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► **To cite this version:**

Michael Houseman. Becoming autonomous together: Distanced intimacy in dances of self-discovery. Graham Harvey; Michael Houseman; Sarah Pike; Jone Salomonsen. Reassembling Democracy. Ritual as Cultural Resource., Bloomsbury Publishing, pp.87-104, 2021, 978-1-3501-2301-4. halshs-03902362

HAL Id: halshs-03902362

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03902362v1>

Submitted on 31 Jan 2023

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Becoming autonomous together: distanced intimacy in dances of self-discovery*

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In most large Western cities, hundreds of people attend weekly sessions of collective dancing explicitly aimed to promote “self-discovery”, “authenticity”, and “connection with others”: 5 Rhythms, Biodanza, Movement Medicine, and Open Floor among others (Houseman, Mazzella di Bosco and Thibaut 2016). On these occasions, participants’ ability to engage with fellow dancers in a spontaneous, heartfelt, creative manner is unceasingly elicited and displayed. As expected, the physical interactions they have with each other are often deemed to be of exceptional power and eloquence. It is thus noteworthy that those who take part in these practices rarely become close friends or lovers. They may be familiar with the superficial facts of each other’s lives, but remain passing acquaintances at best. They are “consequential strangers” (Fingerman 2009) who, as a rule, tend not to socialize beyond the dance sessions themselves and activities related to them. The extent to which this rule applies varies from one local context to the next (cf. Pike 2017; Mazzella di Bosco 2020). However, what remains constant is a striking hiatus between the intense interpersonal intimacy participants are given to share, and the lack of interpersonal commitment that these experiences might be expected to imply. Generally speaking, it is with those with whom dancers feel free *not* to have close relationships, that they develop and demonstrate their aptitude for entering into close relationships with hypothetical others at a further remove.

Moisseff (2012, 2016) has emphasized the increasingly important role played by this type of distanced intimacy in the present-day West, notably in psychotherapy and other related practices (coaching, counseling, etc.). Their practitioners are able to become the custodians of their clients’ private lives precisely by virtue of the fact that they are not members of their intimate circle. Accordingly, the interactions characteristic of these “unnatural relationships” (Moisseff 2004), although often highly emotional, are oriented not towards developing and handling interpersonal dependencies (as is the case of relations with loved ones and family members), but on the contrary towards asserting and preserving personal autonomy. In this article, I will be concerned with the workings of this peculiar mode of interaction as an essential feature of what I have loosely identified as “dances of self-discovery”.

I argue that these practices afford participants with an experience of self-actualization, that of consciously becoming whom one is conventionally prompted to feel one is meant to be: “spontaneous”, “creative”, and “open to others”. In this regard, these dances fulfill what many see as the defining imperative of contemporary Western individualism, namely the continuous, purposeful construction of the self (e.g. Giddens 1991, Taylor 2007, Le Bart 2008). There is, however, a further, complementary aspect to these practices, which is being part of a collectivity made up of such self-determined individuals. Indeed, while dancing, close interpersonal relationships, understood as constantly revised emotional entanglements with particular people, give way to looser, less problematic, higher-order assemblages in which individual self-construction is given pride of place. An anonymized, instrumental mode of intimacy, I suggest, is the hallmark of this particular flavor of we-ness, affording participants with emblematic experiences of the quintessentially modern (post-modern?)

* To appear in Harvey, G., M. Houseman, S. Pike and J. Salomonsen (eds.) *Reassembling Democracy. Ritual as Cultural Resource*, London : Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020. Please do not quote without permission jmichaelhouseman@gmail.com

prospect of being jointly autonomous. My aim is to explore the performative mechanics through which this model of sociability comes into being.

To do so, I will draw on the practice of Biodanza, whose tagline is the “poetry of the encounter”. As websites and flyers attest, an explicit emphasis on interpersonal dynamics is what distinguishes Biodanza from other comparable forms of collective dancing. Created by the Chilean Rolando Toro (1924-2010) in the 1960s, this “human integration system of organic renewal, of affective re-education, and of re-learning of life’s original functions” purportedly allows participants to establish “a connection with oneself, with others, and with life as a whole”.¹

Talking/sharing circles

A weekly Biodanza session (called a *vivencia*) is led by a “facilitator”. Lasting about two hours, it usually involves fifteen to twenty participants who are expected to attend a number of such sessions together.² Each session is made up of an introductory “talking” or “sharing” circle followed by a series of choreographic propositions performed collectively to the accompaniment of music.

