a state of "re-inventing the wheel"--a state that anthropology itself escaped in the early 1900s when a critical mass of trained anthropologists appeared. She regrets that

[F]or at least three decades in the United States and England students have been allowed to bring together a large number of miscellaneous examples of dancing in order that they might illustrate some general idea about the dance that they have picked up or to put forward some thesis about the *importance* of the activity. They seem to have been

encouraged to believe that their efforts--innocent of nearly any of the canons of western academic discipline--are valuable because the area of interest is so new.

How new is new? And how much unschooled, untutored writing about the dance must we endure before it is realized that merely having a data-base is not enough.... That is why I choose to emphasize, not dances themselves but *theories of and explanations of the dance* (pp. 11-12).

The author organized *Ten Lectures* according to the explicit or implicit explanations frequently offered to answer the commonly heard question "Why do people dance?" The type of explanation offered in answer to the question range from the emotional, psychologistic and biological to the intellectualist and literary, through religious and quasi-religious. Last (but not least) we arrive at functionalist explanations.

Each type of explanation is debunked in a lucid, often humorous and ironic way. For example, Williams identifies a category called the "if I were an ape" theory of dancing. In 1953, Segy wrote of African masked dancers that

[D]ance is a deep, organic function of man, an important vehicle of physical release of emotional tension. As mankind developed, the dance from its origins of jumps from one foot to another began to be formalized (cited in Williams 1991: 45).

Williams comments:

In my opinion, all such explanations of dancing, especially those which purport to theorize about 'primitives' or primates--and other organized behaviors observable in the animal kingdom--are sheer guesswork. It seems to me that we are being told by this author that *if he were an ape*, then *he* would have "hopped from one foot to another." If *he* were an "African dancer" dancing with a mask, then he imagines that he would "gain communion with the world of spirits", "believe in animism," and "undergo catharsis". In order to write about masked dancing, in other words, we are meant first to try to imagine ourselves as that dancer. If we were to perform such actions as "primitives" do, then we must further imagine that we would be in some non-rational or pre-rational state, for otherwise, our more highly developed reason would tell us that dances of this kind are "objectively" useless (p. 47).

Such assumptions as Segy made about the social meaning and uses of dances are inherently racist, as indeed was much of early anthropological literature, although Segy wasn't an anthropologist, but a collector and the owner of an African art gallery. The remedy to such speculation is, of course, the empirical methodology that has come to characterize the discipline of anthropology:

There are several possible courses of action open to an investigator who wants to know something about the experience of dancing in an African mask. They can, as I did ... simply ask the dancers.... [I]n any case, one does not rightly try to reduce the dancing they do to psychological states: tensions, frustrations, loss of identity, delusions and such (pp. 46-7).

At first glance, there is a lecture that seems strange and out of place arising in Chapter VII (pp. 151-177) called "Bibliographic Controls" yet, its topic illustrates one of the cores of disarray in studies of dancing. While this chapter is no doubt a result of the author's occupational history as a librarian, it is also an outgrowth of her professional experience as an anthropologist trying to assist and guide students to cope with written works on dances and dancing. She says, "Our problem does not consist in having *enough* literature to get on with; our problems lie in the *kind* of literature that it is ... " (p. 175). In this author's experience, just as students are sent out willy-nilly to collect descriptions of dances in the field, so they are also sent to the stacks of university libraries to read enormous amounts of unconnected, uncriticized, theoretically outmoded books. Williams sees librarians as possible salvagers of the situation, i.e.

The role that the librarian plays (or might play) in the development of the subject of combined studies of the dance and anthropology is crucial. Often the librarian is the only person who controls bibliographic and/or physical access to the items which are needed for study ... (p. 174).

She suggests one critically important reference work: Fleshman's *Theatrical Movement: A Bibliographical Anthology* (1986), which she thinks "should be of enormous assistance to librarians" (p. 174). Assuming that not many librarians will read *Ten Lectures* (which may be wrong, because Scarecrow Press is a library press), the responsibility for weeding out the useless and organizing the remainder in these bibliographies for graduate study still should fall on the professor's shoulders--and rightly so--however, Williams seems to take a rather pessimistic view of the likelihood of that happening. Often the teaching staff of a dance department haven't read much more than their students have read, thus, in any real sense, they are unable to assist. She seems to hope that students will have some back-up sources of aid and information.

