

Editorial Comment

This issue of *JASHM* contains the work of four undergraduate students. The last essay, 'On the Idea of a Personal Anthropology' is by Blake McLemore (University of Illinois), written as part of an Anthropology course (Anth 296) taught by Brenda Farnell.

Three students, Roxane Fenton, Kristin Lindstrom and Emily Johnson, are from the University of Minnesota Dance Program in the Theater Arts Department. Drid Williams taught two courses there, namely, Dance History 3401 - 'Prehistory' and 'Early Western Dance Forms' (DH 3402), from January to June, 1996.

The first three essays are examples of individual learning experiences which record some insights that all of the participating students in Williams's two classes gained during their relatively short period of study, i.e.

1. "[M]y exposure to dance forms from other cultures began slowly to increase" Fenton says. As a result, she realized that "persons from two different cultures can misunderstand each other's movement and body language as easily as they can misunderstand each other's spoken languages" (*infra*, p. 115).
2. "I realized how wrong I was in assuming the research I needed to carry out was a simple step process" (*infra*, p. 125).
3. "Such questions, which stem from stereotypical ideas about Eskimos are usually asked tentatively ..." (*infra*, p. 131).

But, interesting as these insights are, the student-papers as well point to larger issues in the field of Dance History.

Cross-Cultural Study: Fenton

Roxane Fenton discovered that as one of two major mediums of human expression, movement is *structurally* universal, but is *not semantically* universal. That is, all movement takes place within three dimensions of space and at least one of time and all human movement utilizes the same number of degrees of freedom of the jointing parts of the human body. All human movement is closely tied to conventional language-use, just as all movement systems also obey the same laws of hierarchical motility.

The semantics of movement systems, however, by which we mean the values assigned to the spatial dimensions, taxonomies of the body and such, are not the same. They vary enormously from one sociolinguistic context to another. Compared with the state of her discourse when she began the two courses, Fenton now talks about the universality of movement with much greater care and considerably increased perception. In other words, she suddenly found herself in the real world of human movement studies, where

the classification and categorization of dance forms unconsciously determines writing and discussion, both about dances and dancing, sign languages, story-telling, 'ritual' and much else.

When she discovered the cross-cultural dimension in 'dance', of course, she was immediately confronted with her own ethnocentricity and that of others, but, instead of reacting negatively (then minimizing or rejecting these revelations as some do), she courageously set about examining the problem, attempting to sort out for herself where the truth of such matters is to be found.

Beyond the individual value of the exercise for Fenton, however, lies a general educational issue of some importance:

A principal reason for the pervasive skepticism about the educational values of the arts [especially, we might say, dancing] is the persistent assumption that artistic experience lacks genuine intellectual content. It is assumed that, unlike, for instance, the sciences, learning in any substantial educational sense is not possible in and through the arts, since, it is believed, the arts are concerned with feeling, rather than with cognition or understanding which is a necessary condition for any legitimately educational activity. That is, the arts are taken to be unquestionably *subjective*, by contrast with the undoubted *objectivity and rationality* of the sciences, mathematics and other such disciplines (Best 1996: 1 - italics added).

What, if anything, can be done about this situation? By maintaining unusually high academic standards and risking allegations of "over-qualification" since its beginnings *circa* 1967-1970, professionals in the anthropology of human movement studies have consistently attempted to demonstrate the pernicious effects of logical positivism, 'objectivism', etc. (see, for examples, Farnell 1995a), but these efforts are vitiated by an equally pervasive attitude held by dance educators and many dancers themselves about the intrinsic subjectivism of dancing,

Hence the common cliché, which is a banner of *educationally self-defeating subjectivism*, that the arts are a matter of feeling not of reason. ... The arts will never be taken seriously while their proponents assert that, unlike the sciences, the arts are concerned with mysterious, unintelligible realms and/or are answerable solely to occult "inner" feelings which give access to a transcendental Aesthetic universal. It is this kind of woolly, supernatural mystery-monging which understandably gives the arts the dismissive reputation as airy fairy and educationally irrelevant (Best 1996: 2 and 3 - italics added).

Not only are the dance arts plagued by the "self-defeating subjectivism" Best talks about, they are not taken seriously for other reasons.

Ambiguities of the Word, 'Ethnic': Lindstrom

Among the problems Kristin Lindstrom encountered when she attempted an essay about dances brought to Minnesota by Swedish immigrants were many negative responses to her subject, some of which she shares:

I thought nothing could be more interesting than to study my own Swedish heritage and its dance customs. ... When I began to ask for help ... people did not want to help me because they had the idea there was no point in pursuing further study into my topic ... [T]hese were some of the responses: "Good luck in finding anything on that!"; "Why would you want to study that?"; "Do something more interesting" and "If I were you, I'd pick something easier" (*infra* p. 125).

Being an intelligent young woman, Lindstrom didn't take the rejections she experienced personally. Instead, she now realizes that anti-dancing prejudices really do exist -- and they have existed in western civilizations since Plato in the form of a general "anti-theatrical prejudice" (see Barish 1981).

