Why We Dance: A Philosophy of Bodily Becoming
By K. LaMothe (2015)
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RITUAL DANCE

Kimerer L. LaMothe's *Why We Dance: A Philosophy of Bodily Becoming* is important, challenging and sometimes infuriating. In it, LaMothe articulates a foundational challenge to what she calls the materialist paradigm (the belief that matter is real) which informs the dominant West, proposing that movement, and not matter, is the fundament of being. LaMothe is philosophically sophisticated; it would be an error to subordinate her thought to Heraclitus, Whitehead or Merleau-Ponty, all of whom appear in the text. Nor is this a simple opposition, dialectic or replacement, as if movement were the 'other' of matter. If matter is not real, there is no call for its 'other', either as the ideas of science and scholarship or as the spirit of religion.

Although motivated in part by ecological and geopolitical danger, LaMothe writes hopefully as part of a growing wave of scientists, other academics, artists and others who are moving towards movement as the fundamental principle of being. A distinguished scholar of religion, LaMothe has infused *Why We Dance* with religion, the religions and the study of religion, for example suggesting that we think of ritual as 'warm up, practice, play, and cool-down' instead of 'disaggregation, liminality, reaggregation' (p. 158). However, since both the practice and study of religion, as well as their interactions, have been distorted in the materialist

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paradigm, she puts her emphasis on the movement paradigm itself, while articulating how that would affect the practice and study of religion. This brings her to dance, for her both the wellspring of religion and the antidote to materialism. LaMothe maintains a personal and professional dance practice and has integrated dancing and scholarship into a single mode of knowing. Since 'art', 'scholarship' and 'life' are held apart in dominant culture, this is quite a feat, and LaMothe is experienced with the means by which they are made to seem separate. Using this savvy, LaMothe means to 'dismantle the structures of scientific materialism' (p. 12) by demonstrating that movement, not matter, founds reality.

Dance, for LaMothe, extends far beyond the profession of dance and the community dance classes associated with it, and also beyond social dance, all of which LaMothe understands to be limited and distorted by their inherence in the materialist paradigm. For LaMothe, dance is the uniquely human mode of moving because, by dancing, we self-consciously develop our capacities to move and sense. "[D]ance" happens when we consciously engage our sensory awareness as a guide to participating in the rhythm of bodily becoming' (p. 8). Dancing 'is for humans a biological, ethical, spiritual, and ecological necessity' (p. 3), the transdisciplinary practice of human being in its fullest realisation. 'We are rhythms of bodily becoming, participating in a kinetic creativity that exceeds us and sustains us' (p. 36). The materialist paradigm blocks our access to 'sensory awareness as a guide to participating in the rhythm of bodily becoming' (dance), and the widespread lack of dance is at the heart of contemporary ecological, intercultural, social and personal crises. Their resolution lies with a renewed practice of dance correlated with a transformed ontology of movement, including an *ecokinesis* that resonates with indigenous practices of 'ritual dance' (pp. 171–2). 'We are bodies', she writes, 'but not even ... we are *movement ... rhythms of bodily becoming*' (p. 29). Some of these rhythms never sleep (heartbeat, breath, digestion); some are genetically not human (biome); some repeat ancient patterns woven into our biological form (chewing, thumb sucking, lifecycle development); some emerge from the movements of other humans and the effects of those movements (the choreography of cultured life); some emerge from the implications of current and former movements, as the ability to move at any moment is channelled and enabled by former movements, how an 'I' has practised 'being me'. At the same time, our movements contribute to the co-existence (or extinguishing) of other realities around and among us. 'As we move, we participate in the cocreation of the reality in which we live' (p. 31). Movement follows and creatively diverges from trajectories established in previous movement and generates trajectories that enable (and restrict) future

movement. Dance is the uniquely human form of movement that allows us 'to participate consciously in the rhythm of bodily becoming' that we are (p. 8).

LaMothe is not only conceptually radical, but literarily radical as well. She writes as a human being to other human beings (not as, for example, a mind to a mind), and so the matrix of her own movement forms a necessary context for her thought. She shares first-person accounts of her dance practice, of her life on the farm and art centre where she lives with her family, and of the birth of her fifth child. She is thinking, too, of her readers' bodies, wanting us 'to move into new spaces of sensing and responding to the movement into and of [our] own bodily selves' (p. 14).

LaMothe's topics are transdisciplinary and her resources are equally broad, integrating dance and movement studies, religious studies, philosophy, and natural and physical sciences. *Why We Dance* is also mercifully short, with 210 pages of text and 51 pages of notes. It is meant to be accessible to any educated reader. This combination – vast topic, extended field of transdisciplinary scholarship, brief non-specialist text – means that our critical questions are never fully answered, our desire for evidence never slaked, our resistances never fully overcome. No one is more aware than LaMothe that 'at every turn more is needed' (p. 14), and she hopes to inspire not agreement but engagement, not followers but collaborators. The philosophy of bodily becoming is only one way out of the materialist paradigm (p. 205).

