

SESSION 18 (Papers)

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To Participate or to Present: Dance as Embodied Knowledge / Specialized Skill

This paper aims to analyze the educational potential of community dances exhibited as ‘tribal’ dances in festivals such as Hornbill (Nagaland) and Sangai (Manipur). Such annual congregations are occasions for the exhibited staging of traditional ensemble experiences of moving together among communities – involving sensory processes of proxemic interactions. Within everyday community spaces, such ensemble practices enable auto-transfer of knowledge from one body to another through intense proxemic and sensory experiences. This specific category of dance forms is identified as "folk", and described in many academic writings as repetitive, simple, and learned not as a skill from a master teacher, but as an easily imitable structure that can be passed on from one body to another through shared muscle memories or through familiarity born out of membership of a particular community. This explanation in itself hierarchizes knowledge, by way of putting one form of knowing over another. Assuming community dance knowledge to be lower in skill, aesthetic, intellectual, or bodily capability compared to the specialized dance knowledge required for classical dances from the same geographical region, legitimizes a list of standardized aesthetic expectations that all dances must fulfil in order to be actually considered as dance. This paper compares two basic communicative principles - the ‘participatory’ (community dances) and ‘presentational’ (specialized classical dances) as different motivations for dancing – to critically analyse such hierarchizations of embodied knowledge systems.

Bio

Urmimala Sarkar Muni is a Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies, at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, with research interest in Critical Dance Studies, and performance and intersectionality. She is a Social Anthropologist and a dancer/choreographer, trained in Kathakali, Manipuri, and Creative Dance at the Uday Shankar India Culture Centre, Kolkata. Her recent books are *Uday Shankar and his Transcultural Experimentations: Dancing Modernity* (Palgrave, 2022) and *Alice Boner Across Arts and Geographies* (Rietberg Museum, 2021). She has co-edited the special issue on *The Dancing Body*, of the *Routledge Journal of South Asian History and Culture* (2023).