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Review: 'Pragmatist Philosophy and Dance: Interdisciplinary Dance Research in the American South'

Aili W. Bresnahan
University of Dayton, abresnahan1@udayton.edu

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Pragmatist Philosophy and Dance: Interdisciplinary Dance Research in the American South

BY ERIC MULLIS

Palgrave MacMillan, 2019, 247 pp. with index

Eric Mullis' *Pragmatist Philosophy and Dance* is a thoroughly multi-disciplinary and transdisciplinary book that is centered on and deeply engaged in the experimental and lived experience of Pentecostal dance in the American and Appalachian South. The focal point for Mullis' research is not observation and critique of dance as embodied religious practice from a critical distance (although he does engage it critically and analytically) but from the inside, embedding his own person and body into the environment with all the resources of the unifying self that he has at his disposal to not just understand the form but *feel* it and *live* it. This makes Mullis a true William Jamesian and John Deweyan pragmatist; he doesn't just critically reflect on the work of classical pragmatists but he takes the reader on a sustained and deep dive into the qualitative, aesthetics, doing-and-undergoing world of the phenomenon he is analyzing. He does this as both a maker and creator of his own form of artistic representation of religious, ecstatic dance, using tools from contemporary and postmodern dance, theatre, and performance, and as an audience member and participant of Pentecostal services. He tells us about his process, which is reminiscent of Dewey's Barnesian explanation of how artists create art in *Art as Experience*, and he is willing to open himself up to the worries and possibility that he might, in the process, also experience true transformation and religious conversion (which has echoes of James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*). The primary value of this book for the pragmatist scholar is thus not historical analysis of pragmatic texts (although Mullis does some exegesis as well) but his example of *how to be a pragmatist philosopher*.

To clarify, this is not beauty-parlor or armchair philosophy but one that lives, transacts, and trades in the historical and cultural environment that Mullis seeks to understand. The reader who chooses to follow his lead finds themselves immersed in theories of religion, comparative dance practice, theatre studies, ethnography of folk aesthetics, philosophy of pragmatism, Continental philosophy, analytic philosophy, and East Asian philosophies (also reminiscent of Dewey), as well as experiential choreographic and religious practice. It's comprehensive, dense, and at times, a bit unwieldy as a result, but it is organized in such a way that the reader can skip around and focus on the parts and pieces of most interest and relevance to them.

The organization and movement of the book is as follows: Eight chapters progress not in linear or chronological fashion but in an interweaving way. The book does have forward motion in that it's laid out in a way that seeks to advance our understanding of the exploration that Mullis is undergoing, but it does not take the form of an analytic unfolding argument. There is no propositional claim that Mullis is providing evidence for; the exploration, growth, development and embracing of fallibilism along the way is also more pragmatic in overarching method than analytic. And yet, conclusions are drawn and theories advanced along the way. Close explanation of all the methodologies employed, how they intersect, and the difficulties and limitations of interweaving all of these into the rich tapestry that he has created, shows up in the "Concluding Thoughts" section of Chapter 8. It's so illuminating that it may benefit the reader to skim this section before beginning to read the rest of the book for frame of reference.

Chapters 1-4 set the historical stage for the book's philosophical and theatrical dance analysis. Chapter 1 outlines the pragmatic sources to be used in the book, including references to Dewey, James, and Richard Shusterman. Here Mullis explains why this is a pragmatist book, which for Mullis means that it is centered on experimental, first-person research as well as embracing pluralism and meliorism (the idea that the world can be made better with effort). He then explains how all of these theories will connect to the choreographic dance piece that he has made as a continuing, experiential case study of the inside-out process of dancing and performing ecstatic dance that will appear throughout the book called *Later Rain*. (He will also, later, make some reference to another one of his dance pieces still in development called *The Land of Nod*.) Chapter 2 goes deeper into the pragmatist methods of experimental inquiry, somaesthetics, and performance praxis. In this chapter Mullis references James' experiments with hypnosis, homeopathic medicine, and mindfulness techniques in connection with trying cannabis, nitrous oxide, and mescaline. He also reminds us that Dewey travelled extensively in Japan, China, South Africa, and Turkey to study global approaches to education, and that he was a student of the Alexander technique, a bodily practice that encourages somatic awareness (interior, felt, noticing of the experience of interior bodily processes like breath and heartbeat) as well as encourages correct, and injury-preventing posture and movement dynamics. In addition, he discusses Shusterman's work in somaesthetics, pointing out the gap in Shusterman's analysis when it comes to engaging the practical somaesthetic inquiry that has been taking place for years in work in performing arts practice and performance studies. Chapter 3 takes the reader into the religious history of ecstatic Protestantism that is needed to make sense of the religion-focused dance practice that will be analyzed later in a way that is sensitive to cultural and racial dynamics. Chapter 4 provides an account of how artistic dance and theatre performances have connected with and tried to reflect ecstatic religious embodiment practices, focusing in particular on the work of Doris Humphrey, Martha Clarke, and the Wooster Group and their interpretation of Shaker theological folk aesthetics. Here Mullis discusses the "myth of the shakers" and the ways that Southern Appalachia culture has been similarly mythologized in ways that make it difficult to locate the authentic practice within the artistic, performative renderings.

