

Editorial Comments

This issue of JASHM presents papers that focus on the issues of 'Orientalism', 'appropriation', and 'authenticity'. The discussion within pertains largely to the use made by American dancers of non-Western danced movements, real and imagined, although the issues themselves are by no means limited to these contexts.

Although these theoretical topics are of major importance to the anthropological and historical study of dances, dancing and dancers, the issues raised are also pertinent to dance educators, for it is not uncommon for today's aspiring young American dancers and choreographers (like their predecessors), to look to non-Western dance forms for inspiration. For example, a young dancer recently asked one of the editors (Farnell) for information about films of American Indian dancing and "Indian" sign language, because she wanted to choreograph a modern dance, the theme of which was to be the "Trail of Tears."¹ Clearly, she had not thought at all about issues of appropriation, authenticity, and the problems of representation involved in such a project, nor had it occurred to her to consult Cherokee dancers, elders and historians. The deeper issue involved here then, is not a matter of defending some kind of "purism" for dance forms, but rather one of *respect for the people to whom the knowledge belongs*, which in turn involves time spent learning and understanding the cultural traditions within which such knowledge plays an integral part, as Williams points out in this issue (see also Williams 2000).

Another aspect of having respect for the people to whom the knowledge belongs has far-reaching implications. For example, Deborah Goemans Turner a graduate Liberal Studies student approached an editor of JASHM (Williams) after she became aware of issues of appropriation and authenticity, having been "creatively motivated by [a] beautiful rock painting of the San [Bushman] people, to bring the painting to life through dance" (personal communication). Turner's proposed choreography would depict the myth of the White Lady in three scenes: 1. the creation of the painting based on traditional San ritual, 2. the "discovery" of the painting (some 2000 years later) by the Abbé Breuil, and white (South African and European) beliefs about the painting (to be danced in balletic style, including a *pas de deux* between the Abbé and the painted figure). Finally, scene 3. wherein the White Lady proved to be not a "lady" at all, nor painted by ancient Egyptians or Minoans, but a male figure, painted by San (see Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1990 and 1994). He regains his identity and heritage, just as the San are in the process of reclaiming their cultural rights today.

Turner, who certainly had no desire to be disrespectful, now finds herself engaged in important debates regarding appropriation and authenticity, including the work of such scholars as Ziff and Rao (1997), Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1990, 1994) and Williams (2000). The issue here directly pertains to the subject-matter of her dance: will the choreography take place along the lines of Glasser's "Transcultural Transformations" (see Glasser 1996: 287-310)?

Is her choreography about the mistaken identity of the White Lady, or, is the dance about her responses to the overall situation?

We start this issue with Adrienne McLean's paper, which penetrates the Orientalism characteristic of many Hollywood films and American theatrical dancing generally in the 1940's and 1950's. She documents how this came about, largely because of the all-pervasive influence of choreographer and dancer Jack Cole. She examines critically the complex intersection of his Orientalist dance practices with a "Camp discourse," that is, with Coles's gay signifying system that became a "hidden transcript" within the dominant heterosexual frame of his films. McLean locates the origins of Cole's practice in the spurious but fashionable oriental dances of Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis with whom Cole trained in the Denishawn school that was founded in Los Angeles in 1915. Other students at the school included Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidemen, the "vanguard of what would eventually become American modern dance" (McLean, page 61). McLean's paper foregrounds the complexity of this Orientalist practice and its links to gender in American culture. She suggests that its aura of transformative power appealed to both early feminists and gay male dancers, whilst simultaneously being linked to patriarchal values of male dominance over sexualized and sometimes passive females.

Williams's paper extends McLean's essay to ask what kind of theory of the dance might inform Cole's Orientalism? She addresses the crucial differences between such Hollywood Orientalist practices and an American artist who chose to master not one but *two* genres of Indian dance—Bharatanatyam and Kathak. Gina Lalli spent more than three years studying in India and also successfully performed there for Indian audiences, many of whom are well-informed about these dance forms. She also studied Sanskrit and learned to play the musical instruments the *vina* and *tanpura*. "In other words she immersed herself in the culture and language from which her two chosen dance forms emanate—necessary if one is authentically to perform the dances of another culture" (Williams, page 82).

Williams continues to set up a number of criteria for situating authenticity before illustrating exactly what this entails for the two classical Indian dance forms in question. She draws upon Rajika Puri's work on Bharatanatyam (1983, 1997) as well as Lalli's own essay, (this issue, pages 100-113) to make a number of interesting comparative points. She also makes an important distinction between wanting to master a dance form and being a "wannabee"—that is, a pretender.

Returning to the problem of "Oriental" or "Exotic dancing" as well as Broadway jazz, and including dances created for tourists, Williams considers the things they have in common; "they are commodified forms of the dance that are created, performed and marketed for the sole purpose of making money. These forms of dancing are designed to arouse enthusiasm, sexual stimulation, visual shock and excitement, and they reinforce popular, stereotyped images of the dancing (and dancers) of other cultures as well as our own." (Williams, page 87).

Following Williams's paper is Lalli's own explanation of the knowledge that informs her practice of Kathak dancing. Her clarification of Kathak's origins, sources and concepts are important, both because they establish the authenticity of her performance(s) and because they provide readers with a kind of 'map' pertaining to the 'world' of Kathak dancing, without which audiences are unable to *understand* what it is they see—"the potential richness and meaning of the world is unobtainable to them" (Williams, page 89). "Laypeople must familiarize themselves with [a dance form's] 'code'—with its rules and meta-rules and the daily practices that constitute the kind of body language that it is. Until these are known, the meanings that can be transmitted through a single technique or idiom of movement—or for that matter through any system of body language—remains inaccessible" (Hart-Johnson 1997: 208-209).

Indeed, this kind of understanding of dance forms is a *sine qua non* for the understanding of *any* dance artist and his or her performances anywhere. Cynthia Roses-Thema's review of Daniel Nagrin's book, *The Six Questions; Acting Technique for Dance Performance* makes the point nicely. The interview the reviewer conducted with Nagrin further supports two of the themes of this issue, 'appropriation' and 'authenticity', because in his book, Nagrin confronts dancers with a question about work on *the internal life* of a dance performance (Roses-Thema, page 121). "Nagrin's thesis on acting is that the dancer must transcend self and become the 'other'" (page 121). His "Questions" provide dancers with a place to start. All six questions can be compressed into one sentence: "who (or what) is doing what to whom (or what) and where, in what context and under what difficulties and why?" (page 121).

This is a tall order, but, the reviewer tells us that in his appendices, Nagrin amplifies themes addressed by his book; for example, the creation of meaning in a dance; the "rule" that a dancer never reveals the inner world upon which his or her dance depends; an analysis of one of his own works, and a reprint of Federico Garcia Lorca's essay, *The Duende*.

In the interview, readers are treated to some of Nagrin's responses to the artistic world in which he still lives and works, contributing to a multi-dimensional view of an artist as *person* in a complex continuum of relationships including little-known aspects of concepts and relations that produced the art for which Nagrin is deservedly well-known and respected.

The Editors

Endnote:

¹ The Trail of Tears refers to an (in)famous historical event in the winter of 1837 during which people of the Cherokee nation were forcibly removed from their homelands in Georgia to "Indian territory" [now Oklahoma]. As many as 4000 died along the way.

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