

IN MEMORIAM  
Cynthia Jean Cohen Bull

a.k.a.

Cynthia Novack

(September 6, 1947-September 27, 1996)

A memorial to Cynthia Novack could do no better than invoke her wisdom through her own words. This, I hope, will introduce her to the younger scholars who do not yet know her and remind those of us who knew her to recall the inheritance she has given us. Cynthia was a dancer, choreographer, anthropologist, and writer. When asked about the relationship between her work as a dancer and choreographer, and her work as an anthropologist, she wrote, simply, "I feel that my experience of dancing has provided one basis for perceptions and formulations as an anthropologist" (1992: 83); her work balanced at the intersection between doing and thinking about dancing.

[T]he sensible is inextricable from the intelligible: a close study of the physical, sensuous experience of dancing provides us with knowledge as unmistakable as that provided by the more conventional study and analysis of cultural beliefs and concepts and of other aspects of social life.

When I dance I experience kinesthetic, visual, tactile, and auditory sensations, and my *sensible* dance experience includes and implies intelligible choreographic and social meanings. (Bull 1997a: 269)

Here, in her last published article, she distilled and abstracted her insight into the succinct paradigm of "the sensible and the intelligible."

In Cynthia's writing, sensibility/intelligibility was not just a theoretical argument. It was a way of perceiving that she had trained herself to and that eventually became inherent to her. When she looked at dancing, she saw not just spatial patterns, rhythms, weight factors, and dynamics, but people, communities, social configurations, historical moments, and the telling details of cross-cultural comparison. She described movement and the experience of moving not so much to evoke vicarious experience—though her writing does that—as to call up the ambiance of a cultural time and place. She did this most evocatively and profoundly in her book, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Novack 1990). In one section, for example, she traced the idea of "natural" movement as it changed from the 1960s to the 1980s. The pedestrian, inwardly focused, free-flowing movement and street clothing of 1960s contact improvisation became associated with social ideas of freedom and individuality within an egalitarian collective. "They also became part of the American movement environment, social facts in and of themselves, implicitly perceived and understood by everyone" (p. 137). By the 1980s, however, the same qualities looked merely "raw" and "messy," and in need of being "cleaned up" (p. 149). Here she demonstrated that "kinesthetic ambiance calls up an ethos" (p. 138), that there are, over time, "cultural trends in movement styles" (p. 135), that what moves us, as dancers and audience, has its source in the webs of connection in which we move, and most provocatively, that the discourse surrounding dance, in terms such as "natural," is as culturally and historically specific as the dancing itself.

While *Sharing the Dance* is as fine a kinesthetic study as any produced in our field (it won a De la Torre Bueno Prize honorable mention in 1991), as a sociopolitical history of American popular culture in the 1960s, it is also a classic recognized beyond our field (1). Cynthia's interdisciplinary understanding established a precedent and model for future work. Earlier writing had mapped the territory where dance and anthropology intersect, but Cynthia was the first to take a stance both from within the writer's own embodied experience to draw out the felt dimensions of movement and from an objective distance to understand movement analysis as concurrently sociocultural analysis. Once again: sensibility and intelligibility.

Cynthia pointed out the dangers of the extremes: either evoking sensual experience and "slighting the cultural content inherently implied" or abstracting and interpreting to such an extent that the sensual experience is overwhelmed (Bull 1997a: 270). And she admonished anthropologists to attend to the kinesthetic, felt dimensions of cultural movement knowledge: "[T]ranslations of movement into cognitive systems can be illuminating, but sometimes they subsume the reality of the body, as if people's experience of themselves moving in the world were not an essential part of their consciousness and of the ways in which they understand and carry out their lives" (Novack 1988:103). Her own work plays along the continuum between these poles.

Reviewing her work along this continuum, "Artifacts (The Empire After Colonialism)" (Novack 1992) is closest to dancing itself. It is a photo essay discussing Cynthia's 1985 solo dance of the same name based on the familiar photo images of world dance that appear in dance history textbooks (2). Her article, "Ballet, Gender and Cultural Power" includes, as one among several case studies, her personal memories of being a ballet student and dancer, "in a sense using autobiography as fieldwork data" (Novack 1993: 35). Here biographical accounts support her examination of the social and ideological processes at work in women's ambivalent attraction to ballet. She also treated gender in a comparative article on dance and sports (Novack 1994). In *Sharing the Dance*, her only book-length work, Cynthia drew on extensive interviews and movement analysis, dance history, and sociocultural exegesis, as well as personal experience, to illuminate the way a movement genre is implicated in the gestalt of an historical period. An excerpt of this work was also published in *The Drama Review* as "Looking at Movement as Culture: Contact Improvisation to Disco" (Novack 1988). In a largely theoretical article generated by Anna Halprin's EarthDance event at the 1992 Choreographing History conference, she addressed the problematic of "the body" (Novack 1995). And finally, at the opposite extreme from the embodied perspective of "Artifacts," Cynthia wrote an encyclopedia entry on "Ritual and Dance" (for the unpublished *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, Selma Jeanne Cohen, editor) in which she summarized the anthropological literature, provided case studies of dance in ritual, and considered the complexities and difficulties of categorizations such as dance vs. ritual.

