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## Dance on Its Own Terms: Histories and Methodologies


edited by Melanie Bales and Karen Eliot. 2013. Oxford University Press. 464 pp., 77 illustrations, notes, index. $99 hardcover, $39.95 paper.
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For a couple of decades now, dance scholars have been blessed with a seemingly endless identity crisis. That is, the explosion of dance scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s, and the felicitous proliferation of methodologies this engendered, has led many dance scholars to pursue specific research interests and broad disciplinary queries in tandem. Getting a grip on just what the field is up to has been a shared project, and edited collections have played a pronounced role, particularly for undergraduates, in laying out the state of the field. The origins of dance studies (particularly its debts to anthropology and literary studies), and its rise alongside related critical discourses (particularly cultural and performance studies), made for a

motley origin and a constantly pluralizing maturation.

In the 1990s, a series of important collections helped to define the ever-malleable, usually interdisciplinary parameters of dance studies. Collections in the first decade of the 2000s often focused on subdisciplines or specialized lines of inquiry. One of these, *Dance Discourses: Keywords in Dance Research*, took up the question of methodology head-on, considering the ways in which dance is not only subject to, but productive of, critical theory. Its introduction diagnosed two responses among scholars to the heady theorizations of the '90s—one that embraced interdisciplinarity, and another that "emphasized the need to find methods and instruments of analysis within dance itself" (Franco and Nordera 2007, 8).

An important new volume of historical and critical essays, *Dance on Its Own Terms: Histories and Methodologies*, edited by Melanie Bales and Karen Eliot, enters the disciplinary scrum knowingly. At a few points, its Introduction frames the collection as a response to the project taken up by *Dance Discourses*, and plants itself firmly in the dance-centered camp. The editors are unambiguous as to why a dance-centric criticism is merited: "In their eagerness to adopt theoretical language from other disciplines, dance scholars have lost fluency in their own language" (4). I suspect that a host of dance scholars would assent to that view, but would greet a concurrent claim more warily. The editors worry that "the body is theorized as a site for the study of race, class, and gender, but many dance students are inadequately equipped to observe and write about bodies in movement," and likewise that "monolithic assumptions impose themselves on our attention where nuance and sophisticated criticism is needed instead" (4). It is a trend, they claim, that too often leads toward "foregone conclusions." One faint implication here is that political emphases were imported to dance studies by theoretical models external to dance; a stronger implication is that interdisciplinary emphases obscure rather than illuminate the nuances specific to dance.

Partly anticipating such objections, the editors specify that "the political nature of dance is, we think, inarguable," but that the "wealth and ambiguity of dance's history" can best emerge by "examining dances within their own contextual frames" (6–7). In discussing their historiographic impulses, the editors present the project as a progressive one that seeks to include a wider variety of historical actors, and many of the essays keep to that objective. The collection takes an approach that is at once historicist and formalist, reaching toward contingencies particular to dance (for example, prioritizing primary sources like dance notation), and likewise harnessing analytic frameworks particular to dance (for example, Laban Movement Analysis). It would be reductive to suggest that the editors see no place for theory, no value in cross-disciplinary work; rather, they have embraced a dance-outward approach as one means for advancing the field. Whether this dance-centrism is a necessary corrective or a questionable revanchism (or both) will and ought to be the subject of further debate.

Lurking behind this debate is a broad question: has dance studies as a field come far enough along to dance on its own two feet? The collection will elicit different responses to that question from its different readers, since it illustrates both the advantages and the pitfalls of its declared approach. It is telling that some of the collection's strongest essays manage to meld dance-specific rigor with a sustained engagement of other disciplines.

The volume is thoughtfully grouped into three parts, each with a different emphasis: the first on performance and reconstruction, the second on pedagogy and the choreographic process, and the third on systems of notation. While these groupings hold together fairly well, plenty of the essays also fulfill the editors' hope of speaking to each other from across the collection. Few of those connections are explicit: the focus on dance seems to have left many contributors hesitant to theorize broadly, and the introductions to each of the book's three parts treat their contents with a light hand. In other words, not only dance in general, but each essay individually, exists on its own terms. It is to the editors' credit that they still cross-pollinate so productively. It is also perhaps partly the product of a separate dynamic: most of the volume's contributors are connected in some way to The Ohio State University.

The essays touch on a range of issues, many of which deal with the process of reconstruction and the status of the dance text. Karen Eliot's excellent essay is an apt opening to the volume,



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as it considers how specific historical pressures (here, those coalescing in Great Britain during the Second World War) form historically specific ideas of the ballet canon, in this case those cultivated under the aegis of two notably different company directors. Ninette de Valois, viewing tradition as an open system, presented restagings that sought to "revivify the past in contemporary terms" (27). Mona Inglesby hewed more closely to a conservative idea of the traditional, and saw the project of preserving the classics as, among other things, "a rampart against the tides of war" (30). These attitudes are traced in part by studying their differing relationships to the *régisseur émigré* Nicholas Sergeyev.

