***Dancing Bodies of Devotion:
Fluid Gestures in Bharata Natyam***

By K. C. Zubko (2014)

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In this thoughtful and finely crafted work, Katherine Zubko accomplishes a feat that few in the field of religious studies have managed to do: she keeps *dance* centre stage from beginning to end of her book, and not just as an object to analyse but as a practice capable of generating complex theoretical ideas. In so doing, Zubko levels a sturdy blow against a bulwark of the colonial era that continues to produce affects in the field of religious studies and beyond: a refusal to acknowledge 'dance' as 'religion.'

The dance at the heart of Zubko's book is Bharata Natyam, arguably the most popular and well known form of Indian 'classical' dance, emblem of Indian (mostly Hindu) unity, whose own history is indelibly marked by the colonial project. As Zubko relates, nationalists and reformers in mid-twentieth century India sought to resurrect and codify the dance traditions of the *devadasis*, who had been cast out of Hindu temples by British rulers. The reformers invented the name 'Bharata Natyam' for the technique they (re)constructed as a way to affirm its direct line to authoritative texts in the Hindu tradition, most notably, Bharata's second century *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

Zubko does not linger on this history. As she notes, it has been ably told by others. Instead, she focuses on a hand-picked group of contemporary practitioners of Bharata Natyam who use the term *bhakti rasa* to hold open a space for what many scholars claim was lost in the transition of the

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dances from temple to stage: its religious or spiritual efficacy. By narrowing her focus to this small set of dancers, Zubko is able to make precise observations about how the ongoing practice of this dance form is currently generating new conceptual and experiential perspectives concerning religious experience, religious secularism, religious identity, praxis, embodiment and cross-cultural religious exchange.

Zubko succeeds in keeping dance front and centre in her analysis by making several key choices.

First, the dancers. Zubko privileges her chosen dancers – Balasaraswati, Francis Barboza, V.P. and Shanta Dhananjayan, Kalai Kaviri, Monica Cooley, Malini Srinivasan and Tehreema Mitha – as the primary authorities on their own dancing. Drawing research tools from ethnography and performance studies, Zubko relies on interviews with these dancers, as well as on program notes, and other forms of writing and speaking, and she analyses the choreographic choices the dancers make in their performances. When the dancers refer to Sanskrit texts as a way to ground and authorise their work, Zubko acknowledges other uses and meanings of these texts. She does so, however, not to correct the dancers but in order to highlight how the dancers are generating their own distinct interpretations of these texts in and through their dancing. She further allows categories that recur in her interviews to organise her book. The four sections on ‘Devotional Bodies’, ‘Cultural Bodies’, ‘Ethical Bodies’ and ‘Pluralistic Bodies’ owe their existence to how various dancers define and enact *bhakti rasa* (see below).

Second, the dancing. In each of the four sections of the book, Zubko describes at least two dance performances in depth, documenting the narrative, costuming, accompaniment, props, setting and movement choices. When recounting the dancing itself, Zubko interjects – using square brackets and a different font – the name of the particular mudra or hand gesture that a dancer makes at that moment in the dance. Images of these mudras appear in an ‘Illustrated Glossary’ at the back of the book. In this way, the act of dancing constantly interrupts the flow of Zubko’s written description. While doubtful about this strategy at first, I was soon impressed by how effective it is in calling the reader’s attention over and over again to the bodily movements that are giving a word its visual, sensory impact. *It is so easy to forget.*

Third, epistemic pluralism. While never losing sight of the act of dancing, Zubko also refuses to isolate dancing from other forms of knowledge production. Dancing is never ‘just’ or ‘merely’ dancing. Something is happening. Knowledge is being produced. Experiences are occurring. The impact of a dance event, Zubko demonstrates case by case, appears in its relationship to other forms of knowledge and experience. Dance

transforms what we know in all realms. *Dancing has agency* – not just the dancers, but *dancing itself*.

As a philosopher studies for years to recognise subtle differences in concepts and logic, so a dancer studies for years to recognise subtle differences in sensation and movement. In both cases, these subtleties come alive in the practitioner as a capacity for sensing and responding to phenomena that others may not notice. These capacities impel and enable practitioners to create powerful aesthetic and intellectual experiences for others. Further, as Zubko demonstrates, the sensory realms that dancing Bharata Natyam awakens are never simply 'sensory' as opposed to 'symbolic'. For a Bharata Natyam dancer, gestures have meanings, but not in a one-to-one correspondence. A gesture carries with it a sensory awareness of making the movement – the kinetic image of thought and feeling and attention that go into that execution. Any gesture pulls with it the flow of movements coming before and after, as well as the memories of when a dancer used that movement in the past. Any gesture, then, becomes an avenue for extending curiosity, for making connections, for exploring ideas, and for cultivating relationship with what appears. In example after example, Zubko reveals how patterns of movement in a dance orient and refine the attention of both dancers and audience members, making new ideas and experiences possible, plausible and desirable.

