



The Anthropology of Dance

Anya Peterson Royce

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"Dance is a powerful, frequently adopted symbol of the way people feel about themselves." So concludes the author of this book, a general introduction to the anthropology of dance. Since anthropology has broadened its horizons to include Western, industrialised and urban societies, the study of dance culture may, with equal legitimacy, observe ballet, the Hawaiian hula, the classical tradition of Bharata Natyam, the pigeon wings and polkas of the Californian gold rush miners, and the minuets of colonial Virginia planters. Dance makes its unique contribution to society and culture by virtue of its form and expression; at the same time it is intimately bound up with elements of religion, kinship and social organisation, politics and economics. The fact that dance is inseparable from its means of expression - the human body making patterns in time and space - means that it cannot be divorced from its social and cultural context. The author first explores the various meanings that dance has had over time for different peoples. Next she focuses on the place that dance has occupied in anthropological studies over the past one hundred years. Techniques for studying and recording dance are discussed, including notation systems, field guides, film, and anthropological means of participant-observation. The book then turns to structural and functional analyses, comparing them with reference to their different purposes and capabilities. Part Two presents three perspectives frequently used by anthropologists to view dance: the historical, the comparative and the symbolic. Extended and fascinating case studies based on the author's research illustrate each of these perspectives: American colonial dance, North American Indian urban powwow dancing, and Zapotec dance of the Mexican Isthmus. Part Three discusses two categories of research that will be significant in the future but which have not yet been fully explored. They are creativity and aesthetics, on the one hand, and communication and meaning on the other. The author concludes by pointing to some fruitful directions for future research in dance anthropology.

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