Of immense help in framing this and related discussions is the term "culture of reconstruction" (67), introduced by Deborah Friedes Galili in her contribution. In Galili's account, this term "comprises the attitudes and approaches toward reconstructive practices," as determined by historically and nationally specific values, predominant theories of reconstructive practice, and the institutions facilitating a reconstruction. Galili considers the way in which the present contemporary dance scene in Israel privileges not supposedly faithful reproduction, but "recycling" (a choreographer's remixing and reframing of their own past work) as a reconstructive mode.

Many of the cultures of reconstruction discussed across the volume resemble something like Galili's recycling model, or at least show the ways in which cultures of reconstruction are always subject to local pressures and serendipities. Several of the essays demystify the very idea of reconstruction, elucidating the nuances of time and place that prioritize one choreographic quality over another, or infuse wholly contemporary idioms under the guise of authenticity. One welcome move in the collection is the extension of this revisionist attitude toward the pedagogy of the *danse d'école*, pointing to the ways in which the personalities and proclivities of teachers and mentors do not so much transmit as transform the traditions of ballet training. Carrie Gaiser Casey, noting the role of homosocial relationships in Anna Pavlova's company, seeks to "complicate our understanding of feminist ballet history" by demonstrating that the dissemination of the ballet tradition is a far from passive affair (207). Jessica Zeller, in her study of the noted teacher Rochelle Zide-Booth, explores the eclectic syncretism that can operate on both an individual and a national scale. Reconstructing past dances, and practicing a pedagogy, emerge as equally inflected practices; further work on how these phenomena intersect promises great rewards.

Several essays make clear that the *how* of reconstruction is a politically and conceptually fraught process. Ann Dils's essay takes up one instance of such politics, the reconfiguration of racial caricatures in her own 2009 recreation of the 1920 Jean Cocteau/Darius Milhaud farce *Le Boeuf sur le Toit*. Dils suggests that reconstructions might also "rehearse" the audience, "imbedding information into the performance that prompts acts of historical imagination and critical reflection" (44). This reminder—that historical dance texts include not only what happens onstage, but intended affective responses—calls to mind a distinction that Mark Franko made in 1989, that "whereas reconstruction at its weakest tries to recreate a reality without a predetermined effect, reinvention aims at creating precisely the same effect" (Franko 1989, 58). Franko's observations, and Dils's reflections, indicate that in the absence of staging details, attention swings quickly toward what might be reproduced in the audience—a process no less mediated, and at least as complicated. Catherine Turocy's contribution is the only essay that takes a boots-on-the-ground approach to a related dilemma, by providing exercises for practitioners who want to recreate not necessarily the spectacular effect, but the performer's affect, when dancing historical works.[1] All of this points toward a predicament that haunts *Dance on Its Own Terms*: in "extending our scholarly empathy" toward a dance's original political context, our own politics inevitably come along for the ride (7). The editors, and some of their contributors, pay attention to this dynamic; left unresolved is just how far off the politically clarifying force of recent (and interdisciplinary) theory can be held.

Two of the collection's strongest essays, if dance-centric, keep an eye on developments in other fields. Harmony Bench looks at the participatory culture of YouTube, and how it allows "viral choreographies" to travel from body to body. Here, she considers Beyoncé's music video, "Single Ladies," and how a multiplicity of online parodies facilitates the de- and

re-stabilization of various masculinities. Throughout, Bench pays close attention to the negotiative role of specific movements, and the discussion is greatly aided by her engagement of affect theory and queer theory. Victoria Watts's essay, productively employing the insights of Visual Culture Studies, surveys notations systems from several periods. She suggests that since notations emerge "from the needs and ethos of their unique times and particular cultures" (367), they "not only document bodies in motion, but also form a visible trace of how movement is seen" (372). Her analysis ranges from the broad stakes of accounting for such scopic regimes, on down to the minutiae of one case study, George Balanchine's *Serenade*. (Melanie Bales also discusses this ballet; this is one of several points where scholars cover similar terrain to advantageous effect.)