After a comprehensive introduction, LaMothe takes us through seven chapters, each examining a basic assumption of the materialist paradigm in order first to unearth its internal incoherence and then to overcome those contradictions 'by privileging *bodily movement* as the source and telos of human life' (p. 13). *Why We Dance* ends with a short coda, in which LaMothe reaches out to potential collaborators and imagines research and projects which might emerge in response to her work.

Chapters 1 to 3 establish the movement paradigm through engagements with matter, evolution and epistemology. 'Matter', she writes, 'is movement [M]atter would not appear at all if the movement that it expresses did not interact with other movements, crossing, canceling, funding and fusing with itself' (p. 25). Imagine not a 'Big Bang', but a 'First Movement', an expansion which has yet to stop, bringing all of being in its train. The sciences, she says, increasingly describe a world made up entirely of 'probabilities, conditions of appearance, and the relationships within which things appear ... fields and fluctuations, structures and systems, processes and potentials ...' (p. 23).

Life, too, is movement, appearing and continuously self-transforming in the complex, internally and externally interconnected process we call evolution – a movement within which every component is itself moving, in relation to every other component, at all scales. ‘Evolution does not refer to some thing that moves; it evokes the actual moving in and out of all these forms as they spin out, open up, and empty into others’ in an intrinsically creative, self-transformative interaction (p. 50). Dance evolved co-creatively with other determining characteristics of our species; the long history of dancing is embedded in our evolved (and evolving) neuromuscular capacities. Long before *Homo sapiens*, our ancestors began consciously to engage their sensory bodies to intensify their experience of life and to live successfully together and individually, creating not only movement skills, but also potential for new movements that establish evolutionary possibilities.

Next applying the movement paradigm to knowing, LaMothe confronts the movement regimes which lead to knowledge in the dominant culture. It is evident that skilled bodily movement is required to paint, hunt, farm or dance. We forget the body skills we learned to read and write, and figure, fine skills (eye movements) as well as gross ones (stillness). The materialist paradigm identifies knowledge as ideas describing or predicting matter, effacing the acts and skills that correspond to and are necessary to generate that knowledge, creating the illusion of disembodied knowledge. Yet those movements do take place, and they affect the entire lives of our bodies, shaping our perceptions of the world and other people (for example, as things to be read), while guiding us towards high blood pressure, depression, diabetes and other diseases of sedentariness. Because we are rhythms of bodily becoming, those rhythms go right on becoming, even when we are anaesthetised to them. Without dance we are unable consciously to engage them.

Chapters 4 to 7 apply the movement paradigm to human life: birth, relationship, healing and love, overturning materialist notions that humans are minds in bodies, individuals choosing relationships, ill or injured bodies which can be healed, and cultural animals living over against nature.

These chapters contain some of the strongest and weakest sections of the book. The discussion in Chapter 4 of conception, embryogenesis, gestation and birth as a continuous self-developing movement is a stunning achievement. It is wonderful to feel how the developing fetus’ movements create pathways for further developments which enable new, creative movements, themselves enabling further development, one example of what LaMothe means by movement ‘pulling’ matter or form into being. We recall the rhythms of our own ongoing becoming, for each of us has been conceived, gestated, born and developed, as we are now passing through

adulthood (during which we conceive, give birth and help to develop) towards senescence and death.

Parts of the final chapter (7), too, are quite strong, especially her discussion of *ecokinesis*. As rhythms of bodily becoming, emerging from and carrying on evolutionary movements of bodily becoming, we are in a complex evolving ecological relationship with other creatures engaging in their own rhythms of bodily becoming. To thrive, we must align our movements so that they enhance our continuation and well-being and that of our contemporaries and our progeny. Through dance we do so consciously.

Our task in creating culture is not to escape from nature, but to become a life-enabling moment of it; not to dominate the movements of nature, but to discipline ourselves to that movement ... to receive, register, and recreate kinetic images of the nature in us and around us so that the movements we make in becoming, connecting, and healing nurture the elemental conditions for our ongoing movement making on Earth. (p. 178–9)

Other parts of these chapters are less successful. LaMothe writes eloquently and effectively about individuality as an illusion, and of our deep and continuous dependence on human and non-human others, and she is very clear that we have evolved as fundamentally social creatures. Yet her focus is often either on the foreground of individual or the background of species. Other than 'the dominant West', we read little of movement-based, experientially manifest differences among cultures or ethnicities, classes or genders, nor is the work enriched by materials emerging from those differences. This is notable in her own self-presentation, which is mostly silent about her social location and its effect on her experience. This especially struck me in the powerful, loving passages about her farm/art centre where she lives with her family. The farm is an important character in the work; it has clearly played a role in her development of *ecokinesis*, for which I am grateful. But few of us can 'buy 96 acres of glorious fields, trees, ponds, and a stream' (p. xiii). *Why We Dance* would benefit from an acknowledgement of the privilege that enabled it and would be strengthened by *ecokinetic* accounts emerging from other cultural and social locations.

Despite these limitations, I recommend *Why We Dance* not only to scholars of body and religion, but to anyone interested in moving humanity towards more sustainable and joyful lifeways. If dancing is a biological, ethical, spiritual and ecological necessity, then we had best dance!