Fourth, *bhakti rasa*. In choosing the term *bhakti rasa* as a discursive node, Zubko again keeps dance in the forefront. For this term is one that the dancers use to hold space for what the interplay between their dancing and their engagement with texts produces. As Zubko explains, the term *bhakti rasa* does not even exist in the authoritative texts that the dancers themselves reference in order to define it. While the term does appear in the sixteenth century (p. 17), it is only with the naming and reconstruction of Bharata Natyam that certain dancers began to privilege it as referring to both the one *rasa* that surpasses and unifies all *rasas*, and a description of what Bharata Natyam is and enacts: namely, a 'devotional mood' (p. 40).

Not only can the meaning of this term not be found in classic texts, but as Zubko notes, citing A. K. Ramanujan (1981), the concept itself is a 'theoretical impossibility' (p. 3). *Rasa* is an ancient term referring to a 'depersonalized aesthetic emotion', while *bhakti* is a term used since the sixth century across India to refer to a close personal relationship with a specific divinity (p. 4). As such, the term encompasses a paradox between universal and particular, abstract and personal, divine and human that cannot be resolved, but only rendered visceral and generative, as it is, Zubko shows, in the work of her selected Bharata Natyam dancers. Within the conceptual and creative space opened by this term, Zubko illuminates how her dancers

find encouragement to deepen their own devotional practice, establish Indian cultural identities, deliver ethical guidance, and meditate differences between religious traditions. *Bhakti rasa* is thus 'an interdisciplinary epistemological category' (p. 6). It cannot be understood apart from the dancing, the thinking, and the aesthetic/devotional experiences that it makes possible in dancers and audience members alike.

Fifth, Bharata Natyam. Finally, Zubko roots her thesis within the technique of Bharata Natyam itself. Bharata Natyam is a solo dance. Yet it tells stories, many of which feature multiple characters. As Zubko explains, a person who studies this technique practises moving in and out of multiple identities moment to moment (p. 9). The dancer practises becoming someone else – making the gestures, facial expressions and bodily actions that correspond to one distinct character and then another. In so doing, the dancer both recognises difference and practises empathy; she has the opportunity to recognise that identities themselves may be fluid, that they are performed, and that what matters is that the dancing continues.

As Zubko argues, this ability to assume multiple identities, when put in service of *bhakti rasa*, is a potent resource for dancers who are interested in cross-cultural and cross-religious understanding. The Bharata Natyam dancers in Zubko's analysis are not all Hindu. They are also Christian and Muslim and secular. Neither are the content and themes of their dances drawn exclusively from Hindu traditions. Barboza dances biblical psalms (Chapter 3); the Dhananjayans restage a Buddhist dance-drama (Chapter 5) and choreograph the story of the adulteress whom Jesus forgives (Chapter 8); Srinivasan dances a Sufi *Qawwālī* (Chapter 11), and Muslim dancer Mitha dances on the theme of human connection (Chapter 12). To those who would criticise such performances as 'impure', Zubko contests that this capacity for cross-religious pollination, this plurality of perspectives and bodily selves, is integral to the technique and history of Bharata Natyam itself. By focusing her analysis of Bharata Natyam through the term *bhakti rasa*, Zubko masterfully reveals how dancing in general, and Bharata Natyam in particular, can participate – and is currently doing so – in the ongoing project of defining, evolving and connecting religions.

This excellent book has much to offer readers across fields of dance, religious studies, performance studies, cultural studies, anthropology, South Asian studies and philosophy. It also leaves this reader with a keen thirst for more. Three areas in particular call out. Zubko repeats several times that her experience as a dancer informs her observations and analysis; she could say more. This question is important for scholars of religious studies. What artistic practices on the part of the scholar are necessary to ensure that dancers as well as other bodily performers have a voice? Second, while

Zubko returns frequently to the theme of fluid identities and seeks to call attention to particular bodies, 'the body' itself continues to haunt the text as a reified category. What more can be said about *bodily becoming* – about the ways in which a bodily self is an ever-evolving potential for making new movements? Finally, I look forward to reading more about Zubko's 'poetics of mediation', introduced in the last few pages of the book. Dancing Bharata Natyam, Zubko avers, can guide people to 'invite new perspectives of religious plurality into their body' and so create 'new clusters of associations linked at a somatic level with pre-existing ones. These lasting imprints inform and reshape their own knowledge base, creating a cache of embodied perspectives' (p. 224). Indeed.