Upon arriving for a session, participants greet one another, take off their shoes, change into comfortable clothes and engage in small talk (or not) until being invited to come together. In one series of sessions I attended,³ participants begin by standing in a circle holding hands; starting with the facilitator, each person introduces him or herself by name: “I am Michael”. In the other series of sessions, everyone is seated; the facilitator announces her name and then takes the hand of the person on her right, who then does the same, such that as introductions proceed the circle is progressively joined. The slight pause people take and the insistent way they look around the circle before revealing their name, the animated yet exaggeratedly articulate manner in which names are pronounced, the use of the stilted formula “I am ...” (instead of the more commonplace “My name is ...”), all contribute to making the situation an exceptional one in which special conditions of presence and expression are presumed to apply. Indeed, saying one’s name in a talking circle does not consist merely in identifying oneself to others. It is also a way of showing that one tries to do so in the most authentic and heartfelt way possible. Personal sincerity and exhibited reflexivity are made to go hand in hand.

Participants are then invited to “share something with the group”. After a few moments people start to speak (there is no obligation to do so). Often, they say how pleased they are to be there, and how important these sessions are for them. Here is an example from my field-notes for a circle in which little else was said:

After a while, Caroline timidly declares how happy she is to be here. Soon after, Sophie, looking around the circle, says how much she enjoys being with this group. She smiles widely at us and some of us smile back. Antonio tells us that he has had a difficult week because he and his wife have had to look after his grand-children. He also reminds us of his advanced age [85 years] and tells us how thankful he is to all of us for giving him the time of these sessions. After a pause, Thomas says that he is going through a difficult time professionally and how much these sessions “allow him to recharge his batteries for the week”.

Such tributes to the group are unfailingly met with discrete signs of approval – smiles, nods, and the like – prompting further expressions of gratitude. Personal disclosure and collective approbation become joined in a self-reinforcing circuit, such that one has the impression that those who talk speak both *to* the group and *for* the group. This impression persists as participants evoke episodes from preceding sessions or, more often, aspects of their daily

lives. They do so either to “unburden” themselves before dancing, or to share the fact that they will be “dancing with” a particular quality or person.

It often happens that a talking circle takes on a life of its own as a motif or affective tone introduced by one person is picked up by others. Consider the following session in which participants disclose feelings of inadequacy and frustration. This often entails the exteriorisation of an inner or intimate dialogue in which the speaker’s exhibited introspection finds an encompassing echo in the group’s manifest attentiveness to the outpourings of one of its members:

The circle begins with Charles telling us how grateful and pleased he is to be here. After a short pause, Anne, with unshed tears of disappointment, reveals that very few people came to an exhibit of her paintings, and explains how difficult it is for her to find the energy to go on. After a long pause, Boris, in a tear-filled voice that begins haltingly but soon rushes out of control, says that he is going through a hard time “looking for who I am, trying to know what I want”; he recognizes in himself some of the things his companion (whom he “loves a lot”) reproaches him for, but for others things, he “just doesn’t see it at all”, and he “finds that really upsetting, not to know myself”. After another long pause, Viviane, weeping in rage, explains that she “has yet again been had by someone because she didn’t impose limits”, and that she is furious with herself (as is her husband), and that “it is important that I be myself, and it is so hard for me to do that and not to let myself be dumped on”. Sophie, who is sitting next to her gives her a tender hug and her neighbour on the other side squeezes her hand. Finally, Clara explains that for some time she has been wanting to tell us how much suffering is part of her life, and that her husband, whom she loves, says that she should “just move beyond it, ignore it and get on with living”. But “is that a way to live?” she asks. Instead of trying to eliminate this suffering she feels, she prefers to take it on, and to dance with it. She seems at once delighted with herself and deeply moved while announcing that “this evening I will dance with my suffering”.

When people talk like this, others become unnaturally still and adopt a neutral face, either looking directly at the speaker with softened eyes, or keeping their eyes closed as though intently listening. No one interrupts or reacts verbally (to give an opinion, commiserate, or offer advice for example), and subjects mentioned in a talking circle are rarely if ever evoked in the informal conversations that precede and follow a session. Participants focus their attention on the person speaking in a benevolent but detached fashion, seemingly mindful not to infringe upon the speaker’s disclosures with opinions or concerns of their own. As the talking circle progresses, participants are caught up in a reflexive type of collective empathy in which feelings of self-conscious emotional sharing override the idiosyncratic yet markedly allusive content of what is being said. As listeners they bear witness to speakers’ aptitudes for trust and for moving self-expression and self-understanding; as speakers they testify to the group’s collective readiness to provide an unfailingly supportive climate. Each is thankful to all for the emergence of an emotionally and intentionally enriched environment in which, during the choreographic propositions that follow, it becomes possible, as Biodanza practitioners say, to “feel more intensely alive”.

