Dancing and the Poetics of Place[1]

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In the mid-twentieth century Mircea Eliade, renowned historian of religion, established the relationship between religion and place when he tirelessly showed that the qualities of the religious coincide with "the center" (*axis mundi*) and "the origin" (*in illo tempore*). Eliade thus grounded the academic, as well as the popular, study of religion with a human universal rather than a collection of somewhat similar, yet disparate, cultural institutions and practices, that is, as religion*s*. Yet the simplicity and gernericisity of his terms made interchangeable and identical, in a certain sense, all things religious. While Eliade presented endless instances of religion from cultures the world over, nevertheless the local is but an instantiation, localization somehow a fall from origination, a wobble of the pivot. Eliade's understanding of religion coincides with and shares the characteristics of modern globalization. Globalization is not simply the product of economics, politics, and information technology. The shift to the global, with often the tacit degradation of the local, characterizes the modern understanding.

The challenge, dare I suggest also the antidote, to this trend is, I believe, offered by dancing, particularly if our understanding of dancing is explored creatively. Dancing, the exemplar of localization, as body making itself, enacts the poetics of people and place. Dancing asserts itself, in any case, with its movement that whispers "maybe not" and intones the mantra "I" "here" "now" "I" "here" "now" to our proclamations of truth. Despite Coke bottles on Annapurna and MacDonald's in Bomako, notwithstanding cyber cafés in Cape Coast and Puerto Viejo, even with Christian Churches in Tuba City and the three little school rooms in Zambougou, Mali, despite Adidas at Uluru and English language books … well everywhere, localization always prevails. Dancing provides insights.

We of the modern West have become servants of the global enemies of the local. In some senses we have lost touch (I'm thinking also of tactile bodily experience), floating in text and virtual image maps that we have isolated and concocted no longer comprehending that our references to territory are self-reverential hyperlinks, denying, or perhaps veiling, the inevitable return to the earth, to the body. Christianity and Western cultures, to an extent, have been at best confounded by the human body, and have often abhorred it. It is little surprise that among all the cultures of the world it is only modern Western cultures that have considered dancing to be peripheral, mere art, and even forbidden by religion. It is also the religions of these cultures that have little and uneasy attachment to place and who seek to convert others to the religions of exclusivity of the one god, the one way, to the totalizing truth. Little surprise that we refer to the subject of our study as "world" religions and to the principal category, religion, in the singular. And, after spending decades demonstrating that this force of the Western academy and economy is to concoct the rest of the world so as either to serve or to resemble us, it is little surprise that I now turn to reconfirm the tenacity of local cultures, the creative vitality of folks, and to understand how dancing serves the poetics of place.

This essay was first presented at an American Academy of Religions meeting in Toronto in 2002. While some things have changed that I describe in the essay, the basic point about localization remain important. This essay might well be read in conjunction with a recent essay "Dancing and Making" located on www.Sam-Gill.com .

The life I live in Boulder[2] includes these regular experiences: African dance and drum classes and events performed or taught by Malians, Senegalese, Ghanaians, Ugandans, Balinese, and Indians. A Zimbabwean group playing, teaching, and performing as they have for years. The music of an African Highlife band, directed by a Ghanaian ethnomusicologist. Dancing salsa any night of the week, live music is played by numerous Latin bands four nights a week and played by deejays any nights a week. Four Balinese gamelan groups play in the area. Local musicians play Mexican, Japanese, Brazilian, Afro-pop, Reggae, Hip Hop, world beat music in bars, clubs, restaurants, and theatres. There are weekly Tango milongas, where dancers sport vintage Parisian clothing and entertain frequent visiting teachers from Argentina. Two active Brazilian capoeira groups have extensive schedules of classes and events. Half a dozen accomplished flamenco dancers and guitarists teach and perform including one gypsy guitarist with decades of touring experience. Half a dozen middle eastern dancers teach, perform, and even deliver bellygrams for a reasonable fee. Middle Eastern and Balkan musicians abound. Groups do contradance and European folk dancing. There is a school of world dance and music (which I founded and own[3]) offering more than 40 classes a week, frequent public events, an annual African dance and drum festival. The school has its own record/video label. A dozen study trips are bound for Africa and Bali and Argentina and Brazil every year. This account is nothing like exhaustive, just what comes immediately to mind. And it doesn't even touch the offerings of the many colleges, universities, and entertainment venues which feature ongoing dance and music performances from around the world.

