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Article abstract

In the history of dance and Christian theology, the United Society of Believers in the Second Coming of Christ, otherwise known as the Shakers, prove a unique case. Not only did the Shakers practice dancing for over 140 years as the central, constitutive ritual of a successful separatist religious socialism ; and not only did the Shakers mount a biblically informed theological defense of their dancing practice. The Shakers also elevated dancing alongside the Bible as a privileged medium of divine revelation. This paper mobilizes an ecokinetic approach in relation to the first two arcs of Shaker history to argue that the Shakers' dancing serves as an authorizing source for their theological innovations. Dance is theopraxis.

Enlivening Spirits

Shaker Dance Ritual as Theopraxis

Kimerer L. LAMOTHE*

In the history of dance and Christian theology, the United Society of Believers in the Second Coming of Christ, otherwise known as the Shakers, proves a unique case. Not only did the Shakers practice rhythmic bodily movement for over 140 years as the central, constitutive ritual of a successful separatist religious socialism; and not only did the Shakers mount a theological defense of their dancing practice. The Shakers also elevated dancing alongside the Bible as an independent, privileged medium of divine revelation. In their key theological treatise, dance garners praise not only as an expression of Shaker beliefs, but as their authorizing source. In turn, tenets of Shaker theology often graded as « marginal » or « heretical » — specifically, their beliefs that God is male and female, and that their founder Ann Lee is the Second Coming of Christ — serve to justify the practice of dancing. For the Shakers, dancing is the medium through which the God that the dancing enables them to conceive becomes real for them. Dance, in this sense, is « theopraxis¹ », where theopraxis refers to bodily actions that educate the senses of those who do them to feel and know a given conception of the divine.

While the first American expert on the Shakers, Edward D. Andrews, claimed that studying the dances of the Shakers was necessary in order to understand « the very soul of the individual and the essential ethos of the

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1. I develop this term in an analysis of the dance imagery appearing throughout Friedrich Nietzsche's writings (LaMothe 2006).

sect » (Andrews 1953, 8), more recent scholars allocate dance a smaller role in the interpretive project. Daniel Patterson's monumental work *The Shaker Spiritual* (2000), a collection of nearly 400 Shaker songs, includes a description of 20 dance patterns as well as a history of dance within the community. While Patterson affirms that the Shakers danced from 1788 through 1930, and notes the novelty of «disciplined dance» as a religious practice, he also identifies the Shakers' dancing as simply one of several other forms of laboring that express Shaker beliefs in salvation (Patterson 2000, 99-102). In Stephen J. Stein's recent history of Shaker religion, while he mentions dance a handful of times, he describes «dance» as a subcategory of «worship» which itself is an expression of theological ideas (Stein 1994). Likewise, feminist historians, theologians, and religious studies scholars who analyze the challenges of women's leadership; the relationship between gender roles and gendered gods, and the interplay of egalitarian social relations and theological beliefs, do so without engaging dance directly². Even the remaining Shaker communities downplay its significance³.

In one pamphlet of 1984, J. G. Davies and P. Vanzyl «reconstruct» a «Shaker Dance Service» with the intent of encouraging dance in contemporary Christian services. To this end, they distinguish Shaker dancing from Shaker theology, noting the latter's «marked differences» from «orthodox Christianity» (1). Yet this distinction, even when made for the purpose of endorsing dance as religious, denies dancing agency in relation to Shaker theology.

The time has come to put dancing back where it belongs as an interpretive key to Shaker theology. In what follows, I offer a close analysis of theological developments in the first two arcs of Shaker history. I mobilize an eckinetic approach, derived from the phenomenology of religion, modern dance, feminist philosophy, and religious studies (LaMothe 2014).

2. As Humez summarizes, citing the work of Proctor-Smith (1985), Kitch (1990), and Mercadante (1990), even though the Shakers embraced a male-female God, the female principle remained subordinate; even though they endorsed female leaders, female leadership was not guaranteed; and even though later theologians, not Ann herself, identified her as a second Christ, the men were motivated to do so by the need to justify their own participation in a movement founded and led by women (Humez 1992, 12). Mercadante (1990) does argue that Shaker «practices» gave rise to their notion of a Mother/Father God, by enabling members to experience women as leaders and instruments of revelation.
3. See, for example, the webpages for Sabbathday Lake (2015) and the North Union Shaker Society: <shakerhistoricalsociety.org>.

As «kinetic», this approach hones in on patterns of movement and the sensory education they provide. As «eco» it views these patterns as forming an inclusive nexus of relationships that comprise a person or community's sense of reality.

Using this approach, I tease out the relationship between Shaker dance and theology for each historical arc by: first, identifying the bodily movements that Shakers were making as they danced; second, imaginatively recreating the sensory education provided by these bodily movements; third, assessing the possibilities for theological innovation opened by this sensory education, and fourth, evaluating how these innovations not only express the sensory education cultivated in members by the ongoing practice of dancing, but provide members new and old with reasons to *keep dancing* as a privileged means of divine revelation. In this reading, the action of dancing appears as a critical element in the formulation, articulation, and transmission of Shaker theology — that is, dance is theopraxis.

