

*International Review of Social Research* 2021; 11(1):  
doi: 10.48154/irsr.2021.0021

**Open Access**

*Guest Editors Foreword*

**South Asian dance studies. *nritya*: choreography, aesthetics, heritage**

KAUSTAVI SARKAR

*University of North Carolina at Charlotte  
North Carolina, USA*

†ANGELICA MARINESCU

*CEREFREA-Villa Noël, University of Bucharest  
Bucharest, Romania*

†Corresponding author: [angeli.marinescu@gmail.com](mailto:angeli.marinescu@gmail.com)

[Received 15.06.2021; Accepted 22.06.2021]

This issue of the International Review of Social Research addresses Indian dance forms across the prevalent labels of classical, contemporary, commercial, and somatic practice from interdisciplinary perspectives. The contributions critically engage with particular forms within their technical precepts, choreographic works, and canonical repertoire, embedding them within sociopolitical contexts. The issue is looking to present the wide scope and appeal for Indian dance in indigenous and international environments. In this issue, papers have theoretical foci ranging from established disciplines, such as religious studies, queer theory, critical cultural theory, performance studies, feminist theory, and practice-as-research. The voice of both artists and theorists are heard in this issue of the International Review of Social Research, a journal published by the University of Bucharest, Romania.

### **Overview of dance research: from anthropology and ethnology to 'dance studies'**

Dance is "an expression of human behavior that is at once social, aesthetic, spiritual, political, economic, sexual, and semiotic; in short, it is an art and labor, physical and metaphysical, personal and social" (Chakravarti, Gupta, 2010). Research over dance, in its multi-dimensional aspects, encompassing history, aesthetics, identity, but also multi- and inter-cultural approaches, all embedded and embodied in the contemporary dance practices, may be found in a large area of disciplines, such as: cultural studies, anthropology, art history, dance history, religious studies, postcolonial and feminist studies etc.

Janet O'Shea identifies four strands of research laying the grounds for the contemporary studies in dance (not exhaustive and sometimes overlapping): 1) anthropology, folklore, ethnography (the first academic dance writings); 2) the writings of experts, dance analysis; 3) philosophy, especially aesthetics and phenomenology; 4) historical studies including biography and dance reconstruction (O'Shea, 1998). Anthropology, with its historic perspective on the "other" (par rapport to the West) dealt with dance in popular representations and marginalized aspects of society (O'Shea, 1998). However, the anthropological interest in dance leaves behind a problematic legacy to dance studies: Curt Sachs proposed a comprehensive model for dances all over the world, but with a colonial and imperialistic taxonomies and ethnocentric values (see the chapter 'The Evolution of the Spectacular Dance and the Oriental Civilization', Sachs, 1937: 218-236); in the historical context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the collection of folk dances of Cecil Sharp England was linked to the imperative of preservation, supported by the emergence of the folk dance revival, rooted in nostalgia and post-industrialism anxieties about the "loss" of authentic community experiences, a model carried forward by Franziska Boas and Gertrude Prokosh Kurath, for example, by recording the dances of marginal populations (Boas, 1949, Prokosh Kurath, 1956, Goelner & Shea Murphy, 1995). Ruth St. Denis (St. Denis, 1927), Ted Shawn (1929), and La Meri collected the dances of the "other", interpreted them, and displayed them for the viewers of the West (see Gaerlan, 1999, Desmond, 2001). It is to be noted that "these methods of ethnographic collection offer cultural 'authenticity' as a focal point for anti-colonial resistance" (Carter, O'Shea, 2010). The cross-cultural analysis of dance emerged in the 1970s, with, among others, the work of Adrienne Kaeppler in the U.S. (Kaeppler, 1971) and John Blacking in the UK (Blacking, 1954); they brought a structuralist approach to the study of dance, drawing out units of movements as an indication of dances overall patterning and locating dance within larger events, but giving less attention to meaning and representation (Foster, 1986).

The passage from structuralism and functionalism (that emphasized kinship, hierarchy, etc.) to symbolic anthropology and semiotic approaches, which included ritual (Turner, 1974) and body (Lévi-Strauss, 1955), integrated bodily practices into the study of culture (Carter, O'Shea, 2010). The 1980's and 1990's mark a turn towards reflexivity and investigation of the politics of representation in dance studies. These approaches changed their position in time, "to

address identity issues and their articulation to dance, a shift from an authoritative position to a multiplicity of voices, and changing relationship between performance, choreography and writing" (Carter, O'Shea, 2010).

