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## Dancing Culture Religion

by Sam Gill. 2012. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. 219 pp., bibliography, index. \$61.16 cloth, \$30.08 paper.  
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Sam Gill's *Dancing Culture Religion* engages with Western philosophical traditions and a wide range of cultural dance practices in order to theorize the potentiality that dancing as a paradigm has to offer studies of culture and religion. Gill's prolific research on Native American and Aboriginal religious cultures (Gill 1987, 1998) grounds the work alongside other ethnographic examples, such as classical dance and shadow theater in Java, bolero in a Costa Rican nightclub, salsa classes taught to a group of high school students in Colorado, and ballet in the final scene of the movie *Billy Elliot*. Gill employs the theoretical work of scholars ranging from Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Renaud Barbaras to Brian Massumi and José Gil to explore and understand how dancing functions as an integral form of "self-movement," which the author defines as movement that is "primary to and inseparable from aliveness" and therefore "profoundly constitutive of subjectivity" (16–7). Throughout the text, the author places his theories on dancing in dialogue with leading religious historian Jonathan Z. Smith and his lecture at the University of Colorado in 2010 titled, "Now You See It Now You Won't," which focuses on enactment and application in religion rather than objectification and description. Ultimately, Gill claims that religious studies would have much to gain if dancing were to become a theoretical core for the field, precisely because dancing's emphasis on repetition, technique, play, ephemerality, and self-othering (the dancer's ability to fully become the other while still wholly embodying

the self) are all central to understanding how people enact and experience religious ideas.

Three overarching aims emerge throughout the course of the book's six chapters. First, Gill creates a primary focus on dancing rather than dance, keeping the analysis rooted in active movement rather than the study of a fixed object. Second, the author's theory of the primacy of self-movement elides traditional understandings of Cartesian dualism's hierarchical division through a focus on "dynamic interrelatedness" and the "structuralities of movement" (195). Gill therefore refuses to claim the theoretical frameworks of "body" or "materiality," which have become popular scholarly alternatives to a more traditional study of religion that values a primacy of belief (Vasquez 2010). Finally, Gill consistently works to theorize dancing as an alternative academic approach to more traditional methods of study predicated on the assumption of the mind/body split, instead asserting that a focus on dancing activates the living dynamics of what is studied rather than fixing through objectification. As Gill states simply, "One kills as one dissects" (195).

With these three ideas functioning as a framework, each chapter is structured to build upon the last in order to construct a working theorization of dancing. The first chapter focuses broadly on the concept of movement, emphasizing the primacy of movement as fundamental to how we come to know and structure our world proprioceptively. Through this formulation, dancing itself becomes an experiment with vitality, which allows for an experience of self-movement to occur. This analysis of movement is narrowed in the second chapter through a focus on gesture, which is both a habitual body technique of a specific culture and a means of transformation within that culture. The third chapter's focus on "self-othering" is foundational to Gill's argument as he utilizes Javanese shadow theater to understand Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh ontology. By focusing specifically on the puppet's shadow as a doubling process where the shadow is separate from the puppet yet also inseparable from it, Gill argues that this art form illustrates Merleau-Ponty's theory of flesh as two-sided and reversible, for the "object touched (perceptible) and subject touching (percipient) are at once distinct and the same" (113). Emphasizing the self-other structurality of dancing, Gill posits that the dancing body blurs

the boundary between the flesh of the world (Merleau-Ponty's conception of a body that extends into the world) and the limits of our own skin, for the dance and the dancer are identical yet separable.

The fourth chapter's exploration of play is provocative in its rejection of play as leisure, instead positing that play "denotes the principles in which structural oppositions, even structural anomalies, may at once be held together without reconciliation or reduction" (132). Analyzing Zuni and Yaqui masking ceremonies, Gill conceptualizes play as a site where religion focuses on process and becoming as opposed to resolution or an achievement of a goal. The final two chapters on seduction and dancing finally broach the topic of dancing more explicitly, and it is in Gill's explication of bolero in Costa Rica and his analysis of Jean Baudrillard's writings on seduction that the philosophical and anthropological framework on "movement" that he has more generally set up in the earlier chapters finally comes to focus more concretely on "dancing." Baudrillard's definition of seduction as a "pure play of appearances" buttresses Gill's argument that dance is enmeshed in a world of signs that seduces through what is signified and is rooted in "the desire to cross distance to fulfill a need, yet desire and movement continue only as the absence of fulfillment persists" (173). Of particular interest is Gill's reading of seduction in opposition to production, and his critique of the world of *dance* as a means toward masculinist production models of power that seek immortality or irreversibility, when in actuality *dancing* as a feminist seduction model, reveal the illusion of this imagined desire precisely because it seeks to produce nothing real. The final chapter, simply titled "Dancing," primarily functions as a conclusion that reasserts the recurring invisibility of dancing within religious scholarship and suggests that dancing as a theoretical perspective embraces the paradoxes and contradictions of religious life instead of explaining away ambiguity and incongruity.