In particular, (and to some of us, almost unbelievably in 1996), she found herself up against "the nineteenth century legacy" consisting of "ideas about the nature of language and about relations between speech and manual gesture" (Farnell 1995b: 29). Baynton thoroughly documented this problem regarding American Sign Language [ASL] in a recent issue of *JASHM*, and in her Foreword to that issue, Farnell observes:

Baynton reminds us that it is culturally and historically situated metatheoretical discourses that shape and define the kinds of questions that can be asked of any subject. Such discourses often provide unquestioned epistemological grounds from which theorizing can proceed. In this case, Darwinian evolutionary theory redefined the very nature of being human in nineteenth century western thought, with consequences that reached far beyond academia. The social Darwinism that ensued was not without its political uses as a means to justify sexist and racist assumptions about 'human nature', for example. ... A prevailing conception of gesture as "primitive primitive precursor to speech" meant that users of Plains Sign Language were readily classified as "savages" on a presumed social evolutionary scale. In her appreciative essay in response to Baynton's article ... Williams notes that the same set of beliefs and ideologies have adversely affected dancers and the study of dancing in western cultures. Here is an unlikely arena, then, where Deaf persons, Plains Indians, and dancers find common ground (Farnell 1995a: 135-136).

In different ways, Fenton's and Lindstrom's essays echo persistent problems of classification in the field of dance study; classifications that are not "just semantic" as some seem to believe, as if there are different names for the same reality. The reality, as we shall see, is not the same on many levels.

Fenton suggests how dancers, at least, might remedy these obstacles in their thinking about cross-cultural studies of dancing. Lindstrom simply

records the kinds of dismissive, patronizing questions with which she was confronted, which mirror the many existing unexamined popular assumptions about the subject of movement, whether it is mimed, danced, or signed. She doesn't attempt to explain why such attitudes exist, but describes that which she was able to find out about Swedish dances using available resources.

Sophisticated readers will already know that undergraduate and graduate students alike enter courses in Dance History and/or the Anthropology of the Dance and Human Movement Studies already conditioned to think in certain ways; a fact which indicates the first task of their teachers -- the development of an awareness on the part of beginning students that study in these subject areas isn't as smooth or easy-going as many imagine it to be.

The kinds of problem Lindstrom was up against are equally widespread among members of other academic disciplines. Farnell points out, for example, that in a recently published college textbook on language in a section headed 'Non-Languages', we can read

Other kinds of human communication [besides speech] are sometimes called language: body language, or kinesics, is one example. the way we use our bodies in sitting, standing, walking, is said to be expressive of things we do not say. It probably is but that does not make it language. Body language lacks duality, in that it is not symbolic but rather a direct representation of feeling; discreteness in that there is no alphabet of distinctive movements or postures; and productivity, in that "original" expressions are likely not to be understood ... (Bolton, in Clark, Escholz and Rosa 1994: 6-7, cited in Farnell 1995a: 136).

Farnell charitably refers to the above as a naive restatement of a popular pseudo-psychological model of 'body language'. Less inclined to charity in such cases, Williams's criticism is more severe: in her view, academics -- especially those who write in textbooks -- should know better! Bolton's statements serve to reveal his uninformed, outdated viewpoints about body language. He undoubtedly wrote as he did because he knew nothing of research that has been done and proved in the anthropology of dancing and sign language study.

Taking It All For Granted: Johnson

Oddly enough, of the three University of Minnesota writers represented herein, Johnson encountered fewer immediate problems than did Lindstrom or Fenton. Unlike Fenton, Johnson is a member of an ethnic group that is on the other side of the 'we/they' equation in this country. As a member of a minority group, Johnson already comes to the the subject-area with a different point of view, partly because her people were subject to draconian

definition and classification in different ways (see p. 144). However, Johnson's ancestry and heritage are important these days, but there, the likeness ends in a none-too-subtle fashion.

Johnson can say (as Lindstrom could not) that her heritage is important to others. Where Lindstrom encountered active resistance to her project, Johnson's efforts are encouraged, albeit (sometimes) awkwardly.

After I came to Minnesota to go to university, I was asked questions that I never heard in Alaska. For example, when people find out where I'm from, they say, jokingly, "Oh, are you an Eskimo?" When they find out I am, they are sometimes shocked -- afraid they've offended me. Then they might ask, "When you're home, do you live in an igloo?" They are surprised to find out that I don't know any more about living in an igloo than they do.

"Well, where you come from, is it dark all the time?"

"Did you learn to hunt?"

They ask such things tentatively, knowing that the questions are kind of dumb, but *they don't really know what to ask*. Their questions come from stereotyped ideas about Eskimos (and Alaska) that they have picked up from many different sources.

I tell them I'm always asked these questions at first, and from then on, it's up to them. Some are satisfied with short answers, but some want more information. As I tried to answer their questions, I realized that I didn't have a full understanding of my own culture. I began to want to know more about my own people and their ways. Before I left Alaska, I'd taken it all for granted (see pp. 131 for allusions to these questions).