After five to ten minutes, the circle falls quiet. While some participants may feel uneasy about something someone said or regret not having spoken themselves, the dominant sentiment is one of shared complicity and collective self-satisfaction at a job well done, at having given voice to what needed to be said. The facilitator announces that the time has come to dance.

Choreographic propositions

Participants then cease speaking to take part in a series of “propositions” in which they move their bodies to music. Each proposition (usually ten to twelve in all) is first demonstrated by the facilitator – not as a model to follow, she often points out, but as an invitation or example – before being undertaken by all. Choosing among the wide array of choreographies and musical selections at their disposal, facilitators compose their sessions beforehand in keeping with the group’s progress and the session’s theme: “Contact”, “Letting go”, “Joy in one’s heart”, “Being the path”, etc.⁴

A session usually begins with an easy-going circle dance while holding hands (grapevine steps to the right). This is often followed by one or more “walks” in which participants are encouraged to adopt a particularly loose-jointed, springy (“synergetic”) step and/or stride around the room embodying affirmative attitudes such as “being fully present”, or “feeling the joy of life”. They are advised to be attentive to those whose paths they cross, to look them in the eyes and “to let oneself be affected by them”. Participants may then be invited to take a partner and walk together, and then to change partners, thereby initiating a series of energetic, joyful, sometimes playful propositions most of which entail interacting with others. In a “rhythmic synchronization” for example, participants pair off and hold hands; facing each other and looking into each other’s eyes, they move their linked arms back and forth in rhythm with the music in a way that, in keeping with the facilitator’s instructions, their dance “is led by neither party, but emerges from their interaction”. This first, energetic phase, said to favor a state of “identity”, is followed by a set of slower, gentler, often more sensuous propositions, held to promote a state of “regression”. Many of the latter exercises (breathing dances, stroking of hands or face, rocking circles, etc.) also entail partnerships of two or more. Towards the end of this second phase, Biodanza’s emblematic proposition called “the encounter” often takes place. Participants are told to move freely around the room while soothing music is playing until they “connect” with someone and “enter into a relationship with them”. Such an encounter begins with a “welcoming look”, facilitators explain to novices, that prompts two people to move slowly towards each other until they gently grasp hands; “depending on how [they] feel”, they can then either remain gazing at each other, touch each other’s hands or arms, or progressively move into a long embrace. After a time, as after every proposition, partners solemnly thank each other in silence – a slow blink, a hug, a bow of the head with hands pressed to the chest – before separating to look for others with whom to “connect”. In the third, shorter phase of a Biodanza session, a small number of “reactivating” propositions lead to a final, revitalizing circle dance.

The three rules of Biodanza often reiterated by facilitators at the start of a session, especially if newcomers are present, are: (1) enjoy yourself, (2) respect others as well as yourself, and (3) no talking. Speechlessness is said to “favor the use of other modes of communication” and “make more neurons available for the parasympathetic system governing sensation and emotion”. Facilitators, however, speak a great deal. Before dancing starts they talk about the theme of the session and the overall aims of Biodanza, and before each proposition they provide more specific explanations and recommendations. Among the recurrent motifs of such discourse, along with imperatives to “rediscover one’s spontaneity”, to retrieve the creative and expressive qualities “that all children have naturally”, to “wake up one’s body and emotions”, and so forth, is the paramount importance of “entering into relationship with others”.

I have described elsewhere (Houseman, Mazzella di Bosco and Thibault 2016), with respect to dances of self-discovery generally, the learning process characteristic of these practices. Sensory and material cues, the facilitator’s words, and the example of more experienced dancers all encourage participants to move and act in ways that embody how they feel but also how they feel they should be feeling. The self-contradictory nature of these tacit or explicit injunctions – to be intentionally “spontaneous”, to act “naturally” in patently

