

Introduction to the 'Beyond Disembodiment' paper

During the academic year 1992, a group of graduate students under the auspices of the Department of Anthropology at Indiana University, Bloomington, organized the *Association for the Anthropology of Dance and Movement* [AADM]. Students involved in the organization from its inception (or soon thereafter) were Frank Hall, Bridget Edwards, Kazuko Yamazaki, Mimi Doi, Aixa Ansorena, Hallie Stone, Marjorie Estivill, Cynthia Thorn, and Cary Small. They were greatly assisted by Mary Bopp (librarian and faculty sponsor of AADM).¹ The chairman of the anthropology department was willing to help the new organization with short term projects aimed at further development of the subject of human movement studies at the University.

The purposes of AADM were to 1. encourage and support students in the anthropological study of dances and other forms of human movement (e.g. sign languages, rituals, etc.) across cultures; 2. provide opportunities for students interested in the anthropological study of dance and related subjects to meet together to share common interests and concerns; 3. provide programs of interest to members of AADM and the Indiana University community, and 4. offer organizational support for interested students to participate in Association activities.

The Association met once a month and more frequently during the fall semester of 1994, which was the year preceding AADM's first major organizational effort. They hosted an extended seminar entitled *Dance, Bodies, Movement and Cultural Perspectives*, which was scheduled to have several guest lecturers. This seminar extended over a two-year period: 1995 and 1996. The members only met formally three times during those years, owing to heavy involvement by the membership in administrative aspects of the seminar. The Association (and the extended seminar) ended in September, 1997, because by that time, there were only two original members still residing in Bloomington: Frank Hall and Bridget Edwards. Recruitment of new members got lost in the seminar, but while the organization existed, it did important work that deserves documentation, even though AADM no longer exists.

For example, they were able to extend the dates of the invited lecture series originally scheduled during the months of January through May, 1995, because the Association was granted additional money by the Dean of Faculties Multi-Disciplinary Fund. Prior to that, the Department of Anthropology, the I. U. Student Association, 'Horizons of Knowledge', The Folklore Institute, the African Studies Program and the Department of Kinesiology contributed money for the lecture series. For some of these contributions, members of AADM had to write grant applications. The titles of the papers presented by the invited lecturers are listed on the following page.

¹ Now, Mary Strow.

1. *From Body as Artifact to Embodied Knowledge*, Anya P. Royce.
2. *Imaging the Other, Imaging Ourselves: Movement, Ritual and Anthropology*, Adrienne L. Kaeppler.
3. *Beyond Disembodiment: Socio-Cultural Entities and Signifying Acts*, Drid Williams.
4. *Imagining the Rural Mother: Communication, Education, and Movement in Primary Health Care Images*, Corinne Kratz.
5. *It Goes Without Saying: Getting Out of the Habitus and Into the Action Sign*, Brenda Farnell.
6. *Movement and the Ethnography of Communication*, Richard Bauman.
7. *Scholars Who Envisioned an Anthropology of Dance*, Joann Keali'inohomoku.
8. *Dance and Visions of Dislocation in Cambodia*, Toni Shapiro.

Among the original members of AADM, there were a wide range of interests, some of which included Irish Set (Social) Dancing and Competitive Irish Step-Dancing, Aerobics, Dancing in Ghana, Dancing in Uzbekistan, American Colonial Dancing and the classical East Indian form of Kathakali. Among any group of graduate students in any university, one can always find interests in dances, sign languages, rituals, ceremonies -- in other kinds of human movement-based systems of expression and communication. Long experience has taught me, however, that there are many reasons why graduate student organizations centered around this subject seem doomed to flourish (as AADM did), then fade into oblivion.

Another graduate student organization at New York University, the *Society for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* [SASHM] existed during the years 1980-84, then died, not only because its graduate student population acquired their degrees and moved on, but because the program in the anthropology of human movement studies out of which it recruited most of its members was discontinued, as indeed, the department which housed the program was itself discontinued a few years later.²

It is to be hoped that another graduate organization based on human movement study will be born. Given adequate knowledge of the vicissitudes of its predecessors (SASHM and AADM), such an organization could possibly survive, as one of SASHM's projects -- the *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* [JASHM] has survived.

Members of Indiana's AADM proposed an excellent question for their 1995-96 seminar: *What does the anthropology of the dance and human movement systems have to offer the larger field of anthropology and human sciences in general?* Many of the papers listed above failed to address the question, which in my opinion is the main reason why no published version of the seminar now exists. Lack of publication in this case, however, doesn't alter the value of the question or its importance to any future attempt on the part of graduate students to create a lasting organization. The reason why the question arises is that I did not address the question in the public version of my paper, 'Beyond Disembodiment'. I answered the question in the version

² This was the Department of Dance and Dance Education in SEHNAP (School of Education, Health and Nursing Professions) at New York University.

of 'Beyond Disembodiment' that was prepared especially for members of AADM and other graduate students.

AADM's question asks what an anthropology of dance and human movement studies has to offer the larger fields of anthropology and the human sciences. With the proviso that the subject exists institutionally, I believe its most important potential contributions to anthropology, human science and wider academic communities are these:

1. It can assist sociocultural anthropologists, semioticians, folklorists, ethnomusicologists, area study specialists (e.g. Africanists) and human scientists as well as members of dance and dance education departments with alternative, proven paradigms of explanation for the study of structured systems of human action: dances, signing systems, martial arts, rituals, ceremonies, etc.