Chapters 5-6 take the reader on the road with Mullis as he explores the ecstatic theological practices of various churches in the American South, followed by how he has adapted and incorporated these energies in his dance piece, *Later Rain*. Chapter 5 begins Mullis' ethnographic fieldwork. Here Mullis locates *Later Rain* within performance practice and the reader is taken along for the ride as Mullis visits and participates in services in a variety of different Pentecostal and gospel churches. These include performance-savvy analytical descriptions of the highlights of the services, like the preachers' "dynamic vocalizing" and breathing synchronization with the rhythms of the preaching, as well as homier descriptions of the feel of the preachers' sweat on his hands and smell of his Old Spice cologne after receiving a welcoming hug as a congregant newcomer. (128-129) It also contains some reflections on the cultural differences between suburban and rural services and how these lifestyle choices affect the performance aesthetics of the services. Chapter 6 shows the reader Mullis' embodied movement research in connection with his *Later Rain* piece, where Mullis justifies this analysis of his own experience by comparing it with Dewey's, who "articulated an account of inquiry that finds commonalities between art making, philosophical thinking, pedagogy, scientific research, and everyday problem-solving." (149) This section discusses not just his own experience, but the experience of some of the performers in his ensemble, one of whom had a turbulent and negative experience with Pentecostalism in her own life that she was able to bring into her performance. Chapter 7 rounds

out this section by connecting his investigations here with James' religious explorations, taking a closer look at James' connection with religious experience, ecstasy and fundamentalism in "The Will to Believe" as well as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Here Mullis discusses James' belief that first-hand experience is needed for religious belief and to avoid skepticism. Mullis also wonders if participation in the services would cause religious conversion in his own case due to his not just observing but allowing the energies of the rituals to enter, work within, and transform his own body.

Chapter 8, the concluding chapter, explains Mullis' sense of the value of his idea of pragmatist instrumentalism. Here, again, Mullis stresses the need for contemporary pragmatism to connect in closer ways to cultural practices like dance and notes the gap that his research has filled in this way. He also reiterates how this project has increased his understanding of embodied performance, the aesthetics of authenticity, and the egalitarian possibilities of charismatic Pentecostalism. He does note and stress, however, that these practices often contain a troubling regressive politics, such as their enforcement of what they see as traditional gender roles (among other things).

As mentioned at the outset, throughout the *Pragmatist Philosophy and Dance* far closer attention is paid to experiment, experience, and understanding of the phenomenological feel of the phenomena at hand (charismatic, ecstatic, religious Protestant dance) as well as a hands-on engagement with making dance and theatre pieces to aid this process, than there is to close textual analysis. It may be, then, that the expert in historical pragmatism might find points of disagreement with the interpretation of the various pragmatic texts that Mullis' engages. To focus just on those things, though, would be to miss the point and major lesson and thrust of this book, which is *not* primarily to understand Dewey, James, and (to a lesser degree) Shusterman theoretically but to conduct philosophical research and writing *in their shoes*. This involves not just analysis and critique "in abstraction" (as Dewey would say) but experiential learning, as Mullis learns about the religious and cultural phenomenon being analyzed by exploring and moving with the energies it creates within him artistically and performatively. This is what makes the book deeply pragmatic in a way that books on pragmatism that deal only with the text do not. Mullis has not just written about pragmatist philosophy; he *is* a doer and maker of pragmatic philosophy. As such, this book takes a giant leap forward into the previously uncharted domain of pragmatist philosophy of dance and shows future dance philosophy researchers one way to do this in a deep, embodied, culturally sensitive, historically authentic, and spiritually engaged way.

Aili Bresnahan
University of Dayton, Ohio
abresnahan1@udayton.edu