

Critical Notice of Eric MULLIS, *Pragmatist Philosophy
and Dance. Interdisciplinary Dance Research in the
American South*

Palgrave Macmillan, 2019

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Performance-as-philosophy and Philosophy-as-performance. Interdisciplinary Approaches to Understand Dance

- 1 Performance Philosophy refers to an international network of researchers, practitioners, scholars, and activists who investigate new forms of thinking, performing and practicing philosophy through international conferences and events. An independent journal and a book series of the same name also aim to define the perimeter of an emerging international interdisciplinary field of thought. *Pragmatist Philosophy and Dance. Interdisciplinary Dance Research in the American South* by Eric Mullis, a pragmatist philosopher and performance maker, is one of the most recent publications in the series and the third entirely devoted to dance after Bojana Cvejić's *Choregraphing Problems: Expressive Concepts in European Contemporary Dance and Performance* (2015), and Einav Katan-Schmid's *Embodied Philosophy in Dance: Gaga and*

Ohad Naharin's Movement Research (2016). Most scholars dealing with dance from philosophical perspectives usually work in dance rather than philosophy departments, and their publications rarely appear in philosophy books and journals. This series already has the merit of fueling a debate around dance among philosophers. Evidence that this field of study is in full swing is the entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published in 2015 and substantially revised and expanded in 2020 by Aili Breshnahn (Breshnahn 2020). The initial overview of the historical frame in western philosophical aesthetics, where dance is considered as a meaning-making and mainly communicative, expressive, or representational theatre art performed for audience appreciation, was transformed to map out a broader terrain for a more inclusive philosophy of dance, even though the different contexts in which it is currently developing are still not aware of each other (Pakes 2019). Certainly, dance philosophy's potential is vast because dance itself is multifaceted enough to connect with many philosophy branches and has been practiced throughout history for different purposes from artistic to educational, from therapeutic to social, political, and religious.

- 2 *Pragmatist Philosophy and Dance* addresses the philosophy of performance as well as performance-as-philosophy and philosophy-as-performance, through an exploration of ecstatic embodiment and spiritualism in contemporary Appalachian Pentecostalism, a form of charismatic Christianity in which theological concepts inform a series of rituals and transformative experiences of embodiment. Pentecostal rituals generate ecstatic states that impact physically, psychologically, morally, and spiritually the believers who seek it out to individually and collectively renew and empower themselves and get closer to the divine. As Mullis states in his conclusions, "Charismatic Pentecostalism continues to affect the way people move" (Mullis 2019: 234), and his research work is a precious contribution to understanding why and how these people move today in response to our complex contemporary social, economic, and political challenges.
- 3 Mullis' interest in these issues was prompted by his involvement in some recent extreme forms of Pentecostalism and religious fervour like a service in Jolo, West Virginia, a poor and mainly white rural community. It includes ecstatic dancing but also shouting, whirling, physical paroxysms, fainting spells, speaking in tongues (glossolalia), and the use of fire and snake-handling. Another episode that impressed Mullis was a concert by the band Sixteen Horsepower in North Carolina, featuring a robust rhythmic shuffle that drives the congregation to clap, stomp, mixing American folk music with dark electrified rock and roll.
- 4 Mullis' points of departure are his academic philosophy and physical practices such as Chinese martial arts traditions, Zen meditation, and improvisation techniques, as well as his interest in how political performance may address the needs of a particular community. His goal is to show the dynamic relationship between folk aesthetics, embodied expression, and rural Southern culture by developing a meliorist argument through a new research model to bring a unique form of critical investigation and reach new audiences. More specifically, Mullis questions how artists can mediate problematic situations during the creative process and if performance can function as a philosophical inquiry considering the relationship between the theory-in-process model of performance research and scholarly philosophy. He places the Pragmatism of John Dewey, William James, and its recent developments by Richard Shusterman in relation to experimental dramaturgy, performance, dance, theology, autobiography, and ethnographic investigations to verify how Pragmatist philosophy can contribute to

an interdisciplinary approach to critical dance theory. More generally, this consistent interdisciplinary engagement offers a thorough analysis of the relationship between aesthetics and epistemology to consider the strengths and weaknesses of existing research methodologies.