I recite these examples not to brag about my home town, but to give one example of a face of globalization I believe is now rather common. Preparing to come to Toronto I e-mailed someone to ask where I could go salsa dancing while I am here and got a long list of clubs and dates. Were this meeting to take place in Dakar, Senegal, I could likely find even more salsa clubs with live Senegalese bands playing African salsa as they have now for 50 years. Such renowned Senegalese musicians as Youssou N'Dour and Baba Maal have been powerfully influenced by Cuban music, which, of course, arose in the nineteenth century as a creole music through the interaction of Spanish colonists and West African slaves–few, if any, were Senegalese. In the context of our consideration of globalization what interests me about these examples is what, to me anyway, is a highly creative and positive affect of globalization, a kind of localization befitting a postmodern world. I don't really think it is a by-product, but rather an affect which–from our liberal, yet body conservative, perspective–is all too often simply overlooked.

While the scale of inter-cultural exchange is greatly enhanced by the information technologies that have raised the issues of globalization, peoples have always been in contact with one another. And given the world views, we call them "world views" intentionally; the scale was always, relatively speaking, global, if by that term we refer to the images of a given people that encompass their world. There is always exchange: borrowings, stealings, inspirations, destructions. A whole school of folklore

[2] The reader is to be reminded that this was written in 2002. The dance offerings remain diverse, however, the African dance community here has dwindled quite significantly.

[3] This was Bantaba World Dance and Music. I operated it until I had to close the studio in 2007. I had purchased a building in a new mixed-use area of Boulder believing this to be a perfect location for integrating international dance and music to a new and upcoming area in the city, the new urbanism idea. Complaints about what a neighbor termed "noise" (to me it was music) were made from the first day of our operation and the City of Boulder supported the resident. We found it impossible to operate and closed the business. The complaining neighbor nixed many opportunities I had to sell the building and it is now in the process of being foreclosed on by the bank.

and another of linguistics were built on tracking the diffusion of cultural traits to reveal these histories of interaction. History is always the story of the cultural exchanges. Now we are concerned with "globalization," the present face placed on this process of exchange. Globalization suggests a shift in the scale and character of inter-cultural influence–the global domination of Western values, exemplified and made possible by information technology. Globalization, as seen by liberal scholars, is the outcome of the success of colonization, imperialiation, Christianization, and world trade, in short, a perhaps unanticipated affect of modernity now feared as causing a greying of the colorful world of diverse local peoples.

There is reason to be fearful. When I was a corn-fed Kansas farm kid I witnessed the electrification of rural America. As a kid my grandparents' telephone required cranking to raise a neighbor on the party line. Half a century later I traveled along the coast of Ghana witnessing the remarkable change effected in people that accompanied the advancing power lines. In Cape Coast a young boy spoke knowingly of CNN and his favorite television was Arnold Schwarzenegger movies, while just 30 kilometers west in the village of Busua, where the power poles were set but the electricity-carrying wires had yet to arrive, a young boy asked me sweetly innocent questions about what in my country life was like for "small small boys like him." Perhaps nostalgia for the loss of our own past, our own sweetly innocent youth, energizes the concerns we have about making the world into an image of our modern selves. We want to protect the villagers, what few are left, from their daily dose of "Bay Watch" or even CNN. But globalization, at least the set of issues attached to this term, is our concern more than theirs. It is the present chapter in our struggles with how much *like* or *not like* us are others in the world. US national foreign policy brands[4] as evil any who are not like us, yet what is veiled is the essential role the disparate plays in giving us purpose and identity. As in Aldus Huxley's *Brave New World*, we need the Zuni to remain behind fences to protect them from the new world, from us. We need the Tasaday's in their forest uninfluenced by us.

The term "globalization" suggests process, even progress, the on-going march toward the spread of Western values aided, even necessitated, by technology, particularly information technology. Globalization, in our liberal academic perspective, though unshared by business (even the business of religion as well as the academic study of religions), stands in contrast to the local, tainting it, threatening it, destroying it. The local is, it would seem, a necessary predecessor to globalization. Local to global, the road runs but one direction.