1. Early Years, 1770-1896

The United Society of Believers began with dance. There was no moment at the beginning of the movement when members came together and decided to start dancing. The movement formed among a group of people who refused to stop dancing. While the kind of dancing the Shakers did evolved from its earliest manifestations, later dances and the songs that accompanied them served to sustain a connection to those founding moments of the community when its members defined themselves by refusing to stop dancing (Patterson 2000).

Ann Lee, the founder of the Shakers, was born in Manchester, England on February 29, 1736⁴. In 1758, when Lee was eighteen, she and her parents joined the Wardley Society. Co-led by Jane and James Wardley, this Society had parted ways with the larger Quaker congregation in the 1740s due mainly to differences in ritual practice. When the Quakers, named for their quaking and shaking services, began to gather in meeting houses, sit quietly in wooden pews, and wait patiently for their turn to share in words the «Inner Light of Christ,» the Wardleys left the community. They founded their own Society — one in which they could keep dancing their

4. For general information about the Shakers, see Patterson (2000), Humez (1992), Stein (1994), Andrews (1953; 1940).

worship. In 1770, when Lee took over spiritual leadership of the Wardley Society, she and her followers kept dancing as well⁵.

Dancing was the seed, the impetus, and the ongoing reality of the United Society. Even so, it was never not controversial. Critics first in England and later in the American colonies targeted Shaker dancing as a sign of depravity and immorality. Such hostility, however, confirmed for believers that their desire to dance and their willingness to dance were signs that something fresh and radical was happening in the world: the prophecies of Christ's Second coming were coming to pass. God was building heaven on earth.

1.1 Dancing Movement

For the first 25 years of the Society, Shaker dancing was ecstatic and spontaneous. In one account we have of Shaker practice in England, a critic reports:

After assembling together and sitting a while in silent mediation [...] they were taken with a mighty trembling [...] at other times they were affected [...] with a mighty shaking; and were occasionally exercised in singing, shouting, or walking the floor, under the influence of spiritual signs, shoving each other about, —or swiftly passing and repassing each other, like clouds agitated by a mighty wind. (Andrews 1953, 143)

Shaker meetings would take place in someone's house. A small number of people would gather. While sitting silently, they would calm their thoughts and feelings, turn their attention to the present moment of their gathering, and prepare themselves for what they knew and wanted to happen. At some point, as in this account, they «were taken,» as if a force or enlivening spirit had swept through the room and moved them. Those gathered would begin to shake. Their bodily selves moved spontaneously, seemingly of their own accord.

As the shaking intensified, members of the group would break out into individual gestures. They would move freely, fluidly, around the room in

5. It is likely that the Wardley Society and the Shakers may have been encouraged to continue the Quaker practice of ecstatic dance by the presence in England of the French Camisards, who immigrated to England in the early XVIIIth C. The Camisards, fleeing religious persecution, also practiced ecstatic dance as their primary form of worship (Andrews 1953).

relation to one another. In one account of the early days in America, a critic elaborates on the movements that followed the shaking:

The first Believers were seized by such ecstasy of spirit that, like leaves in the wind, they were moved into the most disordered exercises: running about the room, jumping, shaking, whirling, reeling, and at the same time shouting, laughing or singing snatches of song. No form existed: someone would impulsively cry out a line from the psalms, part of a hymn, or a phrase — perhaps in an unknown tongue — bespeaking wild emotion; someone might prophesy; another would exhort his listeners to repentance; another might suddenly start whirling like a dervish; then, as in a Quaker meeting, all for a time would be silent. (Andrews 1953, 7)

Other accounts corroborate what is noted here. For one, the worship was disordered; individuals moved in random ways. There was no set form, no unison, and no musical accompaniment to synchronize action. Second, the movements were not elaborate. They were variations of everyday movements, accessible to all. Third, those dancing were filled with emotion, in most cases with joy. Members laughed, sang, and shouted, delighting in the experience of moving freely with and alongside one another.

Fourth, in all reported cases, as the dancers shook and moved and overflowed with feeling, they experienced themselves as *being* moved, *being* filled, *being* used as a vessel for something that they were thus able to perceive and conceive as « God ». Individual dancers greeted the shouts of others in the room as prophetic — as coming from a greater source of knowledge to speak to the present moment. As Humez confirms of Shaker belief, « The ecstatic religious behavior for which the Shakers were derisively named — the leaping, shouting, speaking in tongues, and falling into trance states — brought access to revelatory vision » (Humez 1992, 12). After a time, the raucous enthusiasm would settle into quiet contemplation, and the meeting end.

1.2 Sensory Education

Imagine what it would be like to engage in such an event. Imagine how the experience would orient your senses, and train you to expect and notice certain eruptions or manifestations of bodily or sensory movement in yourself and in those around you.

