

Book Review

Body, Movement, and Culture: Kinesthetic and Visual Symbolism in a Philippine Community by Sally Ann Ness. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992. 292pp. \$39.95 (cloth) \$16.95 (paper). 11 illustrations; 9 black and white photographs. ISBN 058517279X.

Brenda Farnell

There has been a virtual explosion of scholarly writing about "the body" over the past two decades, in disciplines as varied as literary criticism, cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, history, English and communications, among others. The majority of writers draw attention to the body as social object (e.g., the sexual body, the political body, the medical body, the body as social text, etc.). Noticeably absent is attention to dynamic features of embodiment — that is, to persons as *moving* social actors. It was, therefore, especially pleasing to encounter Sally Ness's ethnography, the main focus of which is body movement.

In the introductory chapter the author aims to acquaint the reader with her view of relations between "ethnography and choreography." Ness frequently adopts a phenomenological style of discourse, that is, she writes from the "experience of doing." That she is very good at doing this is best exemplified by the evocative description of her own personal experience learning to master a movement phrase from an American modern dance work (pages 3-7). This is one of the best translations of the experiential meaning of moving I have ever read. As someone who also trained as a modern dancer, I am not entirely certain that it will succeed in sensitizing the non-specialist anthropological reader to what it means to "talk *from* the body" (Varela 1994), but it is surely worth the effort.

That such discourse is not without problems for an anthropological approach, however, is a point to which I shall return. It is unfortunate that Ness avoids the opportunity to set out any clear theoretical position, except to tell us that her orientation is primarily that of "an ethnographer studying choreographic phenomena with a performer's orientation" (page 16). The practice of banishing all scholarly references and comments to long endnotes makes for easy reading of the main text, certainly, but in this case it fails to cover numerous theoretical ambiguities and contradictions.

In chapters two, three, and four, Ness provides a cultural and historical overview of the ethnographic context. The place is Cebu City, Cebu Island, a rapidly expanding urban sprawl that is the third largest port city in the Philippines. In engaging prose, the author paints an impressionistic portrait of the city and her own location within the space/time in which she finds herself in 1984-85, characterizing the place as a "fragment of the Third World grappling for a toehold in the First" (page 28), and as a "tortured locus of advanced capitalism" (page 29). Cebu City is populated by mixed-ethnic local

and non-local Filipinos, Chinese, Americans, and Europeans, who speak a mixture of Cebuano Visayan, English and Tagalog. Given its long history as a cultural border zone (since at least 1000 AD.), current cultural practices in Cebu City are a blend of many traditions. There is no pure "ethnic" ground to stand on here, the author tells us, but neither is there "high culture" for the cultured socialite, nor "exotic culture" for the adventurous tourist (or naive anthropologist).

Ness places under examination a complex of Filipino "choreographic practices" collectively known as *sinulog*. There are three variants, the oldest form being individual, improvised dances that are religious rituals of mediation performed (mostly) by elderly women. A second form, which Ness labels "troupe *sinulog*" are highly structured choreographed group performances danced only by boys. The third variant is a recently developed, largely secular form of promotional event that she calls "parade *sinulog*." Although the author separates these variants for purposes of analysis, such a division is not held by Cibuans themselves. That these variations are not differences that *make* a difference from the indigenous perspective is a factor that ought perhaps to have played a larger role in the organization of the book rather than making an appearance only in the concluding chapter.

Having set the cultural and historical scene, in chapter five we are introduced to the powerful symbol of the *Santo Niño de Cebu*, (the Holy Child King). The "*Niño*" is the local source of inspiration for the *sinulog* rituals and much of what they represent. A devotional twelve inch wooden figure of the Christ Child, it is housed in a Catholic basilica, but replicated on every desktop, altar, shelf and corner in the city. A dominant symbol in Victor Turner's sense, the *Niño* inspires a mythology of faith and devotion centered in claims that it unites indigenous and Hispanic belief systems, even when rituals associated with it actually reinforce divisions of class and ethnicity.

Chapter six introduces us to the older women candle sellers (*tindera*) who perform the *sinulog* as a mediational ritual in the grounds of the basilica for those who request it and buy their candles. Ness stresses that this is prayer that is simultaneously danced and spoken — the physical aspects being equally essential to the construction and conveyance of the sacred message. The ritual process and its meanings are clearly described, as well as typical customers and the community of elderly women who are its regular performers (chapters 7 and 8). Chapter nine turns to the structure and symbolism of the "troupe *sinulog*" a group exhibition that combines some ritual devotion with choreographed sword play and dance drama. This form developed out of earlier practices during the Spanish colonial period in the late nineteenth century. Connected with fiesta celebrations and sponsored by relatively privileged families, it presents a complex blend of Spanish Catholic and local symbolism. All of this the author gradually unravels, continuing in chapter ten with an interesting account of the social history of its

development. Chapter eleven takes us to the third variant, the “parade *sinulog*” which Ness characterizes as largely a “reinvention of tradition” for the promotion of “local culture” to tourists, foreign investors, city institutions and local residents alike.