For this reviewer, Chapter VIII is the theoretical heart of the book. In it, Williams links the development of anthropology as a whole to the infant discipline of human movement studies. Here again, her personal experience becomes part of the story, as she was a grad student at Oxford at a time when a paradigm shift from function to meaning took place (p. 178). Functional theories of human behavior had run their course, become exhausted, and the structures of a new paradigm based on applications of various linguistic theories entered the picture to fill the vacuum.

One product of this shift has been a focus on “body languages”, embodiment, and such by scholars. In short, movement is realized to be a learned, culture-specific set of signs with meanings that has many analogies to spoken language.

The notion, for example, that body languages comprise systems of the same degree of logical and semantic complexity as spoken languages—although different from them in important ways—is not a new idea to some social anthropologists, but it is not an idea that is widespread enough to be popularly held (p. 182).

This, however, is only the first part of a more extended discussion of why language, the dance and human movement studies have much to offer one another.

Body language, as conceived by semasiologists is ‘species-specific’ to human beings. Indeed that is why the term ‘semasiology’ is used to distinguish this approach from more general semiotic approaches—because of the irrevocable ties that are believed to hold between body languages and the neurological capacities, including all of the language-using and meaning-making faculties of the human mind (p. 188).

Williams bases her theories on linguistic analogies (not models) because she believes that language and structured systems of human movement (i.e. dances sign languages, martial arts, rituals and ceremonies), have the same cognitive source and operational structures in the brain. In this view, linguistics and, say, dances, cannot be studied separately, because the power and hierarchical nature of the cognitive source will not be fully apprehended or appreciated.

The theoretical foundation offered by Williams (not all of which is expounded in *Ten Lectures*) is highly abstract, elegantly simple—and easily misunderstood. She says,

We presuppose a real level of language with regard to speaking [but] we do not tend to pre-suppose a similar level of abstraction when we speak of dancing or any other system of body language. The result is that the whole area of movement study is vitiated by generalizations that stem from comparatively *limited notions about specific and minor uses* of the medium of movement (p. 356).

Her statement calls to my mind something we call ‘gravity’. That is, everyone knows apples, footballs and even humans fall to the ground, but from that mundane experience how many of us bother to abstract out of it a universal physical force of mutual attraction between physical masses? Similarly, we all know that our elbows and knees only bend one way, but how many of us have bothered to work out “laws of hierarchical motility”, “structures of interacting dualisms”, etc. such that we can make responsible generalizations about the structural (*not* semantic) universals of human movement?

But, here again is a crossroads where dancers-approaching-anthropology and anthropologists-approaching-dances have reached an *impasse*. While the latter often avoid dealing with dances because they "don't know anything about dancing", dancers are often intimidated by linguistics, simple mathematics and the prospect of tackling the literature and language of another discipline. However, these days, for dancers to neglect linguistics is to delude themselves about how well they understand modern anthropology.

For anyone interested in modern modes of anthropological analysis to fail to respond to the challenge of language automatically deprives them of entrance into the current field of relevant discourse. Nearly all of the works of modern researchers, whether in anthropology, ethnology, or folklore, are closely connected with developments in modern linguistics (p. 214).

It almost goes without saying that this kind of study involves a more than superficial understanding of the difference between 'emic' and 'etic'--too often repeated in papers and articles as if it were some sort of *mantra*, without the writer knowing how, for instance, a system of phonemes is structured *on several levels* to make up a language.

On the other hand, some anthropologists balk at having to learn a dance-, or a movement-based technique of writing movement, thereby availing themselves of seeing the abstract relationships among the constituent parts of human bodily movements (see Williams's critique of Gell on *Umeda* dancing, pp. 281-282 for relevant discussion). The implied necessity of mastering Laban's script--which among other things, is the basis for a graphic means of holding one's data still--is again well-illustrated by analogy. Could linguistics have got off the ground without a phonetic alphabet in which accurately to record and analyze sounds? Of course not, yet, how many anthropologists really see the value of movement literacy and a system of movement-writing rooted in a comparable *kinetic alphabet*?

