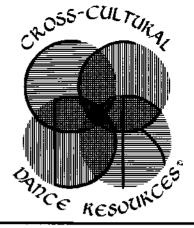
CCDR Newsletter



Number 10

Summer, 1990

Angst Over Ethnic Dance

Joann W. Kealiinohomoku as ethnic; today, many avoid labeling all dances as ethnic, as if ethnic were a four-letter word.

Two decades ago I wrote that many EuroAmericans seemed to believe that classical ballet transcended ethnicity. Because all human beings have a genetic, linguistic and cultural, in short, an ethnic heritage, I suggested that every dance form is ethnic. In the article "An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance" I argued for an objective application of ethnic and ethnicity, and against we/they polarity.

Dancers everywhere are reassessing values. Still, ethnic continues to be used as a polarizing device. For example, a naturalized citizen of the United States, complains that she is tired of having her classical dances be referred to in America as ethnic; Bharatanatyam is not referred to in India as ethnic.

Since 1970 interesting things have been happening on the way to the twenty-first century. In this Information Age of mass media and ease of travel, people everywhere are becoming cognizant of what is "out there," and what has been transplanted. In our "massmediated culture," as Banes quips (1989), restless American dancers, always searching for new dance materials, are discovering and experiencing the dances of Others. At the same time, the rest of the world is paying close attention to what is happening in America.

Similarly, we read in newspapers that AfroAmerican dances are ethnic, while by the breach of not mentioning EuroAmerican dances, except as they are displayed in identified enclaves, the implication is that EuroAmericans are not ethnic. The polarity of we/they seems to reveal a separatist worldview that some represent as Eurocentrism.

There is still misapprehension about "ethnic dance," but the concerns of EuroAmerican dancers are becoming more inclusive than exclusive. Twenty years ago many EuroAmerican dancers did not want their own dances referred to

Of course EuroAmericans do not have a monopoly on polarization. Any "we" can be "they," and vice versa. Indeed, ethnocentrism is a human characteristic. Ethnocentrism is a necessary function of being successfully integrated within a culture. Ethnocentrism becomes ugly when used to justify exclusion at the expense of others, and to sustain old grievances and mistrust (Committee on International Relations 1987).

Ethnocentrism can be politically harmful, especially when ethnic and

ethnicity are used as weapons. As an example, the official policy towards dance in South Africa is to categorize those of whites as art forms, and those of indigenous peoples as ethnic and therefore unqualified for equal respect, funds and venues (Hagemann 1990).1

In the United States one dance critic reports that many dance critics "undervalued" ethnic dances (which? obviously not "ours"), and felt uneasy by requests from ethnic dance artists (read dance artists from Other traditions) to write critical reviews of their dances (see discussion in Gere 1990).

Actually, numerous scholarly publications have examined the strengths and weaknesses of the designators, ethnic and ethnicity (Royce 1982, Thompson 1989). Ethnomusicologist, John Blacking flatly asserts that the myth of some kind of "folk collective" is "enshrined in the obnoxious and derogatory term 'ethnic'" (Blacking 1989). But Thermstrom notes that "Ethnicity is a central theme - perhaps the central theme of American history...the interplay between peoples of differing national origins, religions, and races has shaped the character of our nation's life". He observes that since the early 1960s there has been an "explosive increase in research on

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America's complex ethnic mosaic" (Thermstrom 1971).

In a bizarre movement, having equated ethnicity with minority, some EuroAmericans sought recognition of their own ethnicity in order to receive the "advantages" that were being extended to minorities (Anonymous 1975, Stein 1979).

Seldom is the public stirred by the considered ideas of academics or the off-beat claims of special interest groups. Only within the last few years has there been an "explosive increase" of interest among dancers about the world's "complex ethnic mosaic." With this explosion questions burn that spark more questions. Is an ethnic dance identified by the style, the ethnicity of the performer, or the context? If a major performance rationale for ethnic dance is cultural continuity, what justifies its performance out of context or by a dancer of a differing ethnicity? How should ethnic dances be presented out of context? How much modification can occur before a dance is no longer authentic? Can a dance be authentic but not traditional? Indeed, what is authentic? What is traditional? If post-modern dance is authentic as an expression of EuroAmerican dance culture, is it then traditional - a tradition that values radical innovations? How should audiences be sensitized to respond to ethnic dances that differ from their own? How can critics write about dances from cultures about which their knowledge is limited? What are the ethical responsibilities to both individual and cultural owners of a dance?