In the earliest moments of the ritual, the silence would draw the senses of those present into the moment to feel what they were feeling. In so far

as the people had danced before, or even heard about what these dances were like, that moment of silence would be a time to remember, to hope, to empty, and to reawaken a sensory awareness of where those impulses to move had arisen before. Would it happen again?

In silence the members would wait, listening and feeling for what they believed would come. They «listened» not with outer ears, but with a kinetic sense. They waited to feel impulses to move arising within them that would propel them to tremble and shake. To them, such spontaneous movements were signs of «spiritual influence» (Youngerman 2004, 576).

Imagine that moment in which someone would start to tremble and shake — or in which the sensation of trembling dawned in one's sensory self. As members in the room began to move, the effect would be exciting, perhaps scary, and contagious for others present. Humans instinctively recreate for themselves the movement patterns they observe in others, and the context of the dance would exercise and enhance that kinetic vulnerability (LaMothe 2015, chapter 5). With each person so attuned to himself and to others, one person's excitement would have a ripple effect, catalyzing renewed attention among others to their own movement potential.

Moreover, as people began to tremble, their own shaking would free their bodily selves from patterns of habitual movement they relied upon to ply their trade or fulfill domestic responsibilities. The shaking would awaken sensory spaces the silence had not touched. The dancers would move free from the patterns of movement that performed their class or gender or race, until they felt themselves propelled to move by nothing other than what they perceived and conceived as «God».

When the movement in the room settled into a span of quiet reflection, every person would be breathing hard, audibly. Every individual would feel her pulse, the glowing vitality of her bodily self. She would feel the tingle of having moved so freely, the stretch of skin, the moisture of sweat, the open release of tired muscles. She might feel elated, elastic, inspired, and full of a sensation she recognized as «love», God's love.

Imagine too what it would be like to engage in such a practice day after day, sometimes more than once a day, week after week, year after year. The movements that you would create — the sensory patterns of silence and invitation, of explosion and flow, of spontaneous rupture and opening, of your own power as well as that of those around you — these movement patterns would *become* you. They would become the sensory apparatus that you carried around with you, and through which you perceived the world — the patterns that you consulted for guidance in how to

respond to what appeared to you. Again, that guidance would not exist in the mind as a principle to consult and follow. It would appear as a heightened sensory awareness, or sensory template, of expanding feelings of freedom and love — of transformation brought about by one's own kinetic creativity in sensing and responding to impulses to move. Of course, not all people would have felt impelled to move, and those for whom the dancing did not accomplish these effects would eventually leave the Society⁶.

Imagine what impact this ongoing sensory education would have on your imagination, on the ranges of theological thoughts that you were able to consider, on your sense of *reality*.

1.3 *Theology Innovations*

In the life of the United Society up into the second decade of the nineteenth century, its theology and spiritual teachings were primarily oral. Ann Lee was illiterate. She did not read the Bible by herself; others read it to her. She did not write down her sermons or compose theological treatises. By all accounts, Lee drew crowds because she was a charismatic teacher who delivered rousing songs, pithy statements, and impassioned admonitions to her flock. When inspired to cite a passage from the Bible, she would rely on her brother William to read it for her (Humez 1992).

What is known of Shaker theology in the early years is based on memories of those to whom Lee preached that were written down during the first decades of the nineteenth century, more than twenty years after she died. These reports suggest that Lee taught two basic principals: first, that sex is sinful and must be renounced; and second, that confession of sins is a necessary, ongoing practice (Humez 1992; Stein 1994). The latter teaching Lee had learned from Jane and James Wardley. The former came to her in a vision when she was still in England.

While each of Lee's early tenets has a long history within Christianity, their combination poses a paradox over which scholars puzzle: even though Shaker life required celibacy and constant confession from cohabitating men and women, the Shakers nevertheless maintained a healthy, even jubilant celebration of the goodness of nature and their bodily selves (Youngerman 2004, 577). The paradox posed by these theological beliefs

6. While there were obviously other reasons why people would leave the Shaker community, it is also true that an inability to find in dance a connection to some sense of divinity was one of them.

makes sense, however, when viewed alongside the sensory education provided by their dancing. Dancing made the difference. Because they danced in the ways that they did, the Shakers were able to believe in these tenets, abide by them, and still positively value their bodily selves.

1.3.1 Renunciation of sex

Ann Lee had not always been celibate. While she was a member of the Wardley Society, she married Abraham Standerin. She became pregnant at least four times. Her first three children died in infancy; a fourth before age 6. Only after this string of tragedies did Lee receive a vision in which she came to believe that God no longer wanted her — or anyone else — to have sex.

While it is not clear that Lee was dancing at the time she received this vision, it is likely that the sensory education provided by her dance practice informed it. Lee had been dancing with the Wardleys for long enough to have cultivated in herself a vulnerability to such visions. She had grown willing to attend deeply to the movements of her sensory self and find in them the movement of God moving her. Countless times, dancing had delivered her into an experience of that transformation in her bodily self and in others that occurred as they allowed themselves the emotional joy and physical pleasure of being spontaneously moved. In this sense, Lee was readied by her dancing not only to receive a vision having to do with a change in physical pleasure, but to believe it as true.