- 5 While other books have been devoted to the study of Shaker performances and ecstatic dances, *Pragmatist Philosophy and Dance* is the first that focuses specifically on charismatic Pentecostalism through an ethnographic work on contemporary uses and cultural understandings of folk aesthetics in Southern Appalachia. It is based on a practical and theoretical investigation of a religious form of embodiment and its contemporary performative dimension and its historical background to illuminate the many issues it may raise for non-believers. The result is an original comparative analysis of popular forms of religious embodiment and theatrical performances and the relationship between ecstatic and theatrical auto-affective techniques. It also analyses gender roles and racial relationships in Pentecostalism, providing critical reflections on how its theology of embodied performance has supported egalitarianism, though not systemic gender equality.
- 6 If we consider that Pentecostalism is a form of Christianity that has spread worldwide, the book opens up the potential for a much broader and comparative analysis. African Pentecostalism has over 100 million practitioners, Latin American Pentecostalism over 40 million, and more than 135 million in East Asia. Pentecostalism is intertwining other religious beliefs (shamanism, polytheism, Catholicism, Confucianism, and Daoism) and larger debates about gender equality, race, ethnicity, Islam, and immigration in all these social and cultural contexts.
- 7 The Shakers believed that musical composers and choreographers were divinely inspired, and their dances were profoundly religious because the physical shaking and bouncing were considered acts of spiritual purification. These dances were based on ritualized embodiment that could simultaneously make visible Shakers' beliefs about spirit possession and the necessity to resist sin and separate the sexes. Shaker rituals, though, changed significantly over time. In the eighteenth century, they were based on ecstatic states, uncontrolled twitching, jerking movements, and shouting, and the services were little structured, pretty loud, and quite emotional. Later on, their dances became more controlled, featuring precise choreographies accompanied by a capella singing and rhythmic clapping.
- 8 Mullis starts his historical inquiry in nineteenth-century Shaker dance rituals, whose formal group choreography and a precise dance technique were different from those of the previous generations. He then analyses some American modern, post-modern, and contemporary choreographers and theatre groups inspired by Shakers' dances such as Doris Humphrey's modern dance work *The Shakers* (1931), *Early Shaker Spirituals* (2014) by The Wooster Group, and based on a 1976 LP of Shaker hymns, and *The Zealous Laborers* (2016) by David Parker and Lorraine Chapman. These artists were all compelled to theatrically aspects of Shakers' life and re-staged (in different ways and styles) ritual dance, homes and meetinghouses, except for the site-specific post-dramatic theatre piece *The Zealous Laborers* that was performed at a traditional house church in a Shaker village and mixed Shakers dance with more contemporary techniques.
- 9 By staging their works, these artists enact cultural memory to preserve a cultural and religious tradition, but inevitably they also re-think, elaborate, and adapt it. They were also attracted by (and contributed to fuel) the "myth of the Shakers," which originated

at the end of the twentieth century as a heritage of an idealized historical era. Today, Shakers' appreciation is also due to their values such as communal self-sufficiency, egalitarianism, advocacy of the feminine, and environmental sustainability when compared to the otherwise racist and patriarchal coeval society. In his book, Mullis brilliantly expands the borders of his inquiry and questions how significant theoretical and practical problems associated with Shakers' ideology have been downplayed precisely by the effect of their myth. On the other hand, he questions to what extent the ecstatic has the power to undermine institutional authority, starting from the evidence that both the Shakers and the charismatic Pentecostals were perceived as politically subversive communities.