The chapters on the historical development of these forms and their shifting symbolic importance in relation to social change are the strongest in the book, having been constructed in traditional ethnographic fashion from consultants statements and the work of other scholars and historians of the region. Ironically perhaps, given the author’s explicit identification of herself as a movement performer, it is in the interpretation and description of movement that some fundamental and serious anthropological problems arise.

Talk of one’s own *experience of moving* using a phenomenological/existentialist style of discourse is one kind of linguistic practice that has attendant purposes. Serious anthropological problems arise, however, if applied inappropriately, as when meanings attached to the experience of moving held by an English speaking performer of American modern dance are assumed to apply to members of an entirely different language and culture. Despite Ness’s claims to the contrary (pages 237-238) this is precisely what she does a lot of the time. To take just one example, consider the following passage that purports to describe one dancer’s style:

Her movement signature, exemplified in her *sinulog* gesturing style, was among the more *technically complicated* of the individual *tindera* styles. She held the candles in both hands at nearly full arm’s length well above her head. Using a continually alternating canon sequence, she traced dinner plate size circles with each handful. The movement started at her fingertips, but sequentially incorporated all of her arms and even her scapular region in the creation of sweeping curvilinear forms. She was one of the *more highly integrated movers*, one of the few to develop an action that brought the core muscle groups along the backside of the rib cage into the play of the gesture. *Generosa’s style was more sophisticated*-and sophisticated in a way that allowed it to be *more expansive*-than most of the other *tinderas*. Her gestures were also *more clearly drawn in space and more clearly sculpted* than were the others and represented quite aptly *her more cosmopolitan orientation*. She physically articulated the notion that she not only knew where she was, but she knew both how to describe an “elsewhere” carefully and how to develop an integral connection between herself and that distant location (pages 111-112 emphasis added).

This passage is full of unsupported value judgments about the movements so described. First we learn this dancer’s style is “technically more complicated” than other dancers, to which one feels compelled to respond, “according to whose criteria of technical complexity — the Cibuano dancer’s or the American modern dancer’s?” Larger, more “expansive” gestures are assigned a positive value apparently because they involve muscles of the torso and this is judged as making her a “more highly integrated mover” than her fellow dancers. This, in turn, makes her more “sophisticated.” Again one would want to ask, “What concepts do Cibuans hold about the appropriate size of gestures in this

context and what value, if any, do *they* attach to movements that do or do not "integrate" with the torso?" Likewise, "Do Cibuán dancers judge stylistic differences in terms that are best translated as "sophisticated" or its opposite?" And "More *clearly* drawn in space" and "more *clearly* sculpted" according to whose definition of "clarity" and the appropriate use of space? In other words, where is the 'native point of view' in all this?

Exactly what is meant by the sweeping statements about the "cosmopolitan orientation" of this dancer is difficult to discern, but it is hard to imagine that this is anything other than the author's flight of fancy — what *she* would feel were *she* that dancer. If these are not entirely ethnocentric judgments, Ness presents no evidence to support the notion that such description is in any way linked to *Cibuán* understandings of the body and space (even if these are not normally expressed in words but demonstrated through actions and so more difficult to ascertain and elicit).

There are occasional exceptions to this problem, as for example, in the interesting analysis of Cebuán words for "bouncing" and the dancers' judgments about which kinds are appropriate for the *sinulog* (pages 114-115), but too often we meet the former observationist perspective. Such a mixed state of affairs left this reader feeling unable to trust any of the interpretations offered and, in the absence of any movement texts, there is no evidence for or against the author's statements.

In encountering these kinds of interpretations throughout the book, I was strongly reminded of Drid Williams's pre-anthropological writings about Ghanaian dances, which Williams herself subjected to severe critique after her training as an anthropologist, using it as a valuable exercise in reflexivity that Pocock called "personal anthropology" (see Williams 1991: 287-321, and *JASHM* 8 (1)). The author could clearly benefit from studying this material as a means to transcend successfully the split there appears to be at present between Ness the ethnographer and Ness the performer.

