

~ dialogues ~

Dance Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies, and Queer Theory

A plenary panel at the 2001 meeting of the Society of Dance History Scholars highlighted the publication of Jane Desmond's edited anthology, *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On & Off the Stage*, part of the series Studies in Dance History published by the society in conjunction with the University of Wisconsin Press (2001). The panelists—Valerie A. Briginshaw, Ann Daly, Susan C. Cook, and Thomas F. DeFrantz—did not review the volume per se. Rather, they took the collected essays as starting points for their own reflections on the intersection of dance studies, gay and lesbian studies, and queer theory. The panel was organized by Susan Manning, who also edited the following comments for publication.

I. The Open Mesh of Possibilities

The title of Desmond's anthology, *Dancing Desires*, is significant. Desire, specifically same-sex desire, is at the center of gay and lesbian experience. In the psychoanalytic theories that have emanated from Freud and Lacan, concepts of desire are central to ideas about the construction of subjectivity. Thinking desire differently can therefore lead to thinking subjectivity differently. As Desmond asserts in her introduction, in a diversity of dance practices "choreographed behaviors enact notions of romance, sex, physical expressivity, and sexual identity," and "for many cultural traditions...dance is connected with...enticing display....Dance lets us look at bodies for pleasure....This has the potential to link bodies with desire and dancing with the visible manifestation, or elicitation of, desire" (4–5). The traditional Freudian notion of a normatively heterosexual desire is predicated on a perceived lack, which requires an "other" who is marked as

different. But if desire is for the "same," a more productive concept, such as that theorized by Deleuze, can come into play, resulting in a more dynamic model that importantly involves movement.¹

Applying a productive model of desire in my own work has allowed me to analyze dances that can be read as lesbian, focusing on the way in which spaces between dancers can be seen as animated by the choreography.² In Clara van Gool's dance film *Reservaat* (1988), which features two women in fur dresses and hats and long suede boots dancing a tango through a country park, the dancers' legs and feet are often intertwined, touching themselves and those of their partner. These are highly sexualized rituals in the tango, based on traditional heterosexual notions of desire as lack. A foot or leg often penetrates the space between the other dancer's legs, suggestive of the sexual act. However, because the legs in *Reservaat* are filmed in isolation from the rest of the body and it is difficult to see whose legs are whose, the conventional heterosexual signals are less apparent. The spatial dynamic is not about a subject desiring an object marked as different. It is rather about a more productive desire for the same. I suggest these intertwined legs can be likened to a Deleuzian "machinic assemblage," which characterizes bodies in a broad sense as participants in a fluid, everchanging network of connections and interrelations consisting of intensities, multiplicities, linkages, transformations, and becomings. Desire refigured in this way is characterized by notions of connectivity, particularly connectivity with others.

In his essay in *Dancing Desires* on gay and lesbian social dancing, Jonathan Bollen quotes Elspeth Probyn, who claims that "'bodies and desire are only of interest inasmuch as they engage with others'" (311). He also refers to the work of Rosalyn Diprose who, drawing on the theories of Merleau-