People who ask Johnson questions about her heritage know they don't know what to ask, in contrast to the people who evidently take Lindstrom's heritage completely for granted -- or maybe that isn't accurate. Perhaps people simply aren't interested in Lindstrom's ethnic heritage, or, maybe they don't ask her about it because unlike Johnson, Lindstrom herself isn't considered to *be* an 'ethnic' or part of a 'minority group' as Johnson is. Interestingly, Swedish folk-dancing would be called 'ethnic dance' by most of Lindstrom's teachers and peers, but she wouldn't be considered an 'ethnic' although in fact, she *is* an ethnic, just as we all are.

We wonder if Lindstrom's experience would be duplicated by students of Norwegian, German, French, Spanish or Irish extraction who live in Minnesota? We wonder, too, if Johnson's experience would be in any way duplicated by students of other Native-American, African-American, Vietnamese, Korean or (other) Asian heritages?

Johnson is surely not alone: everyone takes their culture and their language for granted. Elsewhere, Williams remarks, "[U]ntil I lived in Ghana, language to me was a rather tasteless, colorless, odorless, medium, much like water must be to a fish" (1991: 315), learning through repeated 'moments of awareness' that the *lack of awareness* was her own. These 'moments' or 'times',

(whatever length they may be, or however they may come to us), when we manage to break free of our intellectual impediments, built up precisely because we think we know it all, are most precious because through them, we can be renewed and recreated.

Lindstrom's problems aren't unique either: we have all used the word 'ethnic' in unexamined ways, not recognizing its relationship to real people and our everyday lives. Moreover, we have all suffered from the callousness and thoughtlessness of well-meaning people who really have no idea what they are talking about, however well-intentioned they may be.

Finally, before taking the Dance History courses, Fenton assumed (along with several thousand other people) that dancing is "universal." That is, if one knows how to dance in one idiom (or so the thinking goes) the knowledge thus gained will somehow automatically illuminate all the dancing one doesn't know anything about. There are aspects of dancing that are 'universal': the structures within which all human movement takes place, e.g. the spatial dimensions of up/down, right/left, front/back and inside/outside. However, the intricate ways in which human societies interpret, explain and define these 'universals' is extraordinary, thus we say that the semantics of dances throughout the world are not universal.

But, these are the reasons for publishing these papers: to illustrate the extent and depth of what is possible to learn about a subject that many think is easy, having little or no scholarly value at all.

A First Experience With Applied Personal Anthropology: McLemore

The fourth paper in this issue is written by undergraduate anthropology major Blake McLemore who tests the idea of a 'personal anthropology' (Pocock 1994) in his first attempt to do field research. His visits to an African American church service in Peoria (Illinois) exposed him to the religious tradition of an ethnic group who are culturally quite distant from his own social background, despite their geographical proximity.

His effort is laudable because he is learning to be aware of his own value judgments and their cultural sources. This doesn't mean rejecting his judgments, his background or his insights, it simply means he has broadened his horizons immeasurably. Surely this is one of the goals of a liberal education. Quite apart from McLemore's intentions to pursue anthropology as a profession (at this point he isn't sure about that), the reflexive abilities he is developing illustrate the means by which an ethnically diverse, pluralist society might become social reality, more than justifying the inclusion of anthropology in the undergraduate curriculum.

McLemore attempts to show that the external features of forms of worship are less important than internal aspects, i.e. motives, feelings, and their resulting outer expressions, reminding one of the many stories in early British anthropological literature about "primitive tribes" who were thought to have no *laws* and no *order* in their societies because no one could see any court buildings and trappings of office with which the observers could identify. McLemore says, "[T]here was no steeple, no cross, no stained glass windows and there was an absence of lush surrounding landscape", and later, "... no crucifix, and no banners. In the front of the church there was no altar, just a podium on a platform which was only one step up from the floor-level occupied by the congregation" (*infra*, p. 151).

McLemore's insights are especially rewarding because so few students -- and other people, for that matter -- look beneath the surfaces of things they see. They accept their commonsense empiricism at face value. McLemore doesn't, and this is a real gift: possibly the well-spring of his imagination and potential creativity. Certainly, the lack of knowledge of many types of religious services and systems is evident: meditation and stillness, for example, are equally parts of the Yoga traditions (India) as they are in Catholicism. With only the two services to consider, the writer runs dangerously close, perhaps, to putting his own religious practices down because he "bends over black-wards" in his efforts to understand "the native point of view." These shortcomings simply point to areas in which future developments might lie. They do not detract from the value of his contribution.

These four papers together illustrate a variety of insights that students gained during their relatively short periods of study. We trust that JASHM readers will find their struggles and triumphs as informative as we have.

The Editors

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Erratum:

We regret that the initials 'W.F.' were inadvertently omitted from the reference to Bolton 1994 in *JASHM* Volume 9(2): 71.

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