What interests me about the music and dance examples I listed above is that they all have strong and specific local identities no matter in what specific geographic location they are found. And yet they dance the poetry of place no matter how extensively they circulate the globe. The creole affect that occurs when musics and dancings come together is invariably exciting. Certainly there are concerns about and evidence showing the homogenization of these musics as the affect of commercialization. Yet, the impossibility of reproducing dancings leaves dancing largely out of the discussion of this issue. The institutionalization of ballet and the global transmission of hip hop via MTV are interesting cases by which to test this view. What seems to me to be important for us to consider even within the context of our concerns about globalization, is the ongoing processes of localization.

[4] This is, of course, a reference to George W. Bush's designation of a number of countries as being an axis of evil. Fortunately the present administration seems to be attempting to reverse this perspective.

Localization. I suggest that we use the form of the word that designates process rather than state. It seems that we have not asked, "what makes 'the local'?" We have considered the local as the residual pre-existing category, that is, the lack of having been influenced by outsiders. Local was not made, it just was/is. "Local" aligns with "primitive" and "aboriginal" (of the origin), "traditional," "provincial." Equally romanticized and brutalized. And we thought we were done with this one! By offering the term "localization" I want to suggest that to make local is a process as much as is globalization and that both are primary forces of all human communities. To make local is a force of all human and cultural exchanges including, I argue, the current quantum shift in exchange accompanying information technology and world trade. Further, I want to show that understanding dancing is important to both understanding localization and to accomplishing it.

Looking for music to play at a friend's wedding party a young lawyer from Cameroon asked for suggestions in a small African music specialty shop in Paris, home to a million Africans. The shop owner suggested Sandra Melody and played a track of her doing a reggae version of the American group T.L.C.'s song "No Scrubs." Someone offered that this was an American song. The Cameroon lawyer begged to differ and to prove his point danced about the store to the balance of the song after which he exclaimed: "See? You couldn't dance to it like this if it were an American song!"[5]

Dancings are often identified by their locale: Balinese, Indian, African, Middle Eastern. Travel literature, Olympic ceremonies, tourist hotels, vacation slides, anthropologist images, and air port terminals feature dancing because it has such strong identity with place. Places and peoples are recognized and identified by their dances; dances are identified by geography and culture. LA hip hop is different from New York hip hop. Salsa in Cuba differs from salsa in New York and Cali and Miami and Dakar. Yet, unlike the physical features of geography, dancing can be transported. African dancing can be and is done in Boulder. Indeed, it can be commodified and sold as is commonly done in dance schools and studios. Yet, the very attractiveness of this commodity is its identity with a particular locale, its identity with specific places in Africa. In Boulder, as in many places, many dance and music forms from around the world are available. Though it may have elements of colonization, few if any would consider the presence of African dance in Boulder as globalization–African dancing has strong local identity. Dancing is a non-technological medium of cultural exchange; the messengers, in this case Africans, are of the third world. Still, I'd argue that in Boulder, as in any other community, this cultural exchange is part of a localizing strategy, a process of localization for all involved. Dancing African–or, in discriminating Boulder, dancing Senegalese, or Malian, or Ghanaian, or Guinean–is a strategy for creating community, that is, creating relationships and identities that are distinctively local. Though Boulder African dancers are concerned with authenticity and accuracy, there are still many differences that relocalize African dancing as Boulder-African dancing. In Boulder African dancing is done almost exclusively in a studio and class environment. Mirrors are commonly present, though not much used. Dancing is done in lines across the floor following along with the teacher, a technique of transmission derived from ballet, and it encourages the male gaze. The associated ritual and ceremonial occasions–fund raisers for people in need, dance parties, demonstrations to schools and the larger community–are not seen by the participants as ritual

[5]Susan Orlean, "The Congo Sound: How a Record Store in Paris Became a Center of African Music," *New Yorker* (October 14 & 21, 2002): 118.