As contemporary North American dancers and musicians learn ideas, behaviors, rhythms, skills and patterns that were foreign to them² unexpected concerns surface. What happens aesthetically when a blond EuroAmerican performs with a group of Black dancers from Haiti? Should a non-East Indian make a living from East Indian dances so long as there are excellent East Indian dancers who are unable to subsist by their own dances? Should dancers incorporate and/or modify borrowed forms into new works? If they do, are they trespassing? Are they undermining the "purity" of the form?

Some phenomena are perplexing. If showgirls from Japan, dancing in New York, perform Latin American dances, are the dancers and the dances both ethnic? In whose opinion? Because Latin American dances blend various cultural influences, should they even be signified as ethnic? Indeed at what point does a blend become ethnic? If ever? Does it matter?

In June of this year I picked up fliers for instruction and performances throughout the California Bay area from over 30 differing cultures. Because attendance is not restricted to persons of like ethnicity, there will be cross-fertilization of cultural expression. Will the results be ethnic?

As mainstream American dancers become enamored with the dances of Others, North American ethnic enclaves accelerate their enthusiasm for using dances to celebrate and sustain their unique cultural heritages. Enclaves face conundrums, also. Insistence on cultural continuity and boundary maintenance are messages to outsiders as well as to themselves. When enclaves present festivals to which outsiders are invited, what is the targeted audience? Presentations may be adjusted to appeal to an alien audience, but, again, if traditions are malleable, what is tradition?

Many ethnic groups encourage young people to attain dance excel-

lence through recently established competitive events. In this new context can the dances remain authentic? Competitions require adherence to established standards, but do they inhibit development of the dance form?

If dancers choose to violate the standards, do they and their dances become non-ethnic? And another difficult problem: are participants who have but one parent of appropriate ethnicity, less authentic than those whose parents are both of the appropriate ethnicity, even though they all perform the same dances in the same way at the same event?

Three critical considerations and three concurrent movements, then, spawn myriads of questions. Considerations concern the person of the dancer, the dance itself, and the context for performance. Concurrent movements are appreciation of Others' dances, cultural interaction among dancers and their dances, and perpetuation of unique dance cultures.

Across the United States as well as in other countries many dance-related organizations are redressing myopic value-judgements with a dialectic that is reaching a crisis (see "Update Dance/USA" 1990, and "Attitudes and Arabesques" 1990, for information about many of these meetings). Alarmed about the label of ethnic dance, some organizations actively seek a surrogate term.

The City Celebration of San Francisco held discussions last year and this, to consider the elusive parameters of "authentic" and "ethnic" (Euell 1990). Even the title of the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival was under scrutiny. No consensus resulted from the lively discussions and likewise,

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An Open Letter From Ou Jian-Ping

Editor's note: After the beginning of a correspondence in 1989, CCDR invited ou Jian-Ping to share information about his background as a dancer and researcher, what motivated him to become interested in cross-cultural research on dance, and about the Dance Research Institute in Beijing. The following excerpts from his reply are addressed to all the members of CCDR.

"I started my dance training at 13 in one of the biggest Chinese cities - Wuhan, located on the Yangtze River in the Central part of China, just after my primary schooling when everybody...was dancing the so-called 'revolutionary dance-drama.' I was nicely proportioned, soft, sensitive and handsome, so was picked up by the Wuhan Song & Dance Theater just after I was sent by my high school's dance teacher to learn the roles in the 'White Haired Girl'...But my parents insisted on my going on with my normal education, at least to finish my high school education, as they dare not dream of sending me to college to reach their level, because they were not the first-classed people like workers, peasants and soldiers, but just the intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. My father was an electrical engineer and my mother a high school teacher...So, I just did my dance training and performance after school."