- 10 The sixth chapter, in which Mullis discusses extensively the case of *Later Rain* (2018), constitutes the book's pivotal. Here the historical and theoretical framework of his research work takes on new meaning because it is mediated by a contemporary theatrical piece. Mullis created it to learn more about a popular form of embodied religious expression and encourage respect for this phenomenon. He describes the show as a post-dramatic dance theatre piece representing services attended by devout believers who view the rituals as necessary for their spiritual salvation. Mullis uses theatrical means and artistic strategies to recreate Shakers' dance tradition, problematize folk aesthetics, and explore how to performatively negotiate gender relationships and foster critical inquiry about ecstatic embodiment. The show does not present all aspects of ecstatic ritual and theatrically reorients those it does. It is formed by several episodes (that can be arranged modularly), including texts drawn from biblical prophecies, musical interludes, choreography, prophetic moments in which individuals share personal testimonies, and, last but not least, some episodes of dissociative states. It culminates with a scene where the performers work themselves into dissociative states as the electric band plays a driving song. Mullis focuses mainly on the bodily techniques that produce hyper or hypo aroused and dissociative psychosomatic states induced by auto-affective work with breath, posture, gesture, and movement. He then examines where this piece dealing with ecstatic states aligns with Pentecostals' experience and where it diverges and discusses the difference between the dance techniques learned in dance studios and those used in rural churches. The precise and fascinating description of this creative process and the performers' strategies to obtain the necessary alteration of their state of being is one of this intense book's best achievements.
- 11 *Later Rain* (and its preparatory work) is the device through which Mullis could elaborate his ethnographic fieldwork understood as a form of practice cultural criticism. This experiential inquiry in an unfamiliar cultural setting was necessary to investigate the power of charismatic ritual while observing the historical forces that animate its significant concepts. It brings to the stage and frames the destabilizing effects produced by an ecstatic process and an involuntary energetic excess that can end in a psycho-somatic plenitude, brief dissociation, or arouse into auto-erotic fulfillment. In this sense, the book offers indirectly a precious contribution to a comparative analysis of phenomena like Saint Vitus' dance and Tarantism, which would suggest many keys to the links between dance, ritual, and social boundaries in the Western tradition, from the Middle Ages to the Romantic era, as the presence of dancing witches, Willis, and Giselles reminds us.

- 12 Like the *Early Shaker Spirituals* and *The Zealous Laborers*, *Later Rain* shows the fusion of liturgical choreography and codified dance technique advocating for a post-dramatic approach to downplay theatrical representation and engage some more troubling aspects of Shaker religion. This creative process also casts new light into the dynamic relationship between ecstatic ritual and folk aesthetics. During its creative process, the relationship between religious ritual and theatrical performance and more specifically between the dissociative states experienced during studio practice in comparison with ecstatic religious states opened up to a series of questions concerning the psychosomatic authenticity, the relationship between theology and philosophy of embodiment and the cultural functions of folk aesthetics.
- 13 The most problematic aspect of *Later Rain* is the ethical question: how can one witness the religious experience from an artistic point of view and represent Pentecostal embodied theology responsibly? *Later Rain* engages a living religious tradition and is often performed in urban contexts in the American South. Here the spectator may have grown up in a charismatic church or visited one and personally know some believers. Since it focuses on a living religion and functions as a provocation that may stimulate philosophical reflection as well as emotional reactions, it could offend the charismatic Pentecostal or be problematic for the viewer. Unlike *Early Shaker Spirituals* and *The Zealous Laborers* that frame Shakerism as modeling alternatives to regressive socio-political values, *Later Rain* engages regressive aspects of fundamentalist ideology and it inevitably has significant ethical implications.
- 14 On the other side, it transmits the full sense of how an interdisciplinary perspective can illuminate these experiences at the crossroads of religion, contemporary theatrical performance, and private life, and how performatively subvert a conventional understanding of folk aesthetics. These issues are largely debated by Mullis, who thanks to this creative process could explore the possibility of developing mutual understanding through research and performance and make it the other primary subject of this book and its methodological propositions. As a theatrical performance designed for a critical audience, *Later Rain* aims to foster critical engagement with its subject matter by choreographically expressing a position on gender egalitarianism and its relationship to the ecstatic. It also invites comparative analyses of life in metropolitan cities and the countryside, two increasingly divergent dimensions in the United States.
- 15 Mullis has drawn on many different sources and presents them in an elaborate theoretical frame that takes advantage of the initial ethnographic fieldwork conducted in many churches and his studio practice. He then constructed the subject of his research work, referring to a vast range of disciplines such as cultural history, performance studies, Pentecostal history, theology, folk aesthetics, anthropological understandings of ecstatic religious, and dance history. From a methodological perspective, the book discusses Pragmatism as a philosophical understanding of pluralism and the means and ends of pluralist inquiry, and dance practice as an inherently pluralist affair because it indicates a diverse range of embodied experience. Mullis focuses primarily on Dewey's writings on philosophical methodology on experimental inquiry, pluralism, and meliorism, and develops his theory on the importance of emotional expression in artistic creativity by bringing it into dialogue with interdisciplinary performance research.