artificial settings, and so forth – at once heightens participants’ self-consciousness and ensures their involvement in recurrent episodes of disorientation and awkwardness. Trying to “disconnect one’s mind” (*déconnecter le mental*) so as to better tap into my “creative potential”, for example, I am dismayed to find myself reproducing the same set of gestures over and over again. This unsettling, self-defeating dynamic is even more pronounced with respect to the “authentic relationships” participants seek to enact with persons they are ordinarily not close to. Consider something as apparently straightforward as the dance of “rhythmic synchronization” briefly described above. Partners shift their weight from side to side while swinging their joined hands alternatively backwards and forwards in cadence with the music, all the while maintaining eye contact. As the minutes drag on, the movements’ repetitiveness, along with the expectation that partners create their dance together, becomes a source of unexpected difficulties. Simply repeating the same movement quickly becomes tedious. Attention wanders and the connection with one’s partner breaks down. However, introducing new variations not only makes smooth adjustments between partners more challenging, but, contrary to the instructions given, requires that one or the other take a leading role. In such conditions in which defective performance and relational deficiency are closely connected, partners’ vigilance towards their dance and towards each other becomes acute; they can not but own up – sometimes through self-deprecating laughter – to the confusions and misunderstandings that are revealed both in their respective actions and in each other’s eyes. Take another, more “regressive” example of my partner and I as we caress each other’s hands over several minutes with our eyes closed while soft music is playing. At one point, I am taken unaware by a rush of erotic attraction, or by an equally surprising reaction of repulsion. Although I struggle not to attribute to such sentiments the meanings and implications they might ordinarily have, to reject them as merely intrusive and inappropriate comes up against the imperative to be open to being affected by others.

However, spurred on by the facilitator’s directives, the music’s tempo, the expressive momentum of one’s own and others’ movements, as well as partners’ good-natured indulgence towards each other’s lapses, participants learn to take such momentary setbacks in stride. And as they do so, their efforts are increasingly rewarded by enchanting moments of “letting go” in which their own and others’ dancing, their thoughts and feelings, their consciousness of themselves, of each other and of the group seem to merge into a coherent, flowing whole. During these episodes, potentially dissonant attitudes – flirting, embarrassment, clowning around, etc. – do not so much cease to exist as they are no longer felt to be problematic. They are, for a time, simply acknowledged as integral aspects of an encompassing and immediately rewarding interactive “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). In such moments of grace, participants’ routinely shrouded capacity to “feel more intensely alive” seems to rise to the surface of their awareness to provide them with fleeting “peak experiences” (Maslow 1968) of whom they are able to become.

Taking part in these sessions proves more difficult for some than for others. Some find Biodanza to be unseemly or just plain boring; having tried it once, they rarely return (see note 5). Others, many of whom become regular attendees, find it appealing but also challenging. Thus, it is not unusual for someone to become excessively agitated, or to stop dancing altogether, or to break down in tears. However, such occurrences are generally considered by all to be part of the ongoing learning process Biodanza puts it effect; the person is briefly and gently taken in hand by the facilitator before being encouraged to join in the dancing once again. Indeed, it is through trial and error, by repeatedly overcoming what are perceived as temporary hindrances, moving from one partnership to the next, at times with a single person, at times with several others, that participants are led to experience what the exemplary yet largely undefined qualities of “spontaneity”, “naturalness”, “creativity”, and “authentic relationship” might be.

An encounter with oneself...

As we have seen, identifying oneself or recounting an aspect of one's life in a Biodanza talking circle is something quite different from doing so in situations of everyday interaction. Similarly, the relationships participants enter into while dancing are pointedly not the emotionally binding, endlessly renegotiated ties they are familiar with in their daily lives. These "encounters" or "connections" take place under highly unusual conditions: as the object of intense reflexive attention, to the accompaniment of music, in the absence of spoken language, and in the presence of others. As a result, they easily take on a magnified, self-conscious, almost theatrical quality. Gestures are smoothed out and uncommonly studied, reciprocal gazes are unnaturally steady, physical leave-takings are inordinately prolonged, etc. How should these performances be interpreted? On the one hand, participants do not understand these interactions as phony or fictitious. The emotions they occasion, either while dancing or while being recalled in talking circles, often take those concerned by surprise, and are felt by all to be genuine. On the other hand, neither do dancers see these interactions as expressing significant relational commitment, nor do they expect them to lead to lasting ties of interpersonal involvement.

Biodanza participants are engaged in acting out, for themselves and for each other, a conventional (contemporary Western) representation of what an "authentic" relationship is supposed to be: spontaneous, honest, emotionally eloquent, intimate, caring, pleasurable, etc. However, these representations are not distanced depictions or hypothetical accounts, but personally lived-through experiences. Thus, over the course of weeks and months of practice, participants imbue the exemplary qualities they seek to emulate with their individual sensibilities and behavioral mannerisms. What starts out as an abstract, generic model gradually loses its representational character to become a particular mode of feeling and action, recognizable by the distinctive kinesthetic and affective experiences it affords. In short, participants progressively come to personify the archetypal values of interpersonal "connection" they are enjoined to express. In doing so, they develop special, performative *habitus* that both induce and proclaim these personifications: specific ways of moving, of touching, of looking, and of initiating and concluding partnerships in which personal inclinations and exemplary dispositions are conjoined.