Further, while Lee's experience of losing children does not explain her theological rejection of sex, it does illuminate the affect that accompanied the idea of celibacy. For Lee, the decision not to have sex meant that she no longer had to suffer the rollercoaster of fear and hope and loss that trying to conform to society's notion of womanhood had entailed for her. She was free from the constraints placed on a married woman in the laboring class « who has an overwhelming desire for a purer life » (Humez 1992, 14). For Lee, the path of celibacy aligned with the sensory education she had when she danced: it freed her to move in ways that brought her joy, relief, and a sense of identity with God. For her, the act of renouncing sex was an act of embracing the fullness of her bodily self — its freedom from gender expectations — as a vehicle and vessel of God's ongoing grace⁷.

7. In this section and forward, I do not address the question of whether or not men and women actually attained equal rights and status within Shaker communities.

With the alignment of these sensory experiences, Lee was able to revalue the meaning of her losses. The sensory education provided by dancing provided the template that enabled her to receive impulses to move — including theological ideas — that creatively recast her suffering as signs of God's grace, pointing her to act in ways that would free her from further suffering, and free her to move as dancing had taught her was possible.

Finally, dancing served a similar purpose for those who followed her but had not experienced her riveting losses. Followers with a sensory awareness of their own potential to move and be moved would be more willing and able to believe that God had moved Lee to teach them the truth about sex. Dancing provided the Shakers with the sensory awareness they needed to experience celibacy as liberating. And in so far as it did, its ongoing practice became essential for the survival of the community.

1.3.2 Confession of sins

The confession of sins as taught by Ann Lee also modeled and required the sensory education exercised by dancing. For Lee, confession was a mode of being. It represented an orientation in the world. While it was the first act that a person who desired to enter the Shaker Society must perform, it was also one of the primary ways in which a person continued to enact her faith. Confession occurred in words that were uttered to Lee or another elder concerning actions, thoughts, and feelings that were sinful — especially but not exclusively those having to do with sexual desires.

As an ongoing practice, confession of sin in general and sexual sin in particular required and promoted more than self-knowledge. It required that believers engage in a constant effort to discern sin, admit sin, feel remorse for sin, and welcome forgiveness where it was occurring — in the minute to minute desires and sensations of one's bodily self. It required a willingness to render one's sensory self *vulnerable* to another member of the community, and then *receive release* from what one had confessed. In other words, confession worked in so far as it provided an experience that aligned with the sensory education to the possibility of transformation that the Shakers cultivated and practiced in their dancing.

Feminists have convincingly argued that gender stereotypes remained. Rather, I trace the role dancing played in helping the Shakers push as far as they did against conventional norms.

Regular sessions of ecstatic dance guided the Shakers to feel their feelings, to shake them up, to express them, and to find release from them in a joyful experience of being moved, or being forgiven. As Andrews tells, the Shakers danced to shake out sin, not just in a metaphorical sense, but in a literal one (1940). Patterson documents a Shaker « Laboring Song » from a later period that affirms this interpretation, and discloses the Shakers' willingness to defend their practice as efficacious. While dancing, the Shakers sang: « Come life, Shaker life, come life eternal. Shake, shake out of me all that is carnal. I'll take nimble steps, I'll be a David, I'll show Michal twice how he behaved » (Patterson 2000, 254). In this song, « Shaker life » is equated with what David did and Michal disdained: David danced (2 Samuel 6: 14-16).

In short, Shaker beliefs in the sin of sex and the necessity of confession never shaded into hostile actions towards the body because their practice of dancing provided them with a sensory template for regularly affirming the movements of their bodily selves as vehicles for God's ongoing grace and creative work on earth. In and through the medium of dancing, Shakers participated consciously in the rhythms of their own bodily becoming, seeking to align themselves with the salvation they believed was imminent. They came to know that suffering can and will be transformed into joy by virtue of the impulses to move that dancing opened them to receive. Dancing thus gave Shakers a regular, reliable opportunity to experience and celebrate the movement of their bodily selves as (doing) the work of God in the world.

1.4 Evaluation

A common reading of Shaker life is that dancing enabled celibacy by providing Shakers with an outlet for repressed erotic energies (see Mercadante 1990, 54). In this argument, the physical pleasure of dancing provided a substitute for sex, thereby deterring actions that would need to be confessed. This argument however, fails to take account of the specific sensory education that dancing provided, or the avenues for theological innovation that that education afforded. To assume that sexuality and dancing are interchangeable ignores what the Shakers claimed: dancing is *effective spiritually*. It transforms a person's experience of her own bodily self. Specifically, the sensory awareness opened by dancing provided a person with the sensory templates she needed to experience celibacy as a joyous affirmation of freedom from (gender-specific) patterns of movement that produce suffering.

In this reading, then, celibacy and confession, for the Shakers, took shape as life-affirming practices within the context of a community whose members were regularly experiencing the movement of their dancing, danced bodily selves as a comforting, enlightening indication of God's presence in them. Dancing opened safe sensory spaces in which the Shakers could resist patriarchal norms — including antipathy toward the body — and affirm the wholeness of their bodily selves.