or ceremonial, but they certainly function as such. African food is often available, but it is eaten off paper plates with plasticware by individuals a bit unsure of what they are eating. And the dancing itself shifts to fit the body habits and styles and shapes of mostly-young mostly-female mostly-white dancers. Increasingly members of this community spend considerable time in Africa, learning African languages, making strong relationships with African communities, and dating and marrying Africans, and bearing a generation of American-African children whose sensibilities and concerns contrast markedly with those of African Americans and European Americans. African dancing, as many others, is at the core, the source of power and dynamics, of a new community–one fully aware of the privilege and opportunity made possible by modern travel, information technology, and affluence. And I believe that this awareness is as keen for the Africans (and peoples of other cultures) involved as for the Americans. Those involved are in the process of creating a new community for a post-modern world–where first and third worlds co-exist even in one family–both necessary and honored–despite the struggle of uncharted territories. This is a community located on two continents, speaking multiple languages, bearing different skin colors. There is nothing grey about this community–indeed, this is by far the most diverse community in Boulder–localization and globalization are, as I believe is always the case, at play and dancing is central to this play. Dancing has distinctive powers to engage this hyphenized style of relationship, in this case, at once honoring and depending on the distinctive locality (distinctively "other") of the focal identifying feature while re-localizing it. Dancing handles this seemingly paradoxical and conflicting situation. It is not incidental that dancing and the interchange of globalization/localization are coincident with dancing.

In order to more fully understand the distinctive role of dancing in this globalization/localization process we need an expanded and more sophisticated understanding of dancing than the folk understandings we likely hold. Inspired by and based on a number of dance traditions throughout the world as well as by the works of cognitive science, the existential phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the insights of Jean Baudrillard, and the understandings of play from Frederick Schiller to Gregory Bateson, I have developed an understanding of dancing I believe helps us appreciate localization. My motivation for developing this view, however, has been to meet the dual needs of establishing dancing as a category for the comparative study of cultures and the deeper comprehension of what distinguishes us as human beings.

Dancing in this view is distinguished by a möbiatic structurality. Dancing is the making of an other, we may think of this other as the dance or the danced entity. Dancing as the making of an other creates artifact, that is, a dancing is made up, fabricated, and this is its otherness. Dancing, as a bodily action, is a making in which the made up is identical with the maker because the dancer and the dance are of one body. Thus, in dancing the dancer-maker at once transcends self in bodily experiencing the other, while also coming more fully to realize self–a result of the perspective of other. This act of self-othering exercises a fundamental distinction of being human, the power to do what ought not to be possible, that is to make oneself into something other than self and to subjectively experience that other. Like the möbius strip which has both two distinct sides and one continuous unbroken side, dancing is self and other yet one bodied entity. As a making, dancing is unique in that the thing made is both inseparable and distinct from the maker. Dancing is rather like bodily experiencing an M. C. Escher print. From one perspective the dancer is one's self dancing, making a dance, yet with a slight shift in perspective the dancer experiences what he or she is making, that is, the dance or the danced, something other. Focusing on one point members of the audience experience the dancer. With a

slight shift in perspective one experiences the dance. While both cannot be experienced exactly at once, both are inseparable in the dancing.[6]

Dancing then is distinguished by its reversibility, a playful oscillating structurality that in its realization joins while keeping separate, is and is not, is not and is not not, realizes self and experiences otherness, is both dancer and dance. This structurality is elemental, that is, it is ontologically fundamental to what distinguishes us as humans; indeed, even to the seemingly endless concerns we have in the study of culture about how to understand other without simply projecting self; and to the fundamental psychological problem of self and relationship. I believe that, because its reversibility is bodily experienced, dancing is a constitutive human experience in which we achieve differentiation, that is, distinction of self from the world, while coincidentally building the bridge toward the world beyond the distinguished self, that is, creating and bodily experiencing otherness.

However, dancing creates artifact, that is, what is created and experienced as other is not a real other, but the signs of other, even an ideal other. Yet, this artifactual construct is bodily experienced, thus having the kind of presence that distinguishes the real. This distinction, too, marks its reversibility and its potential for engendering power. In constructing an other which, because it is artificial is of the world of signs, and in bodily experiencing this other, thus experiencing a constructed world of signs as "the real," dancing grounds in a seductive promise of the real the whole systems of signs that underlies language, art, metaphor, that is, the whole system that distinguishes the way in which human beings engage themselves and the world. Since we know that what is created in dancing is not actual other but a sign of other, of otherness, yet because we experience it in the non-propositional immediate terms of body, it introduces the reversibility that is the base of all sign systems, that is the sign both is and is not what it is. The body is the base of all signs.