Watts's essay, and also the volume's section on notation as a whole, counterbalance the many inquiries into cultures of reconstruction, suggesting that we might benefit from a complementary term, perhaps "cultures of documentation," as a reminder that whether dealing with a notation, music score, film, photo, or verbal description, each medium and method of documentation is influenced by a host of historical contingencies. This brings up a tricky question: what different methodologies do these different forms of record necessitate? Lillian Lawler's frequent warning, across her scholarly career, against reading too much dance into too inconclusive an image, was an admonition of enduring importance.[2] Some essays discuss their records attentively, questioning when an image might be staged, or when a sequence seems re-choreographed for film. At plenty of points, Lawler's skeptical approach to sources might have come in handy, especially when synthesizing a variety of record-types, suggesting that we must continue to explore how primary source methodologies should shift when juggling multiple media. The challenge of using primary sources is one area where interdisciplinary work would seem to offer valuable opportunities for dance studies. (To toss out two examples: what might the methodologies of microhistory, or of the "new" New Bibliography, contribute to the use of dance records? Those two fields are by now a few decades old, but their focus on documentary traces and questions of scale aligns well with the present concerns of dance studies. The still-evolving digital turn in the humanities, whatever the direction of its turn, offers a very different, more broadly attuned sense of how we might use field-specific records.)

The essays illustrate one enduring challenge specific to dance scholars. Textual descriptions of dance, especially lengthy ones, sometimes do a double disservice: not only can they sap the life out of the dance described, but they also have a way of injecting strange lethargies into the progression of a critical argument. It takes a strong and selective prose stylist to pull them off; some of the critics anthologized here manage this quite well, and some do not. Attending to dance on its own terms, and keeping the focus on movement analysis rather than movement description, might in the future mean turning to interactive media with increasing resolve.

Further discussion of dance on its own terms will also involve extending the insights of this collection to a wider pool of topics. The editors are careful to state that while it is their "intention to value the richness and vibrancy of the dance field," they "make no claims to address all of it" (3). The collection's focus, somewhat narrower than this suggests, is decidedly on Western concert dance, largely on ballet, and centers firmly on the late nineteenth century and onward. As a result, we receive a nuanced picture of 20th-century ballet. It will be rewarding to see what other dance-centered methodologies emerge through the examination of a more culturally and temporally broad set of dance forms.

It would be unfair to fault the collection, in sticking to its stated aim of distancing interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, for failing to account for any given recent critical trend. It does however mean that when prominent ideas in adjacent fields go unaddressed, some of the volume's arguments will be ripe for fruitful engagement. For example, in some of the essays, the attitude toward the dance-text that predominates stresses its ephemeral and transitory qualities (positions we might connect to those of Marcia B. Siegel and Peggy Phelan)—an ephemerality that is arrested in systems of notation and films to varying degrees. Recent trends in performance studies have proposed different ontologies, partly through theorizing archives and reenactments, for example in the work of



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Philip Auslander, Rebecca Schneider, and Diana Taylor (Auslander 2008; Scheider 2011; Taylor 2003). These discussions of records and reconstructions would at many points accord productively with the claims of this collection, and at other times problematize them. On another front, since the nation-state is a prominent entity in the anthology, the emphases of transnational studies (for example, on diasporic cultural production and on cross-border patterns of exchange) provide a rich body of insight to complement and counter this collection's tendency to focus on national categories.

It is inevitable that some scholars who favor interdisciplinary work will see the absence of these and other discussions as an omission; hopefully, they will also see it as an opportunity. By turning the field's gaze inward with this collection, the editors have facilitated some much-needed temperature-taking. They have intervened in a sticky debate, producing results that should be both contested and respected. The scholars collected in *Dance on Its Own Terms*, by supplying at times provocative answers to enduring questions, have ensured that we will continue to debate not just the vagaries of dance's many histories, but the vagaries of its many historians.

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## Notes

1. I should mention that Catherine Turocy was, for some time, my boss. Having loved working with her, I no doubt lack for objectivity.

2. Lawler discusses the problem of pictorial records as source material throughout *The Dance in Ancient Greece* (1964), a theme that also crops up in many of her earlier articles. She weighed in on such questions to humorous effect in a letter to *The Classical Journal* (1965, 267).

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# Dance and Politics

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It is common for many dance artists and scholars to move within nations and between countries as part of their professions. With this multitude of lived, global trajectories comes the awareness of site-specific, issue-specific, and audience-specific views on dance, work with dance, and reception of dance. One such intriguing aspect concerns different articulations of dancing the political, and of defining, debating, and comparing its forms, affects, and effects. What were the political factors behind the arrests and killings of Indonesian classical dancers between 1965 and 1966 (Larasati 2013)? How can these historical events be related to the desires of today's European choreographers to create political dances without explicit political content or identity politics (Hammergren 2012)? Why was dance made a tool of foreign policy and exported across the world during the Cold War by both the Soviet Union and the United States, and why does this not happen today (Franko 2007, 17)? Why has the field of Dance Studies taken so long to recognize the established tradition of investigations of the interrelations of migration and dance (Scolieri 2008, v)?

With questions like these in mind, it is timely to see the publication of an anthology on dance and politics that seeks to explore "the implications of dance in the explicitly political realm" (xiii). As editor Alexandra Kolb herself states, the definition of the expression "an