### **Approaching South Asian and Indian dance research**

Our aim in approaching Indian and South Asian dance was to move beyond the realm of "orientalist" or "exotic" representations (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003: 13-27). Sachs defined "Orient" as a site of two opposed poles: sensuality on one hand, and on the other hand religious fervor and spirituality (Sachs, 1937). It is to be noted, once again, as Said expressed, that the Orient "was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said 1978: 1). "Orientalism" remained for a long time "the site of dreams, images, fantasies, myths, obsession, and requirements" (Bhabha, 1994: 71), while "exoticism" might be better understood if we consider it as "a way of establishing order in an unknown world through fantasy; a daydream guided by pleasurable self-reassurance and expansionism. It is the seemingly harmless side of exploitation, cloaked as it is in playfulness and delirium [...] a practice of representation through which identities are frivolously allocated" (Savigliano, 1995: 189).

This issue provides anti-orientalist and anti-colonial commentaries across a wide range of topics ranging from American modern dance, expressional repertoire in traditional Indian dance, virtual dance education in the pandemic, the intangible heritage of dance identified as folk, semiotic and neuroscientific approaches to understanding movement. Focusing on dance pedagogy and performance from the perspective of practitioners and theorists based on the structuring of Indian movement practices raises the question of the ethics of the representation of the 'other,' while at the same time vouching for modalities of movement travel across the identifying-marker of the nation-state. Vouching for a democratic ethos of dance education, NandyMazumdar and Mani Maran also addresses modes of movement transmission in educational contexts by focusing on intuitive and sensory learning respectively. It is important for artists of color to reflect on their creative process especially since it gets eclipsed either by problematic discussions of historical continuity of tradition and heritage, or by the acutely necessary decolonial theoretical interventions. Curator, vocalist, and ethnomusicologist MA Jyothi presents her creative collaborations with dancers and choreographers in two articles, one of which provides a linguistic analysis. Her other collaboration with Sarkar and Dandavate, focuses on theorizing the collaborative process of music, performance, and choreography through the lens of practice. The majority of articles in this issue, unfortunately, represent Indian dancers belonging to the body of dance recognized as classical by the Indian nation-state. While classical dances, such as Odissi (originating from eastern Indian state of Odisha) and Bharatnatyam (originating from southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu), enjoy respect, patronage, and dominance in the cultural economy, the dances identified as folk remain marginalized. Marinescu's article on Odisha's folk dance, *Dalkhai* addresses the discrepancy where she argues how the form is featured as concert practice.

The article authored by Kaustavi Sarkar, M.A. Jyothi and Rohini Dadavate approaches Abhinaya as Practice-as-Research, emphasizing the collaborative process of an artistic creation. The article brings together the voices of the dancer, the choreographer, and the music composer, working together in a project called *Nachi Meera*. The article documents the collaborative process borrowing from scholar Robin Nelson's Practice-as-Research (PaR) methodology, also explaining the intricacies of South Asian aesthetics or the *Rasa* theory that governs the mood of execution by the dancer. The article shows the imbrications of the various strands of theory and practice, on one end, reflects on the artistic process from different perspectives, on the other,

showing the primacy of the artistic product, that is, the visceral dancing body as central to *Abhinaya's* layering of multiple modes of meaning—textual, musical, percussive, and gestural.

The article by MA Jyothi, “A Reflection on The Inter-Semiotic Transformation of Select Vacanas of Akka Mahadevi into a Music-Dance Production”, is based on a project set out to curate dance videos of select vacanas, meaning, religious free verses in Kannada, of Akka Mahadevi, a twelfth century poet from Karnataka, India. The symbols, images and metaphors used by the poet from discursive fields such as *Bhakthi* movement (a spiritual reform movement in India), Vedas, Upanishads, Yoga and feminism were re-interpreted through traditional music and dance styles recognized as classical arts by the national government, by a process of intersemiotic transformation. The paper analyses strategies of bringing poetry into the realm of aesthetic experience of viewers through the performing arts.

Durga Devi Mani Maran authored an experimental practice-based research study on how to communicate *Sringara Rasa* (the emotion and aesthetic mood of love) through sensory modalities. The author argues that some of the problems present in the current landscape of learning Bharathanatyam (a southern Indian classical dance form) dance include the codification of the form and its authoritarian pedagogy. This has led many students to feel incompetent and has consequentially made the form unattainable. The approach aims at re-examining the theory and practice of poetic texts to bridge the gaps in learning.

