

Francisco Cruces

"Dancing with the Virgin. Body and Faith in the Fiesta of Tortugas, New Mexico" (Book Review)

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Dancing with the Virgin. Body and Faith in the Fiesta of Tortugas, New Mexico.
Deirdre Sklar. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
2001. Xi + 230 pp. 16 photos. 10 illus. Hb. ISBN 0-520-07910-8. Pb. ISBN 0-520-22791-3.

The last decades of ethnographic critique has given much interesting reflection about our craft, but little guidance about how to conduct it. In *Dancing with the Virgin* we find both a good piece of ethnographic work and the particular solutions chosen by her author for managing some of the most conspicuous problems for the ethnography of expressive practice -namely, the position of the observer, the authorial self, the interpretation of embedded meanings and bodily based knowledge, the slipperiness of experience and its relation to the ethnographic writing. Most of this topics remain implicit under the ethnographic text to become explicitly discussed in its last chapter.

Formally proposed as qualitative dance analysis, this book explores the whole religious and sensorial context of the *Fiesta of Our Lady of Guadalupe* in Tortugas, a little community in southern New Mexico close to the city of Las Cruces. By focusing on the yearly performances of the Puebloans natives of this localities dancing in honor to the Virgin of Guadalupe, its theoretical goal is to document the intimate relationship between movement and culture, kinesis and bodily based understanding, performance and belief. For, as the author states, "ways of moving are ways of thinking". The ethnographic account of a catholic celebration is intended to show how dancing and other performances can be regarded as a way of constructing religious faith -of bringing the presence of the Virgin and binding together, by means of gesture, rythm and physical movement, different layers of the participant´s memory and experience.

The history of this festivity goes back to the foundation of Tortugas Pueblo at the beggining of the XX century by a heterogeneous group of settlers, most of them of Pueblo origin -*indios* from the mission of El Paso, but also Tigua and Piro immigrants and *vecinos*, Anglo or Mexican residents-. In 1914 a nonprofit organization named *Los Indigenes de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* distributed lots of land among the settlers and began to organize communal issues like house building, cooperative work, church and cemetery maintenance, etc. This corporation, "conceived of itself as a combination of cooperative land-owning society, church-centered community, and guardian of tradition" (p. 24), has been the holder of the annual fiesta until our days.

The *fiesta* consists of a number of activities which combines a canonic catholic model with a local incorporation of some Pueblo elements: the communal backstage work for dressing the Virgin, cleaning the buildings and cooking food; the *Danza* devoted to the Virgin and performed during an all-night *velorio* in front of her icon; the pilgrimage during the next day to the top of a mountain in the vicinity; fires at night; the high mass of the 12th, officed by the bishop; a banquet for the more than two hundred participants; the *indio* and *azteca* public dances, ethnically marked; a final procession

across the village's space. These activities entail a continuous movement among several ceremonial buildings: a meetinghouse, a community kitchen, a small chapel and a resting house for the dancers.

After a few pages of theoretical introduction and a short review of the historical and social background of the festival (narrated in first person as a "travel"), the bulk of the ethnography is presented. The main chapter gives name to the book, with a detailed account of the *Danza* following the lines of the narrative of *La Guadalupeana's* apparitions to the indio Juan Diego at Tepeyac Hill. Notwithstanding this rather literal and catholic interpretation of the dancing (given by one informant) as a *mise-en-scene* of the Mexican nation's founding myth, the following chapters will allow to glance the ambiguous constituency of the corporation and the multileveled identity of their members. Several readings of the festival and its dances in catholic, puebloan, native american, mexican or communitarian clue are also possible. Indeed, the centrality of dancing with the Virgin for the people of Tortugas comes from the fact that it summarizes how "the specifics of local, temporal histories collapse into a single story of conversion" (161).

Sklar's ethnography is sensitive and intelligent. Honestly approached and carefully written, it elaborates on a key problem for the present theorization in anthropology: the embeddedness of cultural knowledge, the hidden connections between body, sense, belief and social identity. This problem is particularly acute in fields like music and dance, where the inchoate nature of their expressive format makes specially difficult to cast in words the nuances and interpretive moves carried by the actors.