- 16 He also develops James' understanding of conversion experience and critically reconsiders the methodological limitation of somaesthetics, Shusterman's recent development of Deweyan Pragmatism first introduced in *Practicing Philosophy* (1997), and further developed in *Performing Live* (2000), *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (2008) and *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (2012). After having studied Zen meditation, the Feldenkrais Method, and other body practices, Shusterman increased perceptual awareness and appreciation of embodied experience, and opened to an interdisciplinary field of inquiry aimed at promoting and integrating theoretical, empirical, and practical disciplines related to bodily perception, performance, and presentation. Despite his interdisciplinary approach and the central role given to the *soma*, Shusterman did not consider dance. On the contrary, Mullis personal engagement with dance and education in this grounded-in-philosophy-aesthetics allows him to experiment with these theories in constructing the subject of his research and inquiring about the nature of bodily perceptions and practices. Additionally, he explores their function in how knowledge is constructed and transmitted. In other words, Mullis makes Pragmatism and its sensibility for pluralism and pluralist inquiry, interacting with dance, in its turn seen as an inherently pluralist affair involving a vast range of embodied experience. Moreover, he affirms that contemporary dance and performance are Pragmatist in nature. From his perspective, Somaesthetics and dance are alike in that they are both experimental pluralist disciplines but more has to be researched to make them mutually informative and beneficial.
- 17 *Pragmatist Philosophy and Dance* undoubted value is that it offers an example of how to expand the toolbox for an interdisciplinary research work on dance that fully capitalizes philosophical thought. On the other hand, the book came out the same year as the first comprehensive survey of the phenomenon of reenactment in dance, *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Reenactment* edited by Mark Franko which raised many important aspects of research in this area. Interweaving these innovative methodological proposals for reenactment with some of the cases analyses addressed by Mullis, opens up further reflections.
- 18 For instance, *Early Shaker Spirituals* was certainly conceived as a strategy to remember and preserve an important part of American history. Mullis sees it as close to reenactment because it features reconstructed Shaker dance. Nevertheless, he considers it distinct from reenactment because it directs the attention to theatrical artifice as a post-dramatic theatre piece. "Post-dramatic theatre" is a label introduced in 1999 by the German theatre researcher Hans-Thies Lehman to summarise some tendencies and stylistic traits occurring in theatre since the end of the 1960s. It frames a performative aesthetic in which the performance's text establishes a special relation with the performance's material situation. The absence of a "plot" is balanced by the centrality of the interaction between performer and audience, because post-dramatic theatre is more striving to produce an effect amongst the spectators than to fatefully reproduce the written text, and incorporates the notion of the "performer as theme and protagonist" (Lehman 2006: 5).
- 19 Mullis affirms: "since conflicting historical information is presented and since post-dramatic theatre techniques undermine the idea of historical reenactment, it is difficult for the viewer to nail down what era of Shaker history The Wooster Group is presenting in the piece" (Mullis 2019: 104). But are the solutions offered by post-