The next article, authored by Monali Nandy-Mazumdar, “Thinking Minds, Virtual Bodies”, emphasizes the impact of the pandemic over dance education and performance, in Indian Classical Dance. Speaking from the vantage point of a learner as well as performer, the author notes the mixed reactions due to the deviations from the intimate personified practices which are inherent in the traditional ICD system to the virtual learning mode. The paper provides specific significant methodologies which can benefit the knowledge exchange process in ICD especially in the online environment. These ways will appreciably enrich the desired purposes of the “felt” and “embodied” which may have been lost with the shift to the virtual scenario.

The article entitled “Reflections on *Bharatanatyam* and Neuroscience. A Dance Studies Perspective”, authored by Sloka Iyengar, Chandana R. Hosur, Mansi Thakkar, Drashti Mehta and Vibhakar Kotak builds on recent interest in the convergence of arts and sciences, thus taking into consideration, from the perspective of dance studies, the intersection between the disciplines of Bharatanatyam, a classical Indian dance, and neuroscience. The authors explore conceptual areas of convergence between the two fields as well as specific points of connection using language acquisition, rhythm, music, and cognition as examples.

In her research, Angelica Marinescu explores a traditionally religion-based folk dance, *Dalkhai*, from the State of Odisha, India. Connected to the agrarian culture of local *Adivasi* communities, the *Dalkhai* gradually developed into a cultural pattern of Odisha, turned nowadays into a proscenium representation. Folklore is defined as intangible cultural heritage of humanity, according to UNESCO, thus the author approaches the ritual in this perspective, in order to understand this initially complex choric ritual, involving a tradition, music and dance, while enhancing the importance of safeguarding cultural diversity and confronting cultural globalization.

This issue centers practitioners’ artistic perspectives in the field of dance across history and contemporaneity. It provides the concerns of artists as well as theorists and often bridging their gaps through collaborative authorship. The issue recognizes its inability to problematize the dominance of India with respect to dance in South Asia.

## REFERENCES

- Bhabha, H. K. (1994) *Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Blacking, J. (1954) 'Some notes on a theory of African rhythm advanced by Erich von Hornbostel'. *African Music: Journal of the International Library of African Music*. Roodepoort, International Library of African Music, v. 1, n. 2, pp. 12-20.
- Boas, F. (1949) 'The Negro and the Dance as an Art'. *Phylon*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 38-42.
- Carter, A. & J. O'Shea (eds.) (1998) *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition [2010]., London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.
- Chakravarty, P. and N. Gupta (eds) (2010) *Dance Matters. Performing India*. New Delhi: Routledge.
- Desmond, J. (2001) 'Dancing Out the Difference: Cultural Imperialism and Ruth St. Denis's Radha of 1906'. in Dils, Ann/Cooper Albright, Ann (eds.), *Moving History, Dancing Cultures. A Dance History Reader*. Wesleyan: Wesleyan University Press, pp. 256-270.
- Foster, S. L. (1986) *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Gaerlan, B. S. (1999) 'In the Court of the Sultan: Orientalism, Nationalism, and Modernity in Philippine and Filipino American Dance'. *Journal of Asian American Studies*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Volume 2, Number 3, October 1999, pp. 251-287
- Goellner, E. W. & J. Shea Murphy (1995) *Bodies of the Text: Dance as Theory, Literature as Dance*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
- Kaeppler, A. (1971) 'Tongan dance: a study in cultural change', *Ethnomusicology*, Society of Ethnomusicology, 14 (2): 266-277. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, Middletown.
- Kurath, G. P. (Jul-Sep 1956) 'Dance Relatives of Mid-Europe and Middle America: A Venture in Comparative Choreology'. *The Journal of American Folklore*. American Folklore Society, 69 (273): 286-298.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1955) *Tristes Tropiques*. Paris: Union générale d'éditions.
- Shay, A. & B. Sellers-Young (2003) 'Belly Dance: Orientalism, Exoticism, Self-Exoticism'. *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 35, no. 1: 13-37.
- Savigliano, M. E. (1995) *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Sachs, C. (1937) *World History of Dance*. New York: Norton.
- Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Shawn, T. (1929) *Gods who Dance*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co.
- St. Denis, R. (1927) 'The Dance of the East'. *Theatre Arts Monthly. The International Magazine of Theatre and Screen*, August 1927, pp. 605-612.
- Stebbins, G. (1977) *Delsart System of Expression*. New York: Dance Horizons.
- Turner, V. (1974) *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.