"When I finished my high school, it was too late to be a professional dancer, so I got a job as a jade carver...for three years until the Cultural Revolution was ended and a new system of college was adapted, which required every one to take an entrance exam."

"I took the exam and passed, thus was accepted by the Central China Teachers College. Nevertheless, I was very sad to leave my job as a jade carver and later a designer, a very creative work indeed, and moreover, I was not happy to go to a teachers college.... I finally went, after I realized that it was a rare chance for me to go upward...I went as an English Major for four years, and got my position as best student which led to the official invitation from the college to teach after my graduation. But I decided to do a grand jeté back to the very thing I love too much - dance!"

"So, I passed another examination to become one of the first two Chinese MA students in the graduate school of China National Arts Academy under the direct guidance of Mr. Wu Xiao-bang, the most important Chinese dance figure for the past sixty years and still to the present, as well as Chairman of All-China Dance Artists Association and the founding Director of Dance Research Institute. I got my MA as one of the two lucky dogs in the whole of China, after many interesting courses in ballet, modern, Chinese folk and classic dances, as well as their history and theories, which laid a solid background for my later research career."

"Right after I got my MA in the December of 1984 I was employed as an Assistant Research Fellow in the Chinese national dance research center - Dance Research Institute. The researchers in the DRI enjoy the best research possibilities in China and the best thing I cherish has always been our paid but free time, one could always do what he is interested in. We had two major research functions in the Institute - Dance History Study Section and Dance Theory Study Section, and in the spring of 1987, a third part - Foreign Dance Study Section was set up around me. Our research thrusts reach far to not only America, Europe, but also to Asia and Africa - I went to India in the December 1986, as one of the two governmental dance delegates under a two country cultural exchange agreement, and a young scholar from my section is going to Nigeria for a whole year; in my section, we have altogether six people...we have a treasure also, that is an experienced scholar named

Guo Ming-da who once studied with Alwin Nikolais and other dance artists for eight years in the States! At this moment, our research projects are mainly on the Modern Dance, as our Chinese dancers and choreographers are in bad need of it."

"As far as I myself am concerned, I have worked with over twenty US and European dancers and choreographers...Ben Stevenson, Marian Sarach, Trisha Brown, Janet Randell...and many others...[also] Asian and Asia-oriented dancers and choreographers like Astad Deboo from Bombay, Hazel Chung Hood who studied Javanese dances for many years. Ohad Naharin who came to the States from Israel to dance for Martha Graham...In the spring and summer of 1988, I went to the States and West Germany to study and observe dance and other cultural activities with two separate fellowships from the New York-based Asian Cultural Council and the West German Government. I spent most of the New York City time working in the Dance Collection at the Lincoln Center...performances, reviewing them for the US Dance Magazine (began to work as their International Critic and China correspondent since 1987) and interviewing dancers and choreographers such as Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown, Erick Hawkins...to name just a few of them; at the American Dance Festival, I participated in Don McDonagh's Dance Critics Conference...in Washington, I drowned myself in the Library of Congress and all the national museums; In West Germany I travelled in eight major cities...all this would finally lead me to a wider range of comparative studies between different cultures, which is my ultimate aim."

"At the moment, I'm working at three commissioned books - one on the most famous and important world dance personalities, one on the theory and practice of the Western Modern Dance and one on Indian Aesthetics...last year, I published a book named "The Sketches of World Dance'...and now will be reprinted as the 8,000 copies have been sold out. I also translated a book by the US aesthete Thomas Munro, 'Oriental Aesthetics,' which will be published in a few months...the editors and publisher have asked me to write a book on the comparative studies of Eastern and Western aesthetics, my project of 1991. Also, if time permits me, next year, I would like to do an English-Chinese dictionary of World Dance."