2. It can provide the above-named professionals (or aspiring professionals) with literature that authoritatively supports statements they might want to make about movement-based phenomena that are different from those which result from traditional approaches. It also provides them with the basis for legitimate statements about the related subject of *embodiment*, because non-movement specialists can, through study of the sub-discipline, understand how it is that one moves from talking *about* the body, or *of* the body (current prevailing modes of discourse in the literature) to talk *from* the body.

3. It provides sociocultural anthropology with a set of ethnographies that were written, not from an observationist stance, or an objectivist's philosophical viewpoint but from the point of view of a reflexive anthropology that *remains objective*, but is against *objectivism* -- and, we might add, *subjectivism* as well. See Farnell (1995), Varela (1994) and Williams (1994).³

4. Because none of the traditional body disciplines, i.e. anatomy, kinesiology, physiology, biology, sports medicine, etc. provide paradigms of explanation that permit (a) study of human beings as socio-cultural entities, or (b) the semantics of human movement (far less concepts of "signifying acts" and "action signs") an anthropology of human movement program could fill serious gaps in departmental curriculums.

To put the matter in another way: an anthropology of human movement takes inert human bodies out of the morgue and/or hospital operating theaters. It puts moving, speaking, *living* human bodies squarely into everyday life where it is neither anaesthetized nor immobilized.

5. In the past, sociocultural anthropology has provided graduate student populations with the means whereby they can effectively study and write about art forms, (e.g. sculpture, painting, pottery, architecture, etc.) in their own or another culture. It *has not* provided them with the means of studying *movement* grounded in sociocultural concepts.

³ For references, see bibliography at the end of 'Beyond Disembodiment' essay.

How does a non-specialist in human movement studies set about finding adequate support for his or her field research which may include dancing, sign languages and such? An anthropology of human movement studies provides valuable adjunct courses within standard anthropological training that can be opened to non-anthropologists and people who are not movement specialists.

6. The fundamental questions in the anthropology of human movement should not be considered in isolation from other central questions and issues in sociocultural anthropology, nor should fundamental questions in sociocultural anthropology be considered in isolation from the study of human action, because movement and gesture are ubiquitous. They constitute one of two primary modes of human expression -- sound and movement.

7. It provides the only real cross-cultural approach to the study of dances, sign systems, the martial arts, religious ceremonies -- any movement-based system of human communication and expression -- because it doesn't proceed from the traditional classifications of (especially) dances into 'art', 'folk', 'ethnic', etc. -- a striking feature of older literature in the field.

8. An anthropology of human movement studies provides the means to become *literate* with regard to movement, thus it offers valuable technological advances in the form of movement-writing usable by non-dancers in any situation where human action is involved.

Finally, one wants to say that the question of the literacy of human movement is of primary importance. One anthropologist, at least, has had this to say:

One of the difficulties that has prevented progress in the field of the anthropology of dance being as rapid as that in, say, the anthropology of visual art, has been the need for a notation of dance movements that combines accuracy with some degree of readability for the non-dance expert. Art objects, such as the masks mentioned in the previous section, can be simply *reproduced*, but this simple graphic reduction is not feasible where dance movements are concerned. Labanotation and Benesh notation both have their advocates, but are equally incomprehensible to the rest of the anthropological profession, who are unlikely to undertake the task of learning complicated systems of hieroglyphics lightly. . . . etc. (Gell 1985: 186-87).

Gell didn't doubt the importance of the subject of dances and other human movement systems to sociocultural anthropology and the human sciences, but he didn't like being faced with the prospect of learning to read movement texts.

Instead, he "[D]evised a system, for whose crudity I make no apologies, that reduces Umeda dance movements simply to movements of the leg, seen sideways on" (1985: 187). He was convinced that "Umeda dances can all be construed as different forms of gait, and can be analysed using techniques derived from the kinesiological study of human walking and running" (1985: 187).

As far as I am aware, Gell's attitude about Laban's movement script continues to persist, for he was not the only anthropologist who opposed the idea of movement literacy. The negative attitude persists in spite of the fact that people who are literate in movement in whatever forms it takes know that human actions *cannot* be reduced to gross physical movements without serious distortions that transform the actions into something else. They know that behavioral approaches to movement studies -- however useful they may be in sports medicine and dance training -- is actually detrimental with reference to the study of "[S]ocial action as dynamically embodied practices, in which people talk and/or move in structured symbolic spaces, integrating action signs and vocal signs in numerous ways, in varied contexts" (Farnell 1999: 365). As David Best pointed out so long ago:

[A]n intentional action is not the same as a physical movement since the latter can be described in various ways according to one's point of view and one's beliefs about the person performing it. *One cannot specify an action, as opposed to a purely physical movement without taking into account what the agent intended* (Best 1974: 193 - italics added).⁴

The point is that when we describe human action in terms of physical movement, *we lose the significance of the action as part of human social life*. So far as many of us in the field are concerned, such losses are of utmost importance.

Drid Williams

⁴ For reference, see bibliography at the end of the 'Beyond Disembodiment' essay.