dramatic theatre really incompatible with the strategies deployed by reenactment? Throughout the book, reenactment is mentioned only as a field closely associated to public history and museology and dealing with historical truth and the experience of authenticity. In recent times, thanks to the shift toward performance studies and the central role accorded to the body as an archive, reenactment is rather understood and practiced as a vehicle of critical historical knowledge-making. In the last decade, it has gained a central role also as a distinctly new choreographic strategy and dramaturgical modality that deeply impacted dance practice and theory. In other words, it offers a way for dance scholars and dancers/choreographers to deal with their own (embodied) memories or other people's (individual or collective) memories. The nature of dance as embodied experience happening in a specific place and time is inherently performative and transformative. Therefore, all acts of re-doing, re-working, and re-constructing are also performative but precisely by repeating a dance as an act in the present and in a public context they transform it.

- 20 Moreover, danced reenactment places the dance work in a web of historical temporalities. For this reason it transcends the needs of preservation and opens to a philosophical and historical reflection on the *pastness* of dance (Franko 2018: 4). This new approach to the historical dimension of a dance piece, a repertoire or a dance technique stimulated by dance reenactment troubles our sense of what is past. It therefore destabilizes the notions of work and technique as much as the notion of tradition and authenticity. Reenactments are based on relevant archival material (both documentary and bodily) to shape our understanding of a past dance piece, a repertoire or a dance technique and to inquiry how they might have been and how they stimulate the audience. Based on the idea that the body is a mediator of knowledge, reenactment shifts the history of dance entirely into the present. It does so by acting on the past and not only by writing it, as it is the case for traditional historical approaches. It also aims at re-evaluating dance as an experience rather than a product to be preserved and passed on “as it was and where it happened” (as it is the case for philological reconstruction).
- 21 From this inspiring theoretical perspective, some of the theatre productions discussed by Mullis would reveal even more of Appalachian Pentecostalism, ecstatic embodiment and spiritualism, its complex historical dimension, and its controversial contemporary condition, and precisely because they bring these issues to the present. In rural Southern Appalachian churches, thanks to a religious ideology looking to the past and folk aesthetics echoing white American political values and stressing the negative aspects of post-industrialized neoliberalism, these services sustain the profound difference between rural communities and cosmopolitan cities. More precisely, “white folksy authenticity” (Mullis 2019: 38) is a common trope of American popular culture romanticizing the folk to make it easier to appropriate and tacitly acknowledging the urban-rural divide. If understood as forms of reenactment and not just as post-dramatic theatrical productions, *Later Rain* and the other theatre productions analyzed in *Pragmatist Philosophy and Dance* could reveal even more about how they trouble the obvious association of the folk with cultural authenticity. In different ways they all offer precious counter-narratives on ethical, theological, or aesthetic values of this tradition bringing them into dialogue with contemporary dance (techniques) and society. Mullis suggests that meetinghouses, like museums or theatres, can be considered as heterotopias or liminal, disturbing, contradictory and transforming spaces that connect the present to the past and precisely for this reason here

performances (and reenactments) can make distinct historical legacies and temporalities interact with each other.

- 22 With his book, Mullis contributes to affirming that performance goes beyond presenting philosophical content and develops an effective theory-in-process methodological approach to sustain performance research and generate practical and theoretical knowledge extremely useful for the artistic process. *Pragmatist Philosophy and Dance* has the rare merit of making dance the subject of a study and to show how philosophy could play a significant role as cultural practice in contemporary culture. His theoretical and methodological approach shows how philosophy and dance artistry intertwine in a specific creative process, and proves productive while researching and developing performance. Last but not least, it demonstrates the potential of performance philosophy to bring a unique form of critical investigation to both academic and non-academic readerships. From this perspective, performance philosophy can play a crucial function in the context of our politically and culturally divided societies in which, as Mullis affirms, “it is increasingly easy to not have any significant interactions with those who differ from oneself” (Mullis 2019: 27).

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