"To conclude, a few words about why I got interested in the cross-cultural dance studies. First of all, I love dance and I love people, and to me the two are just one, and when we communicate with dance - the most beautiful combination of soul and body...there certainly will not be any war, I strongly believe. Secondly, I'm always curious, curious about everything new to my senses, and I think dance is the best representative of all the peoples...And that's why I work eight to ten hours a day to think, to read, to translate and to write, every day, happily and exuberantly, as I know there's still a long way for me to go."

"...Best wishes to OUR cross-cultural dance studies! ... I would be most happy to start new contacts...My address is on the copyright page of every US Dance Magazine since 1988."

Yours most sincerely,



there was no resolution about the name of the Festival - some participants justified the Festival's name because of commonly shared frames of reference but others hesitated because of the many unanswered questions.

This year the Dance Critics Association (DCA) decided on World Dance instead of ethnic for their upcoming meetings that are scheduled to coincide with the Los Angeles Festival. Dance/USA focussed its annual round table on Internationalism in Dance. The Arizona Commission on the Arts circumvented ethnic by substituting Culturally Diverse Arts. The Association of American Cultures (TAAC) chose Multicultural and Cultural Pluralism instead of ethnic for their meetings. However, these substitutes seem unsatisfactory because they are not synonymous with ethnic.

World Dance is potentially as polarizing as ethnic if it begins to imply that EuroAmericans are not part of the world. World Dance is confusing, also, because of its apparent analogy with World Music that sometimes refers to the blending of music cultures and sometimes to the varieties of music cultures. International Dance and Internationalism suggest a kind of dance Esperanto instead providing an umbrella term for dances from many cultures. They also disallow for the fact that dance cultures are not necessarily coequivalent with artificially derived national boundaries. Culturally Diverse Arts excludes idioms that are not considered to be "art" within a cultural context, or worse. forces the situation (Kealiinohomoku 1980).

The concepts and labels of ethnic and ethnicity are useful to social scientists. If understood to be value-free and dynamic they could

be useful to us all. All of us are ethnic; our appearances, frames of references, languages, and behaviors, all give evidence of our ethnic heritage. All of us are human, also; our abilities to interbreed, learn and share cultures, become multi-lingual, and shift behavior modes as needed, all are proof of our human heritage.

Alas, encrusted connotations of ethnic are destroying a useful concept and epithet. Connotations include unchanging, conservative, quaint, inferior, atavistic, underdeveloped, backward, rarified, exotic, fragile, culture-bound, and other misleading or separating, polarizing ideas. None of these adjectives is a definitive feature of ethnic. Any or all of them - or their opposites - may or may not be appropriate for specific ethnic expressions but that is beside the point.

The point is that the label of ethnic dance is contaminated and is unlikely to be purged. Accepting reality, I join those who want to see the term retired, but the vacuum thus created is not filled by the suggested substitutes. I experience dissonance when some Native Americans identify their dances as "ethnic," to imply that they have accepted roles as Others in the United States. I would be shocked if Native Americans identified their dances as World Dance, International Dance, Culturally Diverse, or Multicultural.

A simple solution for labeling is to engage comfortable self-references. Bharatanatyam is Bharatanatyam; a Flamenco dancer is a Flamenco dancer. A dance is a dance and a dancer is a dancer; appropriately added self-reflexive descriptors refine the identifications. festival celebration of dances could identify specific dances and dancers in its publicity3. Funders could choose adjudicators to match the self-identification of applicants. Dance critics could consult with dance ethnologists who have specialized in researching dances throughout the world.4

A straightforward system of labeling, with neither the term ethnic nor a euphemism, will be mutually satisfying to dancers and non-dancers alike. With no need for a value-free overarching label for the dances of Us and Them. dancers will be assured that their designations, respected by everyone, are those with which they accept ownership.

NOTES:

- 1. Thanks to Dena Davida who alerted me to the articles by Hagemann and Jowitt.
- The movement to blend cultural performances is particularly evident in experimental theatre. See issues of The Drama Review for the past several years.
- The Los Angeles Festival scheduled for September, 1990, avoids the word ethnic in their 34 page tabloid-size program.