In these early years, there is little evidence that Lee identified God as male and female, or herself as the Second Coming of Christ. She called herself «Mother in Christ»⁸. However, the ways in which the practice of dancing held celibacy and confession together with an affirmation of bodily becoming suggests why these innovations emerged in the second arc of Shaker history. They expressed and further authorized the ongoing practice of dancing.

2. Middle Years, 1796-1823

Ann Lee died in 1784. After the brief tenure of Father James Whittaker (1784-1787), Father Joseph Meacham, a former Baptist preacher, took the helm, soon choosing Mother Lucy Wright as his co-leader. Meacham put an end to dancing. According to scholars, Meacham encouraged the Shakers to stop dancing because the United Society was growing quickly; having so many unpredictably moving bodies in one place proved too chaotic. Converts were moving to Lee's home site, Niskeyuna. New communities were springing up around New England. As Stein describes: «The need for union and order led [Meacham] to curb the spontaneous movement of the spirit in the meetings» (Stein 1994, 47). In 1796, two years after ending the dance, Meacham died.

For the next twenty-five years, Mother Lucy Wright assumed sole leadership of the United Society. As membership continued to expand, it was Wright's task to mediate squabbles that were breaking out over resources and authority. New converts were not falling into line and young people raised as Shakers were leaving the community in droves. In response, Wright hatched a number of projects, which included renewing missionary efforts and reviving the practice of dancing in worship.

8. Andrews claims that Ann Lee did imply as much in 1779, when defending her authority to a doubtful New Light Baptist minister (Andrews 1953, 19). Others credit Youngs (1808) for articulating the idea.

The reintroduction of dancing was controversial. Critics outside the community were hostile. To combat their disparaging remarks and solidify internal support, Wright supervised the articulation of a written theology strong enough to hold the dance in place⁹. For this project, she appointed two ministers Calvin Green and Seth Young Wells. The fruit of their labor, *A Summary View of the Millennial Church of the United Society of Believers*, appeared in 1823¹⁰. In this *Summary*, Lee appears as Christ, and God as both male and female. An entire chapter is dedicated to dance.

2.1 *Dancing Movements*

At the beginning of his tenure in 1787, Father Joseph Meacham was not opposed to dancing; he simply sought to modify its expression. He introduced a dance, the Square Order Shuffle, or Holy Order that he claimed to have received in a vision « of angels dancing before the throne of God » (Andrews 1953, 147). As the name suggests, the Holy Order borrowed steps, rhythms, and floor patterns from square dances of the time to create an ordered, orderly dance experience for all involved (Andrews 1940; Patterson 2000). As Youngerman describes, « The worshipers formed rows of men and women on separate sides of the room, either facing their leaders, the singers, or each other. The dance consisted of the ranks going back and forth, in a series of three steps back to the beginning place, turn, three steps backwards, turn, three steps forward, and then three steps backward, punctuated with shuffling in place » (Youngerman 2004, 576). Rather than move independently, the Shakers made the same movements together, organized in straight lines, with men and women facing one another.

In 1788, after Meacham appointed Wright, the dancing slowed. By 1790, as Meacham and Wright were tightening disciplinary measures for the community, the Shakers were dancing The Turning Shuffle, « making a slow shuffling turn, often with knees bent until the fingers touched the floor » (Youngerman 2004, 576). Beginning in 1794 the dancing stopped altogether.

After Meacham died in 1796, Wright not only revived the dances he had taught, she quickened the pace of the « laboring. » She introduced

9. This project was the Shakers third published work, and the first public expression of Shaker theology. For the earlier, internal publications, see Youngs (1808) and Bishop and Wells (1816).

10. A later version appeared in 1848, « revised and improved », with added responses to objections, mostly concerning the practice of celibacy.

dances that she had received in visions. From 1811 through the 1830s, under Wright's guidance, Shaker dance proliferated into an array of lively forms involving complicated floor patterns, as well as gestures and movements that often enacted the words of specific songs (Andrews 1940; Patterson 2000). Members were now moving side by side, in unison, to the same beat, with the same orientation, focus and patterning, singing the same songs. These dances not only warmed the Society's collective heart and coordinated its wayward limbs, they cultivated the experiential ground which Shaker theology evolved to protect.

2.2 Sensory Education

While these new dances were different, the contrast between what the Shakers called their « promiscuous » ecstatic practice and the « ordered » square dances is easy to exaggerate. In several respects, both forms delivered a similar sensory education.

Both dances marked a regular, recurring space and time in which participants could exercise their own capacity to create and become movement patterns. In both dances, each person cultivated a sensory awareness of vulnerability to the movement of others as sites of enlivening spiritual activity that was beneficial to all. Neither dance allocated privilege based on gender, race, or class; they were inclusive of men and women, and required of all. Both dance forms thus provided Shakers with resources for discovering movement-making, their own and that of others, as an agent of spiritual transformation. And as Stein confirms, even in the ordered dances, the ecstatic character of the earlier meetings continued to permeate and sometimes break through: « Despite the steady growth of liturgical forms, the ecstatic impulses characteristic of the earliest period were never far below the surface and often burst into the ordered and structured meetings » (Stein 1994, 105).