Such apparently impressionistic, seemingly idiosyncratic descriptive language is not as innocent as it might appear to the unsuspecting non-specialist, yet nowhere in the book could I locate an acknowledgment of the source of Ness's terminology and therefore of the method of analysis she employed. It is one thing for an author to decide against the inclusion of extensive technical analyses if the book is aimed at non-specialist members of the profession, but failure to make any mention of the resources employed does the fragile sub-field of the anthropology of human movement a disservice. Those of us who are seriously interested in her work are denied any opportunity to examine movement texts, debate the issues, and verify or disagree with the validity of her interpretations. Unsuspecting non-specialists on the other hand, are, potentially at least, placed in the untenable position of being seduced by apparently innocent prose. Such an omission also perpetuates the gross misconception that the anthropological study of dance

and human movement *does not have* rigorous theories and methodologies available to it, or worse still, that unlike other semiotic practices such as music or spoken language, it doesn't need them, and *ipso facto* simply being a performer is the best qualification for interpreting the movement and bodily practices of another culture.

One clearly identifiable problem, then, in this book, lies in the author's unacknowledged use of descriptive terms which come from a method of movement analysis known to many American modern dance practitioners as LMA (Laban Movement Analysis — not to be confused with the script Labanotation). LMA provides a detailed taxonomy of terms applicable to the analysis of dynamic aspects of body movement. This is where Ness's use of such terms as "sequentially incorporating," "curvilinear forms," "integrated movements," "expansive" and "sculpted," mentioned above, are drawn from. As illustrated clearly in the passage cited above, this method of analysis presupposes a categorization of what various dynamics and patterns mean in terms of an ascribed 'normal' range of motion and attendant emotional or other semantic connotations. In other words, inherent in much of the taxonomy are universalist assumptions about how the dynamics and phrasing patterns should be interpreted. While this mode of analysis has proved to be of some value in Western therapeutic and diagnostic settings and in teaching choreographic form in American modern dance, it raises serious problems for anthropology because it is *indigenous* taxonomies of the body, spatial pathways, movement dynamics and their possible semantic range in a given language and culture with which the anthropologist of human movement must deal. In other words, and oversimplifying somewhat, *what looks the same doesn't mean the same in a different body language*, whether one is talking about structure or dynamics. There are no pre-cultural, pre-linguistic universal experiences attached to moving that somehow transcend language and culture, and to assume otherwise is to engage in physical essentialism.

Doubly ironic is the fact that while Ness embraces Stoller's call for a "radical empiricism" in the interests of providing "evocative descriptions and novel insights in opposition to universal explanations," the results of her theoretical and methodological choices land her in the untenable and contradictory theoretical position of promoting the idea that there is indeed some kind of universal experience attached to acts of bodily movement that can be observed, or experienced *as the same* simply by doing.

The goal of "returning bodily experience as a form of consciousness and understanding" to a central place within ethnographic inquiry cannot be achieved through phenomenological discourse because the latter fails to provide a solution to the problem of agency framed by Cartesian mind/body dualism: it simply relocates an equally ambiguous notion of human agency *in* the body instead of *in* the mind (see discussions in Farnell 1994 and Varela 1995a). Attendant problems attached to working out new and adequate

notions of objectivity for anthropological inquiry within in a post-positivist paradigm are not solved by throwing in the towel and resorting to old fashioned subjectivity, which is where the author of this book unwittingly and frequently lands herself. Ness is unfortunately not alone in conflating 'reflexivity' with subjectivity in this way, nor in the naive notion that making theory implicit in ethnographic writing (or, even worse, laboring under the illusion that there isn't any need for theory) is all that is required to make ethnography "more accessible."

In the end, then, we often learn much more about the meanings that Ness experiences and then attributes to the movement patterns of the Cebuan world than we do about the indigenous perspective itself, but this in and of itself does not entirely negate some very good historical documentation and interesting symbolic anthropology on the important roles that the *sinulog* plays in the complex world of a contemporary Philippine City.

References Cited

Farnell, Brenda

1994. Ethno-graphics and the Moving Body. *MAN, Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society*, 29(4): 929-74.

JASHM

1994. Special Issue on Theory and Analysis. *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement*. Vol. 8(1): 1-71.

Varela, Charles

1994. Harré and Merleau-Ponty: Beyond the Absent Moving Body in Embodied Social Theory. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 24(2): 167-185.
 1995. Cartesianism Revisited: The Ghost in the Moving Machine or the Lived Body. In *Action Signs in Cultural Context: The Visible and the Invisible in Movement and Dance*, B. Farnell (Ed.). Metuchen NJ: Scarecrow Press, pp. 216-293.

Williams, Drid

1976. An Exercise in Applied Personal Anthropology. *CORD Dance Research Journal* Vol. ix(1):16-30. [Reprinted as Appendix 1 in Williams 1991, pp. 287-321].
 1991. *Ten Lectures on Theories of the Dance*. Metuchen NJ: Scarecrow Press.