In "Sense, Meaning, and Perception in Three Dance Cultures," Cynthia departed from her earlier ethnographic studies emphasizing depth analysis through a single case study to take a wide ethnologic, or comparative, perspective. She did this, as she wrote, with "a playful, exploratory, heuristic attitude" (Bull 1997a: 271). Responsive to recent work in the anthropology of the senses, she relied on personal dance experience and ethnographic study in a range of genres to draw comparisons at the level of aesthetic sensibilities. Specifically, she compared ballet, contact improvisation, and Ghanaian dance in terms of their organizing sensory modes of sight, touch, and hearing, respectively. An example will suffice to alert you to the insights here. Considering Ghanaian dance, Cynthia wrote:

When the dancers are not improvising variations, they dance in rhythmic unison with each other, matching their movement impulses to those of a drumming pattern. However, while dancers may appear unified, they seldom produce an exact spatial unison because the emphasis of their movement lies in rhythmic, dynamic action rather than on achievement of a shape or line, as in ballet.... A dancer who solos does so at the invitation of others (the rest of the dancers may stop and watch, or the master drummer may call a dancer to perform). He or she (or in some cases, a pair of dancers) performs in the service of the group, playing with variations in response to the group's encouragement. Thus, choreography becomes shaped by the rhythmic interaction of many people, rather than by the choreographer's vision (as in ballet) or by the mutual momentum with a partner's touch (as in contact improvisation). (pp. 280-81)

In discussions such as this, Cynthia demonstrated the hypothesis that opened this tribute, namely "how sensation and intelligibility are shaped within each form" (p. 271). Thus, the sensibility/intelligibility dyad refers to the dynamic working within any dance genre; it epitomizes a theoretical stance at the intersection of dance and anthropology; and it represents Cynthia's personal approach to understanding as a dancer and scholar.

It is impossible to remember Cynthia without seeing Richard Bull, her husband and dance partner, and their performance ensemble. The Richard Bull Dance Company, in which Cynthia, Richard, and Peentz Dubble collaborated since 1978, with others joining and departing, had its home in the Warren Street Performance Loft where Cynthia and Richard lived. Working collaboratively with choreographic improvisation, the trio performed in over one hundred concerts, at Warren Street and on tour. In a manuscript that was to be the beginning of a book about the company, Cynthia wrote:

Dancing and choreography, particularly as Richard's company has pursued them for the past seventeen years, are ongoing, intricate processes—researched, developed, and performed continuously through the weeks, months, and years. This lengthy working relationship has produced knowledge so subtle and wide-ranging that it is daunting to consider how it might be summarized, described, theorized, or even consciously recalled. (Bull 1996: 2)

The company was as much a commitment to longterm ensemble research as it was a show business enterprise. The company worked improvisation as if it were jazz music, riffing on social, political, aesthetic themes, movement motifs, accidents, and each other's spontaneous impulses. As one reviewer wrote, the company was "characterized by intelligence, invention, wit, and subtlety" (Strini 1981). They combined dancing and thinking, sensibility and intelligibility.

Cynthia taught in both the practical and academic areas of dance throughout her career. Before earning her Ph.D. in anthropology from Columbia University (1986), she taught technique, composition, and women's studies at the State University of New York, College at Brockport (1974-78), and dance history and anthropology, movement analysis, composition-improvisation, and technique at Barnard College (1978-79). Beginning in 1983, she was a faculty member at Wesleyan University's Graduate Liberal Studies Program, from 1991 as associate professor, teaching dance anthropology and history, choreography, and technique.

She was assistant professor in the Department of Performance Studies at New York University in 1990-91, adding courses in constructions of the body in America and black dance history to her teaching repertoire. She also taught in the Dance Department at the Purchase campus of the State University of New York (1986, 1989). Cynthia attended Washington University from 1965-67 as a merit scholarship winner. She earned a B.A. in English (Phi Beta Kappa) from the University of California at Berkeley, and a masters in dance from Mills College, before beginning her doctoral work in anthropology at Columbia in 1980. She studied modern dance with Merce Cunningham, Viola Farber, Margaret Jenkins, and others, ballet with Diana Byers, contact improvisation with Robin Feld, Randy Warshaw, Daniel Lepkoff, Nina Martin, and Lisa Nelson. She also studied with Robert Ellis Dunn, Irene Dowd, Annabelle Gamson, and in West Africa, at the Institute of African Studies in Legon, Ghana.

In the last months of her life, Cynthia chose to drop the name of her first husband, "Novack," by which others had come to know her. She chose to reassert her original family name, "Cohen" (evoking the name of her late mother and father and her sister and brother, Linda and Steve, and their families) and to join this with the name of her beloved husband and partner, "Bull" (linking her to her stepdaughter and granddaughter, Katie and Hannajane, and to her son-in-law Harry Pritchard). Thus, she died as Cynthia Jean Cohen Bull. Her passing is a turning point and transition for us, her colleagues. We must know her now through her words. Here are mine to her:

We remember you,  
like Miriam who  
danced with timbrels,  
making a covenant  
to remember dancing  
and call together  
the tribes of dancers.

*Deidre Sklar*  
University of California at Irvine

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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#### NOTES

1. *Sharing the Dance* was published in the series, "New Directions in Anthropological Writing," edited by the renowned cultural anthropologists George Marcus and James Clifford.

2. "Some Thoughts About Dance Improvisation" has also now been published in *Contact Quarterly* (Bull 1997b). I have not yet seen it.

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