At the same time, the ordered dancing, by prescribing that every person make the same movements at the same time, would have provided Shakers with a heightened sensory experience of unity. In so far as these dances enabled members to feel pleasure as a function of moving in synchronicity with one another, the dancing fostered a willingness to move with others when not on the dancing floor. Individual feelings of joy in moving as part of a collective would have lived on within participants after the dancing was over as conduits of sensation and response, increasing the likeliness that a person would feel happy about cooperating with others in

the community, and have the sensory attunement needed to do so. As Youngerman explains, « By being in order in the dance, the worshipers not only symbolized the ideal of order, they helped to achieve it. Ecstatic outbursts too were given their place [...] Shaker life was a balancing of control and religious ecstasy, and so was their dancing » (Youngerman 2004, 577).

The balanced sensory education provided by these ordered dances proved especially attractive to new converts whom Wright sought to welcome. Many of the converts were veterans of the camp meetings that marked a series of revivals occurring in the early XIXth century. These converts had been exposed to ecstatic forms of worship and religious expression, such as speaking in tongues, laying on hands in prayer, prophetic visions, and spontaneous movement. Yet, as itinerant preachers moved to the next camp, those left behind were often unable to sustain the same level of intensity and commitment to God (Cross 1981). For such people, the Shaker life — and dancing in particular — was a boon. It offered regular access to the vivid sensory spaces with which they were familiar, while also offering them a way to move with one another in a sustainable, communal life.

2.3 *Theological Innovations*

Calvin and Green's *Summary* was not published until two years after Wright died. Not only did the *Summary* offer the thoroughgoing theological defense of dancing that Wright wanted, it also fleshed out the signature Shaker claims that the Godhead is both Father and Mother; and that Christ returned for a second time in the person of Ann Lee. A close reading of the *Summary*, beginning with its theological defense of dance, suggests that these innovations make sense as expressions of the sensory education that the Shakers' ecstatic and ordered dancing provided.

2.3.1 Theology of dance

In their chapter on dance, Green and Wells do not begin with the Bible. Their apology begins with Christian history, claiming that it is incomplete and unfinished. Jesus, the authors aver, did not establish a means of worship for those who followed him: « no particular order of religious worship could be fully established in that day » (II 5 #11). The authors begin, then, by laying out a historical narrative in which Christians are scattered and their unity shattered not as much by different ideas as by different opinions about how to practice (II 5 #1-10).

The authors' history ends with a small group of « faithful souls » who decide to break with centuries of bad worship (II 5 #14). The authors take pains to explain why earlier and existing forms of worship are so inadequate. These forms, they aver, do not demand or allow for everyone's *participation*. Only a few people participate in the service; and the rest who watch or listen are not fully engaged — heart, mind, and body. Moreover, even those who are singing or speaking or administering the ritual are not opening their hearts. They are not giving or receiving love. Rather, participants in charge cling to whatever forms of worship they have inherited, or experienced at an early age, and thus close themselves off to ongoing divine revelation. The faithful souls left the church, the authors conclude, in search of practices able to engage each and every full bodily self in a process of heart-opening, ongoing divine revelation.

According to this historical narrative, the hole of what was missing was dance-shaped. By separating themselves from these « lifeless forms and fruitless ceremonies of human invention, » the authors explain, the faithful souls opened to receive a different call. It came. They were « involuntarily led, by the mighty power of God, to go forth and worship in the dance » (II 5 #14). For the authors, the Shakers decision to dance was not a good idea adopted for strategic purposes. Dancing was « brought to light... as a manifestation of the will of God, through the special operations of his Divine Power » (II 5 #15).

Here lies the crux of the *Summary*'s apology. Dance is not only a *means* to divine revelation; it is a *result* of divine revelation. To dance is not only a way to *find* God's will; it is the way to *follow* God's will. Dance is driven by God; directed by God, and thus, due to God.

Having established dance as both a conduit for heart-opening, participatory divine revelation and its fruit, the authors of the *Summary* do turn to the Bible, but not to prove that dancing is the right form of worship. They know it is. The authors turn to the Bible for clues as to how to interpret the unlikely fact that the Shakers have been and are called to dance. Humans, the authors later add, would never choose a path that cut so strongly against the cultural grain, requiring such humility and self-mortification relative to the mores with which they had been raised. Thus the authors look for ways to interpret the sensory education that dancing provides as theologically significant.

