

## Editorial Comments

In contrast to many previous issues, this edition of JASHM has no specific theme to link the contributions, rather, the three papers by Charles Varela, Brenda Farnell and Drid Williams offer readers a rich variety of theoretical, historical and methodological discussions central to the ongoing development of the anthropology of human movement.

Varela's paper, entitled "Parsonian Action Theory and Dynamic Embodiment" (see p. 1) provides a succinct, insightful exegesis of fundamental problems in the theory of human action developed by the famous American sociologist Talcott Parsons. Such problems appear to have been overlooked by Parsonian scholars to date. Utilizing Harré's 'new realist' theory of causal powers, Varela clearly demonstrates why Parsons's formulation cannot lead to an embodied notion of action, despite his own goals. Ironically, his concept of action prevents the inclusion of an embodied actor while simultaneously requiring such a concept. If action is causal efficacy, then action has to be moving, and Parsons rules out that possibility because he eliminates space as having any relevance to a theory of action.

Farnell's contribution provides extended commentary on papers submitted for a panel entitled, "Birdwhistell, Hall, Lomax and the Origins of Visual Anthropology," which convened at the *Origins of Visual Anthropology Conference* in Göttingen, Germany, June 21-25<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Farnell was invited to be a discussant, but had to cancel plans to attend in person at the last minute. Her comments were circulated amongst the panelists and those attending the session, and were subsequently published in *Visual Anthropology* Volume 16(1): 43-56. Her paper calls for a more rigorous, critical analysis of these three pioneering figures—one that situates their contributions historically. The paper offers suggestions for a more satisfying historical framework for the anthropology of human movement and studies of the visual aspects of human communication.

Williams's contribution to this issue was written for an interdisciplinary academic meeting. On May 6, 2004, a three-day symposium convened by Dr. Paul Bouissac entitled, *A Multidisciplinary Approach to Patterned Human Movement Across Time*, took place at Victoria College, University of Toronto, Canada. The symposium papers and list of participants are available on the Semiotics Institute website ([www.semioticon.com](http://www.semioticon.com), or, [www.chass.utoronto.ca/epc/srb](http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/epc/srb)).

The purpose of the symposium was to explore the possibility of studying gestures and rituals across time, and "to probe the memory resources of the human brain which can account for their continuity and change." Dr. Bouissac was especially interested in how so-called "non-verbal" materials are transmitted over time and how "transformations" occur in the forms of movement and their meanings. It was, so to speak, a tall order—only minimally successful owing to the difficulties of communication across disciplines. Williams's paper, that covers a wide range of subjects of anthropological interest (dances, rites and sign languages) is included in this

issue because of its emphasis on movement literacy, a topic that also arises in Farnell's discussion of Franz Boas's interest in human movement (see p. 16)

The paper, "Modes of Continuity and Change in Action Sign Systems" (see p. 29) opens with stories of continuity and change from ethnographic accounts, then proceeds to a brief examination of the use of film as a recording device for action sign systems. Williams then introduces the work of two archaeologists in the field of dance and human movement and discusses the recording of sign languages. Finally, she explores a case of recent transformation of a ritual (the Dominican rite of the Catholic mass), following this with an exposure of some of the reasons why changes (Bouissac's "transformations") occur in rituals, dances and sign languages throughout the world.

Williams argues that despite the fact of growing interest in the human sciences in human bodies, *the notion of moving persons and their signifying acts/actions* tends to remain absent from ethnographic accounts and sociocultural theory. Once it is realized, however, that 1. people enact their selves to each other in words, movement, and other modes of actions, and that 2. all human selves are culturally defined, as time/space itself is culturally defined, it then becomes possible to develop strategies for a systematic investigation of human actions—whatever their form may take. "So," a reader might ask, "what's the problem?"

The problem turns around a genuine anthropology of embodiment, the most significant technology for which

will turn out to be, not, as might be supposed, video and film technology (although they are important aids), but the invention of an adequate script for writing human actions. What is required is a script that will provide the means to become literate in relation to the medium of movement just as we have been able to achieve literacy in relation to spoken language and music. By 'literacy', I mean the ability to read and write movement so that translation into the medium of words is unnecessary for creating ethnographically appropriate description of actions. The breakthrough that is represented by a movement script (in contrast to various forms of mnemonic devices) is that it provides the means to think and analyse in terms of movement itself. In Ardener's terms (1989[1973]), a script provides a mode of registration and specification that enables the apperception of movement events in ways that are otherwise extremely difficult, if not impossible. It enables body movement to be seen as movement flow rather than as 'successive positions', and as agent-centered action rather than as raw behaviour (Farnell 1994: 937, cited in Williams, this issue, page 37).

Williams argues that the adoption of movement literacy, not only as a methodological resource, but also as a further development in the evolution of social scientific disciplines, is necessary, because when literacy enters the picture, the understanding of continuity and change in patterned human movement across time will finally (if belatedly!) come into its own.

This issue concludes with an index to the contents of JASHM Volumes 9, 10, 11, and 12.

The Editors