

Tomie Hahn: SENSATIONAL KNOWLEDGE. Embodying culture through Japanese dance.

Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007, 197 pp., figures, photographs, DVD examples.¹

Tomie Hahn characterizes herself as a performer and ethnologist whose activities span a wide range of topics from Japanese traditional performing arts to Monster Truck rallies. She received her PhD in ethnomusicology from Wesleyan University and is currently an associate professor in the Department of the Arts at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, NY. Her ethnography *Sensational Knowledge* was the 2008 recipient of the Society for Ethnomusicology's Allan P. Merriam Prize, which recognizes the most distinguished English-language monograph published in the field of ethnomusicology.

Hahn has studied Japanese dance since the age of four in New York and Tokyo for more than thirty years. She explains that this book is her attempt to comprehend how her body has come to *know* this movement. Therefore, a sentence told her by her teacher in Tokyo: "Know with your body" becomes a crucial opening statement of the book: "*Know with you body,*" *headmaster Tachibana Hiroyo said during my dance lesson, as she gently drew her hand to her chest. In this fleeting moment she succinctly imparted a cultural sensibility, a Japanese way of knowing, that moved beyond these few words and gesture. Curious about my own understanding of such moments,*

¹ I thank my colleague Vít Zdrálek, who introduced this book to me.

and the embodiment of such sensibilities conveyed during lessons, I was drawn to research how culture is passed down, or embodied through dance." (p. 1).

Hahn's book is an ethnography of dance transmission focusing on how cultural knowledge is embodied, using lessons of Japanese dance *nihon buyo* in the Tachibana School in Tokyo as a case study. Based not only on her long-term experiences as a student but also on thorough systematic fieldwork, her participant observation of how dance is taught reveals a great deal about Japanese culture. She explains her focus on behind-the-scenes activities of dance training as a unique way to observe a process when "culture flows" (p. 1), on the contrary to "finished" performances on the stage presented to the general public by most performing arts traditions around the world. Therefore, although she sheds light on the genre of *nihon buyo*, which remains relatively unknown outside Japan in comparison to *kabuki*, *noh* and *bunraku*, her aim is not to mediate a comprehensive history of the genre or records of the specific dances, but to concentrate on the elusive and fascinating process of how culture becomes inscribed in the body.

Hahn reflects that her own experiences have both enriched and problematized her ethnographic research. There was no "concrete" object to grasp other than her growing proficiency. Drawing on the anthropological approaches to body as both *subject* and *object* of culture (e.g., Csordas 1990), she writes: "*Ironically, the very 'data' I sought were deeply entrenched in my very body [...] a puzzle for me to excavate. [...] My body became one of my primary field sites [...], beyond Hatchobori*

[the dance studio] *the dancers moving around me were in fact my field sites, and my own body a terrain to survey.*" (p. xiv). This approach of using a scholar's body as a research tool also reminds one of the "carnal sociology" concept of Loïc Wacquant, who puts in practice and examines a theory of his teacher Pierre Bourdieu about reflexive sociology, habitus and its embodiment. Wacquant develops a method of knowing through body and of reflection of this process based on data from his fieldwork of becoming a boxer in an Afro-American ghetto in Chicago.² Although Hahn does not refer to this concept, she has drawn from a number of disciplines for theoretical and methodological inspiration, mostly from ethnomusicology (where a similar concept of the bimusicality of a researcher has been practised for a long time), dance studies, anthropology, performance studies (e.g., Richard Schechner's emphasis on the scholar as a practising artist), and Asian philosophy of the body. Her mentors have been two world-famous ethnomusicologists, Marc Slobin and Kay Kaufman Shelemay, Professor of Music at Harvard University, who "infected" Hahn with her fascination with transmission systems.³ Finally, Hahn has been inspired by the work of Cynthia Bull (Novack) in her conceptualization of the socially, sensually situated body in dance.

² Wacquant, Loïc. 2004. *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³ Kay Shelemay visited the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University in Prague last year, and her paper presented at the Roundtable for Theory and Method in the Urban Ethnomusicology is part of this issue of the journal⁴.

Since dance is a multisensory process, Tomie Hahn finds that the academic discipline of ethnography often privileges one sense (mostly the eyesight) over the other senses, limiting the ethnographer's experience of the lush sensory environment (p. 4). To overcome this limitation, she finds inspiration in the relatively newly established anthropology of the senses, mainly in the work of David Howes (1991, 2005), Constance Classen (1993) and Anthony Synott (1993). The fundamental premise underlying the approach of anthropology of the senses is that "*sensory perception is a cultural as well as a physical act: sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell are not only means of apprehending physical phenomena but are also avenues for the transmission of cultural values. [...] smell, for example, creates social boundaries, not because some smells are naturally bad, but because they are culturally constituted as such. [...] smell is as culturally relative as aesthetic judgement.*" (Herzfeld 2001: 240–241)⁴.

Considering the senses as the vehicles of dance transmission and the connection to embodied cultural expression, Tomie Hahn asks (among other questions): How does culture shape our attendance to various sensoria, and how does our interpretation of sensory information shape our individual realities? In her book, she reveals "*how a culture's transmission processes prioritize practitioner's attendance to certain sensoria (even particular qualities of sensory experience), and how the transmission of sensory knowledge can*

⁴ Herzfeld, Michael. 2001. *Anthropology. Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society*. Malden – Oxford – Carlton: Blackwell Publishing.

shape dancer's experiential orientation. Through practice, systems of transmission structure experience so that, within the social group, the world appears similarly constructed and members know how to interact within it" (p. 5). Hahn illustrates how entire setting and ritual of dance lessons conveys something that she calls a Japanese sensibility – from bowing, to where one stands during a lesson, to attire, interactions, voice, gaze, spatial negotiations, and even touching.

In chapter 4, the core of the book, the author presents a careful and detailed analysis of the transmission process of this Japanese sensibility. Referring to many video examples, subchapters divided according to the modes of transmission as visual, tactile, oral/aural and media (notation and video) give an exhaustive

but captivating ethnographic insight into the extremely personal process of learning Japanese dance. I would personally mainly highlight the subchapters on learning through touch and through practising music as the most methodologically inspiring.

Tomie Hahn's skillfull interweaving of theory and empiric data from long-term ethnographic fieldwork makes this book an important reading not only for all who are interested in the anthropology of dance and music, but also for those interested in qualitative research in general. Moreover, it is accessible to readership with limited knowledge of Japanese arts and her gentle, modest but absorbing style of writing makes it a pleasure to read.

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