Inspired by Jean Baudrillard's understanding of seduction, I suggest that this reversibility accounts for the seductive character of dancing–the way dancing draws us into itself. In his view, seduction has the capacity to "deny things their truth and turn it [sic] into a game, the pure play of appearances, and thereby to foil all systems of power and meaning."[7] He holds that the "sole strategy [of seduction] is to be-there/not-there, and thereby produce a sort of flickering, a hypnotic mechanism that crystallizes attention outside all concern with meaning. Absence here seduces presence."[8] Dancing always feels so meaningful, yet its meanings are never satisfactorily articulatable. I think we place far too much emphasis on articulating the meaning of the meaningful. When we experience something as meaningful, we believe that we must be able to articulate its meaning. The two are not equivalent. Something may be meaningful because it is seductive in the sense of suggesting meaning or seemingly promising that meaning is available, not because it delivers some articulatable meaning. To say or feel something is meaningful more likely reflects its opaqueness, its seductive suggestion of meanings rather than the awareness of any clear or stated meanings. Usually, I believe, when we can clearly articulate the meaning of something it destroys that thing as being experienced as meaningful. To tell

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[6] Dancing, understood in this way, is an example of Merleau-Ponty's "flesh ontology" and is similar to his exemplar of one hand touching and being touched by the other. The two hands, clearly differentiated, are of one body thus touching and being touched are reversible, differentiated yet interchangeable and interdependent. Dancing, I believe, is a far richer analogy than is flesh for his ontology, especially when extended to experience that involves the world beyond the body.

[7] Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (1990), p. 8.

[8] Ibid.

the meaning is to take away the play, the seduction, the meaningfulness. Dancing keeps our attention, seduces us, because we can not find any suitable representation; seduction is its character. Dancing's reversibility is the reversibility that is seduction.

Baudrillard clarified his understanding of seduction by opposing it to production. Production, which means to render visible or to make appear, is, he argues, to materialize by force what is of another order, that of the secret, that of seduction. Production opposes seduction which always precedes it. Whereas production renders visible, makes appear; seduction removes something from the visible, veils, occludes. In its effort to expose all, pornography is, for Baudrillard, an apt exemplar of production. For him, masculine power is the power to produce while seduction is feminine, not so much a power as the affect of annulling the power of production. Seduction then is not so much power as the source from which arises power of any kind, including that of production. By its ability to reverse production, seduction is always more fundamental. Baudrillard writes,

> Seduction is stronger than power because it is reversible and mortal, while power, like value, seeks to be irreversible and immortal. Power partakes of all the illusions of production, and of the real; it wants to be real, and so tends to become its own imaginary, its own superstition . . . Seduction, on the other hand, is not of the order of the real–and is never of the order of force, nor relations of force. But precisely for this reason, it enmeshes all power's real actions, as well as the entire reality of production, in this unremitting reversibility and disaccumulation–*without which there would be neither power nor accumulation*.[9]

Dancing is seduction in that what is made is only a sign of what we experience as visible, as real; yet these appearances absorb meaning and presence by the pure play of signs, signs that disappear as they appear, that both are and are not what they appear. This richly complex view of dancing, though presented here too briefly, helps us understand the fascination humans have with dancing and witnessing dancing. It may also help us appreciate why dancing and religion are so closely related. It also begins to give us insights into the process of "localization."

An important distinction of dancing, well recognized but poorly understood, is that dancing cannot be reproduced. If understood as seduction, dancing opposes production and, thus, there can be no *re*production of dancing. A reproduction of dancing cannot be dancing at all, since to do so must end the play of signs. A seeming reproduction of dancing is not dancing, rather it is film or painting or description, that is, it is something else. Globalization, as I understand it, depends on production and on re-production, on the de-territorialization of the produced, that is, on the absence of the imprint of place on product. A bottle of Coke is a bottle of Coke whether in New York City of an inn high in the Himalaya. Images of the Internet are indistinguishable whether experienced in a Seattle computer lab where they are created or in a cybercafe in Abidjan. The Christian God is the same whether found in a great European cathedral or in the Australian outback. All are products, visibles, presences. Dancings cannot be brought or bought into this process, yet their seductive character tempts us always to try. Attempts to do so simply supplant dancing with something else, but they do not stop the dancing. The seductiveness of dancing always persists even in the presence of production–seduction is the more fundamental. Dancing is necessarily of the local, of the body, of the play of signs. As constituitive of

[9] *Seduction*, p. 46.

being human, dancing attests to the necessity of localization that implies a global circulation of influences and experiences and accomplishes the task. Dancing is the poetics of place. An essential distinction to being human is a localizing ontology that we acquire by dancing. Such an understanding of dancing gives us liberals some respite from our fears of a graying globalization.