*Dancing Culture Religion's* impetus to bring dance studies into conversation with the field of religious studies is a timely and important contribution to two fields that are built upon an interdisciplinarity that is grounded in both anthropological methods and phenomenological inquiry.<sup>1</sup> Gill's text succeeds in engaging with Western philosophical traditions that are not

concretely about dancing, but still seem to open up spaces where dancing itself can become a theorizing about the "minded body" (108). It is Gill's thoughtful engagement with these ideas and his ability to concretize those ideas in specific, firsthand accounts of cultural dancing bodies that make this work accessible, particularly to a religious studies audience not regularly engaged with dance as theory-making. I found particularly exciting Gill's reading of Baudrillard's seduction as counter to Martha Graham's famous assertion that movement never lies. The politics of aligning dancing with play and seduction, and positing dancing as immanent to but not necessarily encompassed by the imperative of production, are compelling constructs worth more consideration. Finally, Gill's enthusiasm for dance as practice and willingness to insert his own dancing body into his writing creates a self-reflective narrative that demonstrates the impact that dancing has had on his own understanding of religious practice.

As much as this text engages with scholars of religion and anthropology, Gill's references to dance studies scholars such as Susan Foster and Marta Savigliano are left undeveloped. Citing Foster's *Reading Dancing* (1988), Gill uses the text to question the facile assumption that dancing always desires to be read. However, placing his research in conversation with Foster's later texts, such as *Choreographing Empathy* (2010), would, perhaps, have had a profound impact on Gill's discussion of the neurobiological research that is becoming fundamental to the study of both religion and dance. Similarly, Gill utilizes Savigliano's *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (1995) as a parallel to his own explication of salsa, but a deeper engagement with the material would have revealed how the performative textuality of Savigliano's work in fact seeks to enact the dancing text as part of the very academic shift that Gill seeks to enact through his own study. So while this book makes great strides in incorporating dance into the academic study of religion, I propose that Gill's impulse would be richer if scholars of religion and dance studies were to enter into a more meaningful and substantial dialogue concerning the relationship of the two fields.

A final concern is revealed in the structure of this and other texts that use Western philosophy as a starting point for analyzing the dances and philosophies of non-Western peoples. Gill's

purposeful juxtaposition of Western philosophy with Indian Hinduism, Native American religious practice, and Javanese performance, for example, upholds a separation that still seems to value Western ideas as the primary means for understanding danced philosophies in different cultures. I wonder if this is not an injustice to the rich and complex philosophical systems and the respective writers of these culturally “othered” traditions of inquiry. If Gill were to take Hindu belief and philosophy as the foundational viewpoint, I imagine that his understanding of gesture within *bharata natyam* would be very different than an interpretation that relies on the works of Marcel Mauss and André Leroi-Gourhan.

Overall, I found this book to be a compelling foray into the possibilities that dancing as the “dynamic structurality that is common to all forms of movement we call ‘dance’” (202) holds for a scholarly understanding of religious culture. Similarly, I think Gill’s research also reveals the potential role that religion as a lens can play in the future of dance studies—a focus that at this point is under theorized in contemporary scholarship. *Dancing Culture Religion* as the first book published in a new series on Studies in Body and Religion is significant precisely because the editors began this exploration with a book that focuses on the dancing body. Hopefully, it will be the first in a long line of texts that investigate what dancing, the body, and religion have to offer one another.

Michelle T. Summers  
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## Note

1. The research of Kimerer LaMothe in *Nietzsche’s Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values* (2011) and *Between Dancing and Writing: The Practice of Religious Studies* (2004) offers one of the only other examples of a scholar in religious studies who is working to bridge the fields of dance and religion.

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## Hermes Pan: The Man Who Danced with Fred Astaire

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As sensitive to the eye of the camera as to the lines of the human body, the choreography of Hermes Pan both changed dance for camera and manipulated the ways in which Americans watch dance. In his new book, *Hermes Pan: The Man Who Danced with Fred Astaire*, John Franceschina captures the essence of a man dedicated to the art of making dances for Hollywood. Unlike some of Franceschina’s previous roles as editor or translator, this recent publication allows him greater latitude to explore his own authorial voice. Franceschina examines the choreographic prodigy alongside American history and technology. He also demonstrates his extensive knowledge in disparate fields by offering detailed accounts of the artistic and culturally rich world in which Pan lived. *Hermes Pan* traverses both the slight and the scholarly; it is an instructive text laced with juicy entertainment gossip.

While Franceschina’s earlier publications have demonstrated the author’s expertise in the fields of theater and music,<sup>1</sup> *Hermes Pan* proves that he also has an excellent grasp of both dance and dance for camera. He uses technical dance and camera terminologies and then supports these terms with encyclopedic descriptions. Additionally he fills the text with dense historical, technological, and musical theater facts, so that even those well versed in these