A truce--or better still, a program of mutual enlightenment between tribes of dancers and tribes of anthropologists would in the end save time by enabling both groups to get out of the cycle of reinventing the wheel--where a few in each new generation of dancers "discover" anthropology as a sympathetic discipline and a few in each new generation of anthropologists "discover" dances, those neglected, but very social activities. A few pioneer works that have indicated the way, i.e. Kaeppler, Keali'inohomoku, Kürti and a few others are discussed in *Ten Lectures*.

I came to the end of this book mightily impressed with the erudition, the closely reasoned arguments, the macro-level vision of what the field of human movement studies might become, but I had one regret when I encountered the

retrospective remarks that seemed to be “graduate department bashing”--perhaps a “last word” in old arguments, which were, in my opinion, beneath the stature and purpose of the book as a whole. On the positive side, however, Williams’s attitude toward students is gracious by contrast:

I unashamedly take the part of actual or potential students here, because they are the ‘consumers.’ They represent a significant portion of the other half of the academic publication exchange, and they are frequently both the unwitting and unwilling victims of the ‘publish or perish’ syndrome (p. 222).

Despite minor flaws, this book is a landmark publication in several ways: no one previously has had quite the mix of performance experience, academic skill and the kinds of personal encouragement (Evans-Pritchard, among others) that Williams had. The book is a unique pulling-together of wide experience in both the dance and anthropological worlds. The most valuable aspect of the book for current (and future) scholars is its encyclopedic and critical nature. That is, a large amount of work has been vastly simplified for anyone contemplating a literature search-*cum*-review for a dance topic, and more importantly, for anyone who seeks a firm theoretical foundation for his or her work.

The exhaustive literature review that went into the making of *Ten Lectures* began as the author prepared for her B. Litt. in anthropology at Oxford. Scholars and students now and in future can benefit from Williams’s long and careful labor in large fields of disparate literature on dances and dancing.

One breathes a sigh of relief: “Thank God someone has at last gone through that load and weeded out the useless, the ridiculous and the outmoded!” How delightful it is not to be obliged to give detailed explanations of one’s rejection of various previously acceptable ‘standard works’ on the dance. Quick reference to the relevant section of “Williams (1991)”, will allow writers to unclutter both their writing and their thinking, and, they can get on with new, theoretically sounder ideas. *Ten Lectures* will be seen in time, I think, to be a watershed in dance scholarship. Perhaps its role will be similar to the role that Keali’inohomoku’s seminal 1967 article now has.

*An Anthropologist looks at Ballet as an Ethnic Form of Dance* has become a touchstone—a lodestone—a standard against which other works are measured and evaluated. Citations of Keali’inohomoku’s article in bibliographies has been virtually mandatory since the early 1980s at least. The article is an icon that signifies a scholar subscribes to the idea that *all dancing* is based in a particular social context and has cultural meanings (as opposed to purely aesthetic meanings) only in relation to its particular context. I think *Ten Lectures* will also (even inevitably) arrive at the same iconic status, as writers recognize the validity



of the discussions it contains. Like Keali'inohomoku's contribution, Williams's book can serve to re-calibrate scholar's perceptions--not as they observe danced forms in social context, perhaps, but as they read, hear and talk about dances and dance literature. To have in hand an accurate compass capable of steering readers through all the profusion and confusion of ideas is to have a precious instrument indeed.

Beyond dance scholars of whatever background and persuasion, *Ten Lectures* points to new territory within anthropology as well. This discipline (at least as it is taught in America) prides itself on its unique perspective among all the sciences, social and physical, of regarding humans as both a body--the product of evolutionary forces that produced all life on earth--and a mind--a cognizing force that engages in a uniquely human activity. But to recognize both aspects of human beings, body and mind, is a long way from explaining how the one works with the other. In fact, if Farnell (1995) is to be believed, our main problem is that we think of body and mind separately, reflecting our common Cartesian legacy of a "mind/body split".

If Williams's ideas of semasiology--culturally assigned meanings to human actions, codified and organized into patterns that are as complex as the hierarchical, paradigmatic and syntagmatic structures of spoken languages--prove to be productive theoretically, bridging the mind/body nature of human beings, then this germ of a new branch of anthropology contained in *Ten Lectures* has much wider significance--one that extends far beyond dance scholarship.

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