In examining Biblical stories, the authors note, first of all, that it is usually women who lead the dance (II 5 #16-17). The authors also notice that these women often dance for joy, to celebrate victories (II 5 #18). The

authors interpret these passages as keys to how their own dancing works: it educates the senses of those who do it to the equality of women and men, and to the delight of overcoming challenges. As such, dancing primes people for the final victory — the victory over all sin. It provides them with the sensory template for its possibility and eventual manifestation. As the authors insist, dancing in the Bible, is «a figurative manifestation of the manner in which the true followers of Christ were to be called to worship God, and manifest their joy in the latter day, for their victory over the power of darkness» (II 5 #18). Biblical dancing is «figurative» only in so far as the women depicted are not dancing about the final victory, only a mediate one. The dancing itself is actual, and it is effective in ways that Shakers, given their own experience, can recognize and affirm: it transforms suffering into joy.

2.3.2 Theological anthropology

Having established the significance of this sensory education that dancing provides, the authors respond directly to critics who reject dancing as a compromised and corrupted medium, unfit for Christian communion. The discussion quickly moves to a rousing theological anthropology that again draws inspiration from the sensory education provided by dancing. For the authors, the whole human, «every created talent [... is] designed for the service of God» (II 5 #24). At first, the authors simply affirm that the whole of what God created ought to be given back to God in a «service» that includes worship and work: «To devote only a part to the service of God, is to render an imperfect service, which God will never accept [...] it is in vain to talk of loving God with all the faculties, without serving him with all the faculties» (II 5 #28, #29-31). Bodily selves included.

Yet, the authors go farther and advance a theological anthropology in which a human is a whole whose mind and body are so interconnected that one cannot be fully engaged without the other participating as well: «There is too powerful a connection between the body and mind, and too strong an influence of the mind upon the body, to admit of much activity of mind in the service of God, without the cooperating exercises of the body» (II 5 #33). In this account, not only are mind and body powerfully connected, they represent modes of activity — patterns of movement — that depend upon one another's *difference* in order to realize their individual *talents*. Right thinking, the authors aver, must not only find expression in movement but *will not be fully expressed until it does*. Bodily movement

in turn, realizes its potency only when it awakens and orients a dancer's heart and mind to God. As the authors insist: « the heart must be but feebly engaged in the worship of God, when all the active powers of the body are idle » (#33); and conversely, any sounds or movements, however sophisticated, are « empty » without « the devotional feelings of the heart » (II 5 #34).

In this theological account, then, dancing is not only one talent alongside others; nor is it a « physical » act that vents pent up sexual energies. Dancing is the *best* form of worship, it provides the *best* medium for divine revelation, because it *enacts* a dynamic rhythm of bodily becoming. Dancing, people create and *become* patterns of mental and emotional movement that are vulnerable to impulses received through their sensory awareness; they create and become patterns of physical movement that amplify thoughts and feelings of love. Dancing educates a person's senses to this generative interplay — to their own bodily becoming — as participating in God's ongoing creation.

2.4 Evaluation

The authors' theological interpretation of the sensory education provided by dancing sets them up to authorize the innovative claims that Ann Lee is the Second Coming of Christ and that God must be both male and female. The Shakers could embrace the idea that divine revelation is an ongoing event because they were constantly experiencing their own bodily movement as a medium for receiving it. They could embrace the idea that Lee was the Second Coming of Christ because she, in leading this dance, was completing the work prophesied by the women in the Hebrew Bible and begun in Jesus. For the Shakers, the dancing Lee encouraged was training them to do what they needed to do not only to purify and perfect their actions, but also to align their thoughts and feelings with the inevitability of that transformation.

The authors' interpretation of « Christ » supports this view: Christ is an « anointing power » (VI 4 21). They write:

As the true Church of Christ which is his body is composed of male and female, as its members; and as there must be a correspondent spiritual union between the male and female, to render the Church complete, as a spiritual body; so it is essentially necessary that such a spiritual union should exist in the head of that body, which is Christ; otherwise there could be no source from which such a correspondent, spiritual union could flow to the body. (VI 4 13)

This passage from much later in the *Summary* echoes the theological anthropology that the authors earlier credit to dancing. «Head» and the «Body», even of Christ, become what they are in mutually enabling relationship with one another. As a result, the work of Christ cannot be completed unless a woman, namely Ann Lee, leads a dance in which men and women engage the generative becoming of mind and body as the locus of divine revelation.

Similarly, the experience of dancing provides believers with the key that they need in order to believe in a Mother/Father God as well. Not the Bible; not tradition but dancing plows the sensory ground through which Shakers can believe what, to the authors, is obvious: «that there exists in the Deity, the likeness of male and female, forming the unity of that creative and good principle from which proceeds the work of Father and Mother, manifested in Power to create, and Wisdom, to bring forth into proper order, all the works of God» (III 1 4). Dancing is theopraxis.

Once dancing appears as theopraxis, the medium within which ideas about God and Jesus find their source and warrant and become believable, it is clear why the Wright as well as the authors of the *Summary* wanted to make sure dancing continued. Sure enough, the very theological innovations that required dancing in order to be believed also appear as critical for authorizing the continuing practice of dancing. If Mother Ann Lee is the Second Coming of Christ, then her call to dance cannot be ignored. If God is both male and female, then Lee's call to dance extends to all men and women. And if perfection unfolds in time, then that dancing cannot be a once and for all act. It must be an ongoing ritual that sustains the practices of celibacy and confession on the one hand, and the theological beliefs that pull and push perfection into existence on the other.