The basic narrative which runs throughout Sklar's text and unfolds in the last chapter is a combine of anthropology of the senses, performing theory and reflexive ethnography. It makes to me a sound frame of reference. The main conclusion drawn from fieldwork is that "spiritual experience in Tortugas came as a doing, a transformation enacted upon oneself through the details of work" (p. 184). To develop this argument, Sklar elaborates on Mark Johnson's contention that abstract conceptualizations are built in sensorial orderings (embodied, imagined or *feeling* schemata)¹. This leads to the recognition of a "somatic mode of attention" or "propioceptive awareness", as the one distinctive of the dancer perception, with an ongoing translation of visual and verbal information into movement sensation. In contradistinction with this is the process of "wording", matching embodied schemata with words. For "while we experience and express embodied schemata across all sensory modalities, as images, sounds, gestures, and qualities of touch, we manipulate them predominantly as words" (p. 186). This sets forth a sharp difference between "propositional thinking", where names and symbolic representations are splitt off from embodied schemata and worked as abstractions in relation to each other, and "aesthetic and spiritual thinking", where the words are expected to reverberate with somatic memory. Both kinds of understanding would normally run to opposite directions in the construction of meaning. "Whereas propositional understandings depend on excluding somatic effects from what counts as meaningful, both aesthetic and spiritual understandings depend on them" (p. 187). In line with Roy Rappaport's union of the sacred and the numinous² and Victor Turner's

¹ Johnson, Mark. 1987. *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

² Rappaport, Roy A. 1979. *Ecology, Meaning and Religion*. Richmond, CA: North Atlantic Books.

bipolarity of symbols³, Sklar is looking for the process that gives religious symbols both their power and their lived and immediate flavour, a process which she ultimately finds in “the doubling of doing and feeling oneself doing”. The difference between merely aesthetic and spiritual thinking would lay in that “in spiritual knowing, otherness, the divinity, provides the doubling”. For that purpose she invokes -although not fully explaining it- Robert Armstrong’s category of “presence”⁴.

Although my overall appraisal of the book is neatly positive, a number of critical remarks can be suggested. First, the solution given to the problem of the authorial position is not fully convincing: the writing becomes frequently too self-centered. Self-referentiality may take the form of minute literary references to the childhood memories of the author, or to scarcely informing sensorial confessions in an crudely realistic style -i. e. "Heat rose from the sand when I stopped the car and opened the door" (pg. 9), "Traffic was heavy. No one was walking" (pg. 20), etc-. There are other moments when the author especulates about how must be feeling like one of her informants, or even allows herself to imagine their answers to virtual questions. Of course, this is justified in terms of the kind of somatic search (learning through proprioceptive awareness) that is at the basis of the project. But to me it goes beyond the limits of ethnographic empathy and results in an overacting of reflexivity. Moreover, this seems to be a particularly restricted way of understanding "reflexivity", more as self-confession than as a commitment to objectify the observer, introducing him or her within the scope of research. In this sense, I missed in the analysis more careful attention to the political economy of the festival, obviously subjected from its beginnings to a number of local and non local appropriations (ethnographer’s included).

The book is notoriously addressed to the Northamerican public, and to Northamerican academics in particular. For a non-English reader, the writing easily becomes too literary and lexically dense, demanding the help of a dictionary. On the other hand, the Spanish speaker will find misspellings in several vernacular terms, I cannot say if due to mistakes or to local variants of the Spanish words (i. e. “casa del puebla”, p. 31 ff., “perillo”, p. 10, “indigenes”, p. 23, “rño”, p. 106, “respectar”, p. 209, “Diegito”, p. 170). The bibliography broadly ignores the mexican and hispanic literature on the topics of marianism, catholic religiosity and guadalupanism -it is restricted to the quotation of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Octavio Paz and the New Mexican historians. Finally, let me indulge in some “proprioceptive awareness” of my own reading of this good monography. As a member of a catholic culture where *fiesta* is common place, I could never avoid a lasting distance from its overall scope -nothing too misterious or picturesque in the devotion to a Virgin or in a village’s pilgrimage. Respectful and sensitive with the local sensibilities as this work is, I wonder if anyhow does not originates in a new and subtle exotization of the inner Others of America -those who are southern, catholic, traditional, communitarian and true believers.

FRANCISCO CRUCES
Universidad de Salamanca

³ Turner, Victor. 1969. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

⁴ Armstrong, Robert Plant. 1971. *The Affecting Presence: An Essay in Humanistic Anthropology*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

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