

# Letters





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It was enlightening to read the *Dance Research Journal* 41(1), 2009, issue on “Dance, the Disciplines, and Interdisciplinarity.” For years, postgraduate studies of dance have had fledgling status in various disciplines, e.g., aesthetics/philosophy, anthropology, education, history, physical education, physics, psychology, and sociology. Dance as a discipline whose academic study can culminate in a doctoral degree is the new kid on the block. The articles in *DRJ* 41(1) raise some issues that are applicable across disciplines. Permit me to add to the dialogue.

Good history calls for getting the facts right. Repetition of inaccuracies may “validate” misstatements. The Riverside dance program is said to strive to be interdisciplinary and to rely on *Reading Dancing* (1986) as a sign system that includes the political and cultural potential of dance. Jens Richard Giersdorf in “Dance Studies in the International Academy: Genealogy of a Disciplinary Formation” echoes a common belief: “Up to this point, the direct translation of dance into other sign systems had occurred only through various notation systems . . . the shift that occurred from *Reading Dancing* to *Corporealities* moved dance studies from an investigation of dance as a sign system to choreographing of relations. This transition was an important theoretical and political move by Foster . . . and it allowed the . . . impact [on] discourses in neighboring disciplines” (37).

However, this phenomenon also occurred years earlier: *To Dance Is Human: A Theory of Nonverbal Communication* (1979), written by an anthropologist/dancer. The work presents how dance comes into being, emanating from natural movement, its communication potential, developments in culture and society, and individual creativity. The 1979 book explores the translation of dance meaning to a verbal sign system and vice versa and offers a tool to probe for meaning in movement (a semantic grid with devices and spheres of encoding the meaning of dance). Heretofore, there were only notation systems to symbolize physical movements. The dynamics of performance and reception, underlying structures of dance, and how dance “choreographs” relations in society, education, gender, and politics are discussed in *To Dance Is Human*.<sup>1</sup> Anthropologists study human behavior and its meaning in the context of process, culture, history, society, and politics. The meaning of dancers’ messages can be

ambiguous and have multiple interpretations, which anthropologists seek to discover. They consider what people say, do, and how these acts mesh with their contexts to ascertain possible meanings. Anthropologists generally follow the poststructuralist insistence that an analysis can never be exhaustive or final and that there is an absence of ultimate meaning. Categories are fluid and overlapping. Indeed, anthropologists often spend years analyzing and reanalyzing some of their data.

My approach to the semiotics of dance, recognized in a number of disciplines and in various countries, emerged during doctoral study in anthropology at Columbia University in the mid-1970s. Required to take a linguistics course, I realized that knowledge of modes of conveying meaning in verbal language can illuminate the understanding of the nonverbal language of dance.<sup>2</sup> Verbal language and dance have communication similarities but, of course, differences. So I adapted semiotic concepts and perspectives to create the semantic grid to probe for meaning in dance. Semiotics, subsumed within linguistics, is also interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and open-ended. In studying physical anthropology, I became aware of the evolutionary presage and import of dance communication. Humans attend to motion to survive—to distinguish prey and predator, to select a mate, and to anticipate another’s actions and respond accordingly. The body’s motion “talks” and people “listen.” Humans first learn through movement, sensory-motor activities form new neural pathways and synaptic connections throughout life, and the merger of body, emotion, and cognition allows the communication of meaning in dance.<sup>3</sup>

To extend knowledge in a particular academic domain requires first knowing the state of existing knowledge and engaging it. Academics are expected to read, digest, and analyze the literature, note omissions, inconsistencies, and erroneous statements, and distinguish what has been done from what needs to be done, not merely list relevant work in a bibliography.

Innovation is often heralded with so-called new semiotic, poststructuralist, postcolonialist, postmodern, and cultural and critical theories and methodologies. Related concepts include reflexivity, hegemony, globalization, multiple perspectives/truths, embodiment, and writing and rewriting the body. But since the 1920s, numerous anthropologists and sociologists

contributed to the literature on dance dealing with these issues. For example, “old” scholars such as sociologist J. Clyde Mitchell (1956) examined how dance reflects and influences culture and social structure within a political arena of colonized and colonizer as well as tradition and change. He showed how dance embodied ethnicity, social class, and aspirations to new identity.

Anthropology, an academic discipline since the nineteenth century (in 1905 Franz Boas founded the first department of anthropology in the United States at Columbia University), includes culture as a key concept and has been using what is labeled cultural and critical theory before the field of cultural studies was institutionalized in 1964 with the founding of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. As Gay Morris points out in “Dance Studies/Cultural Studies,” cultural studies was intended as an interdisciplinary political and social agenda that seeks to look at realities that make a political difference to the working class. Interdisciplinary, with its archaeology, cultural, linguistic, and physical fields, anthropology has a tradition dating to the early twentieth century of “practicing anthropology” (researchers go beyond making their findings available to other scholars and apply their research toward solving problems). Many have been concerned with poverty and low-status social and political classes. Similarly, sociologists such as C. Wright Mills in the 1950s and 1960s addressed what came to be called the “military industrial complex” and critiqued Western capitalism and Eastern communism.<sup>4</sup> Concerning dance, I have applied my research to issues in health, education, and freedom of expression/censorship.

Certainly dance is not the only discipline with unsubstantiated claims. Anthropologists noted, “Many would probably argue that today’s academic job market forces younger people to have this drive to impress . . . One of the . . . forms of self-promotion we see being deployed is the claim of originality. . . . We might connect things in ways that are not commonly done, or invent a new terminology for ideas that have been around for time immemorial, but by and large we are not inventing the wheel.”<sup>5</sup>

From the vantage point of a founding member of *CORD* and its publications, I have watched the exciting growth of dance studies in different disciplines. My comments are not meant to detract from the excellent scholarship but to clarify some developmental pathways.

## Notes

1. Judith Lynne Hanna, *To Dance Is Human: A Theory of Nonverbal Communication* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979; revised edition, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987). The transition of dance as a sign system to choreographing of relations is also discussed that year in “Toward Semantic Analysis of Movement Behavior: Concepts and Problems,” *Semiotica*; “Movements toward Understanding Humans through the Anthropological Study of Dance,” *Current Anthropology*. Elaboration occurred in Hanna’s later publications (see [www.judithhanna.com](http://www.judithhanna.com)).

2. “Speech refers to the oral/auditory medium that we use to convey the sounds associated with human languages. Language, on the other hand, is the method of conveying complex concepts and ideas with or without recourse to sound” (Margaret Clegg, “Modern Approaches to the Evolution of Speech and Language,” *General Anthropology* (October 2004): 8. Dance meets the criteria of language articulated in Albert M. Galaburda, Stephen M. Kosslyn, and Yves Christen, eds., *The Languages of the Brain*, Harvard University Press (2002): 1, 200, in being a method of conveying, complex ideas, representing information, and having rules for how representations can be combined. These all vary according to the genre of dance. Researchers argue that there are multiple possible languages of thought that play different roles in life of the mind but nonetheless work together.

3. “A Nonverbal Language for Imagining and Learning,” *Educational Researcher* (2008), summarizes current knowledge about dance in light of findings from neuroscience and neurolinguistics.

4. Daniel Geary, *C. Wright Mills, the Left and American Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

5. Frederic W. Gleach and Vilma Santiago-Irizarry, “On Fame, Worship and Sharing: Self Promotion,” *Anthropology News* (January 2008): 64. Margaret Macmillan, in *Dangerous Games: The Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Modern Library, 2009), raises some relevant issues.