The authors, in concluding their theological case for dance, allude to this critical role. They write: «Where a body of Christians are united in Spirit, they cannot but feel a peculiar blessing when united in their religious devotions. To render this the more perfect, a uniformity of exercise is necessary. Indeed the true union of the spirit has a direct tendency to produce a harmonious order in the exercises of divine worship» (#35). At first glance, these statements seem contradictory — does dancing enable «true union,» or does true union produce harmonious dancing?

From an ecokinetic perspective, the dancing and the union *generate one another* via the sensory education that the action of dancing provides. Moving with one another trains people's senses to the possibility of spiritual union; they are able to feel it, conceive it, look for it, and cultivate it

as a source of comfort and as a sign of the Shaker difference. On the other hand, any idea of spiritual union must be constantly rekindled so that it becomes real, and may be felt and known by others. In short, the link between dancing and harmonious unity passes through the medium of bodily becoming: over time dancing provides members with the sensory education by which they can feel and amplify and make more real a union — a God-with-us — that is always already present.

3. Conclusion

For the Shakers, at least through the 1820s, the fact that they can and do dance is proof that what they believe is true, and not the other way around. Dancing is the authority on which their theological beliefs rest; and that authority is lodged in the sensory education dancing provides to the ongoing revelation of God manifest in every individual human's kinetic creativity. Dancing has agency. It is spiritually effective independent of theological interpretation, though it cannot manifest its potential fully until it finds expression in that interpretation.

This approach to interpreting Shaker theology may seem cynical, as if the Shakers invented ideas that would justify what they wanted to do, namely dance. However, from an ecokinetic perspective, the practice of dancing opened within them a capacity to think differently about the Christian God because of what they were experiencing while dancing. And in so far as they found those thoughts powerful and enabling, they wanted to continue dancing so as to keep rediscovering and refining their truth.

While the implications of this analysis for contemporary discussions on dance and theology are vast, I note a few. For one, the Shaker case suggests that dancing is not an additive practice. It is not simply one medium among others that Christians can decide to include in their spiritual lives or not. Whether or not Christians dance, how they dance, and with whom they dance is inseparable from how and what they believe. This claim does not assume that a given kind of dancing can be correlated with a particular belief, only that a generative interplay will always be at work and deserves attention. Dance has agency as theopraxis.

Second, and related, as Green and Wells' careful theological reflections confirm over and again, religious experience is always mediated by the bodily movements that make it possible — not just by symbols, cultural context, gender, race, or class. In this regard, any claim for an understanding or conception of God must include reflections on the bodily move-

ments that make it possible — and not only on bodily movements per se, but on the sensory education they provide. How we relate to God — who and what we conceive God to be — is a function of all the bodily movements we have made and become as we navigate our time on earth.

Third, the kind of effect that dancing can have on individuals and a community can accumulate across years. Shaker history did not end when Wright died. The community experienced another decade in which ecstatic dance practices returned to the fore. Then, after 1850, as the Shaker community fell into a long slow decline, so did its dance practices. Its theology, however, lives on. It may be that the Shaker theology is still holding open a dance-shaped space for the rebirth of dance as theopraxis.

An ecokinetic approach, by targeting the sensory education dancing provides, and imaginatively recreating the possibilities for thinking and feeling that emerge, can help unleash the potential of dancing for generating new patterns of meeting, receiving, and moving with (what that dancing may enable us to conceive as) divinity.

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Résumé

Dans l'histoire de la danse et de la théologie chrétienne, la United Society of Believers in the Second Coming of Christ, plus connue sous le nom de Shakers, présente un cas unique. Non seulement les Shakers ont-ils pratiqué la danse pendant 140 ans comme le rituel central et constitutif d'un socialisme religieux séparatiste fonctionnel; et non seulement ont-ils constitué une défense théologique de leur pratique fondée sur les textes bibliques. Ils ont aussi placé la danse aux côtés de la Bible comme moyen privilégié de révélation divine. Cet article mobilise une approche écokinétique en relation

avec les deux premiers moments de l'histoire des Shakers, afin de proposer l'idée selon laquelle la danse des Shakers est une source d'autorité pour leurs innovations théologiques. La danse est *theopraxis*.

Abstract

In the history of dance and Christian theology, the United Society of Believers in the Second Coming of Christ, otherwise known as the Shakers, prove a unique case. Not only did the Shakers practice dancing for over 140 years as the central, constitutive ritual of a successful separatist religious socialism; and not only did the Shakers mount a biblically informed theological defense of their dancing practice. The Shakers also elevated dancing alongside the Bible as a privileged medium of divine revelation. This paper mobilizes an ecokinetic approach in relation to the first two arcs of Shaker history to argue that the Shakers' dancing serves as an authorizing source for their theological innovations. Dance is theopraxis.