Hundreds of venues that feature at least 27 dance groups, include presenters from several disciplines in addition to dance. The Festival focuses on cultures of the Pacific Basin, with a few notable exceptions, such as India and Jemez Pueblo, and questionably Cambodia and Thailand, except as they may have representatives who reside on the west coast of America. The program notes and the synthesizing essays are culturally sensitive except for the insistent use of "art." I am familiar with some of the groups who think of their dances as very valuable but not as art, and I think that designator will be cognitively dissonant to them.

The assumption that all dances

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are art is as ethnocentric as the defunct assumption that only EuroAmerican dances are art. Likewise the assumption that all dancers even desire to have their dances be classified as art is equally ethnocentric. To label all dances as art is not empowering because it unfairly sets up the performers and viewers for disappointments.

4. For a dance critic to write a critique of a Jemez Pueblo dance, for example, would be at odds with the dance's mission. lemez dances achieve something other than a pleasing performance, although that is important, also. A descriptive review rather than a critique would be acceptable and probably appreciated to document their participation in a major Festival. Jowitt notes that one of the critic's jobs is "to question preconceptions that may be inappropriate or unhelpful, not add more" (1981).

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Blacking, John, "Challenging the Myth of 'Ethnic' Music..." Year-book for Traditional Music, vol. 21, 1989, pp. 17-24.

Committee on International Relations. Us and Them: The Psychology of Ethnonationalism, Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, report 123, New York: Brunner/Mazel Publishers, 1990.

Augmenting Resource Information

CCDR Newsletter #9, Winter 1990, prompted augmenting information concerning the article "Challenges for Dance Ethnologists: Observed during Travel."

Judy Van Zile, University of Hawaii, and editor for DRJ writes "during our special Fall, 1989, Chinese dance project (a report about this appeared in the spring, 1990 issue of DRJ 22/1:54-55), we did some major documentation. Currently available for use at UH, and possibly more widely available in the future, are transcripts and translations of a series of lectures on dance in China and minority nationality dances presented by our visiting teacher from Beijing, a video we made about her and Chinese dance, videos documenting two lecture-demonstrations she did, and a video of a student demonstration of dances she taught. She also deposited with us approximately 15 hours of video tapes on dance made in China - some containing rather special footage on dances I suspect are seldom seen by most people even in China."

Augmented references:

Holly Fairbanks' article based on thesis: <u>The Collection, Preservation</u> and <u>Dissemination</u> of <u>Minority Dance in the People's Republic of China</u> (New York University, Dept Dance and Dance Education), 1985.

Madeline Kwok's article is abridged from her thesis, <u>Dance of the Paiwan Aboriginal People of Pingtung County</u>, with <u>Implications of Dance for Tribal Classification</u>, (University of Hawaii, Music Department), 1975.

The Miner thesis, was published in book form in 1973 under Judy Van Zile's married name. <u>Dance in India: An Annotated Guide to Source Materials.</u> Providence: Asian Music Publications, 1973.

Two new references for Malaysia:

De Danaan, Llyn, "The Blossom Falling: Movement and Allusion in a Malay Dance," <u>The Asian Theatre Journal</u> 3(1), Spring 1986, pp 110-117.

Seeler, Joan, <u>Kenyah Dance, Sarawak, Malaysia: A Description and Analysis</u> (M.A. thesis, University of Hawaii, Music Department), 1975.

Dance Critics Association Brochure for 1990 Conference "Looking Out: Critical Imperatives in World Dance, an International Conference."

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Gere, David, "Critical Imperatives in World Dance or, The Writing on the Wall," DCA Newsletter, Spring, 1990, pp. 1-11.

Hagemann, Fred, "The Politics of Dance in South Africa," Ballett International, January 1, 1990, pp. 135-141.

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say," Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement, 1,1. 1980, pp. 38-44.

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Thompson, Richard R. Theories of Ethnicity: A Critical Appraisal, Contributions in Sociology #82, New York: Greenwood Press, 1989.

Update Dance/USA, March/April, 1990.

A Personal Note

It has been one year since I was given the opportunity to become Acting Executive Director of CCDR. The experience has been both rewarding and challenging. As many of you know it is an ongoing task to keep a non-profit organization afloat regardless of its purpose and function. With your support we have had a successful year at CCDR. Among some of our accomplishments have been the addition to our library of books and dance materials from around the world; participation in panels, workshops and seminars on dance; extending the use of our library to a number of individuals researching different facets of dance; and most important, we were able to host our third annual recipient of the Halla K. Kealinohomoku Research Choreographer-in-Residence award, David Appel. Much of this could not be accomplished without your continued support of CCDR.

We have also come to the realization that our operating expenses have risen over the last nine years due to growth and inflation but our membership fees have not. Therefore the Board of Directors has voted to increase the membership fees slightly in order to help meet some of our expenses. We believe that this increase will not cause a great deal of hardship to you, our members, as we have expanded our newsletter from four to eight pages to give you something more in return for your continued support.

Thank you for a wonderful year,

Kathleen Stemmler

Kathleen M. Stemmler

Acting Executive Director

Alert! Up For Reauthorization

National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act

The futures of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and the Institute of Museum Services are at stake! Final votes will be in September.

The National Endowment for the Arts is threatened, particularly, because of controversy over a few grants in spite of 25 years of exemplary performance. The case is very serious; folks who want the NEA to be eliminated are waging a full-scale attack. Even if you have contacted legislators within the past few weeks, please do it again. There is power in the sheer volume of correspondence. With permission, we reprint a portion of a notice sent by the organization, Arizonans for Cultural Development:

"The National Endowment for the Arts funding from Congress is in serious jeopardy...please call <u>The Emergency Campaign to Save the Arts</u> hotline number 1-900-226-ARTS today! (\$4.50 will be billed to your phone.) Mailgrams will automatically be sent in your name to senators and congressmen...We want reauthorization without censorship restriction! Currently calls and letters are 10 to 3 to <u>Abolish</u> the NEA rather than reauthorize without restrictions.

"This is truly an emergency! We have contacted...our congressmen and they are not hearing from arts advocates."

New Members at CCDR

CCDR welcomes the following new members: Karen Anijar, Alyce Bevine-Polak, Carole Binswanger, Lisa Boguslaw, Neita Carr, Ann I. Czompo, Dena Davida, Penelope Doob, Helen M. Floer, Kathleen Haywood, June Lewis, Ira Lux, Susan Melman, Vera Meletic, Jacque Paquette, Olivia S. Rivers, Bernice Rosen, Marian Runyeon, Jody Sutlive, and two organizations: Aires Flamenco and Tibetan Institute for Performing Arts.

Annual Meeting

This year, 1990, CCDR will hold its Annual Meeting on Sunday, August 12 at 4:00 p.m. at the CCDR facilities 518 South Agassiz. All of our members are invited to come and bring a friend along with your aluminum recycleables for the H.K.K.

Research-Choreographer-in-Residence Fund.

At this meeting, CCDR will be selling used or duplicate books from donors or the CCDR library. Proceeds will go to the H.K.K. Research-Choreographer-in-Residence fund.

Thanks to McGaugh's Newstand for its generous contribution in support of this newsletter.

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A special treat is waiting for those of us who gather at the Annual Meeting: Cynthia Knox will present "Impressions of 'Little Lhasa,' the Tibetan Community in Exile in Dharamsala, India," in an illustrated talk.

Gifts to CCDR

We are pleased to announce with thanks the following gifts: a calico Inuit (Eskimo) dress from Patricia Dewar, two cassette tapes of Tibetan music from Cynthia Knox, three hula outfits of the 18th century era in Hawaii from Holly McKusick, a Wayang Kulit (shadow puppet) from Kathleen Stemmler, and additions to the library from Dena Davida, John Dewar, Joann Kealiinohomoku, Barbara Mintz, and Susan Wilcox.

New CCDR Board Members

CCDR is pleased to announce that Holly Hamilton and Elson Miles have joined the Board of Directors. Their energies and great ideas are welcome indeed.

Cross-Cultural Dance Resources, Inc. 518 South Agassiz Street Flagstaff, Arizona 86001

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