Particularly telling in this respect is how participants manage that conspicuously interactive organ which is the face. For example, how does one go about gazing into another's eyes – for a full minute say, while music is playing, while touching without speaking, surrounded by other couples doing the same – in a way that, according to the facilitator's instructions, "says 'I am here'" or "communicates 'unconditional acceptance'"? What is required is neither an impassive look (which connotes a lack of attention), nor an expression that articulates a specific intent (which suggests a strategic posture or a lack of openness), but a sort of uncommitted, self-aware responsiveness. As one facilitator-in-training described it, this "empathic gaze [...] is at once close and distant. I don't merge [with the other person] and I am not absent [from her]. It's a welcoming, hospitable look (*un regard acceuillant*)". Participants explore different approaches to melding intimate receptivity and reflexive detachment in ways that do not congeal into a mask. Nevertheless, the facial expressions of accomplished dancers have a definite family resemblance whose regular features include unwavering eye-contact (suggestive intensity?), raised eyebrows (unjudging expectancy?), tilted head (playful readiness?) and gentle, unfocused smiling (tranquil benevolence?).

The artful yet pointedly unresolved character of such expressions, and of participants' performative *habitus* generally, bear witness to the refracted or dilated experience of self that Biodanza engenders. The transcendent properties of personhood that dancers are encouraged

to embody on the one hand, and their own individual patterns of feeling and behavior on the other, are made manifest as mutually reinforcing components of their dancing selves who take on the mysterious quality of being sublime and commonplace at the same time. In this way, Biodanza participants come to be recognized less as individuals seeking to emulate certain cardinal values, than as persons capable of revealing these values as heretofore unsuspected aspects of themselves. In other words, to the extent that participants are seen, by themselves and by others, as personifying and not just representing what are held to be the intrinsically worthy qualities of authentic “connection” (affectivity, caring, vulnerability, spontaneity, etc.), their acting out of these qualities can reasonably be acknowledged as evidence for their own personal capacities to “connect”.

... through others

Fellow dancers play an essential role in enabling participants to consciously experience their aptitude to enter into relationship with others. This is one of the reasons dancers are strongly encouraged to circulate and try out new partners, whose distinctive ways of moving, of making eye contact, of touching, of showing emotion, etc. – all variations within a shared conventional ideal – can provide them with so many complementary interactive experiences of whom they are able to become. As one facilitator explained, “connecting” with others becomes a wellspring of self-understanding: “one has an encounter with oneself, an encounter with another, and an encounter with oneself through another [...] what is important is [...] to feel the other and to feel oneself through the other”. Another facilitator once put it differently: « the other is oneself [...] the other is a light, like a flashlight that illuminates me, that reveals me to myself ».

Encountering oneself through another, however, is a reciprocal process. If others act as a given person’s resources, each person also acts as a resource for others – as an interactive foil, a source of inspiration, a witness, etc. Some propositions, such as caressing one’s own face (“as one would wish to be touched”), or “segment dances” centered on particular body parts, are performed alone with eyes closed. However, most of the time, dancers are involved in propositions that require them to assume both exploratory, self-oriented attitudes, and enabling, other-oriented ones. Some exercises do this on the basis of turn-taking, with one partner dancing while the other looks on “in a supportive way”. Other propositions are more elaborate, as when participants are told to stand in “an open and receptive way” with their eyes closed, while their partners, standing behind them, lightly and rapidly graze parts of their body to induce them to move; after several minutes, the person behind comes around to face their partner in order “to give them what they need” before exchanging roles. By providing dancers with the means to experience their own capacities for empathy and generosity, such supportive attitudes, like that adopted by listeners during talking circles, can be highly gratifying. Thus, whereas beginners generally come to Biodanza with their own well-being in mind, they progressively come to appreciate how their participation can be helpful to others struggling along their own paths of self-discovery. Increasingly, these two orientations come to reinforce each other, such that, for many long-time practitioners, being able to act as a resource for others becomes a constituent aspect of their own self-transformation.

Participants’ mutual acknowledgement of their reciprocal enabling roles is an essential component of Biodanza. This is particularly evident in the reverent leave-takings that follow especially satisfying partnerships. Such expressions of thankfulness bridge two opposite inclinations. On the one hand, there is a tendency for partners to abandon themselves in hugs in which the inherent mutuality of touch (touching and being touched becoming indistinguishable) is exploited to the full. On the other hand, encouraged by facilitators’ occasional indications that an embrace is perhaps not always the most authentic, appropriate

way of connecting with someone, and that hugging a person entails *not* meeting their gaze, partners are careful not to rush into this. As a result, hugging is turned into the consummation of a drawn-out processes of reciprocal recognition in which partners, emphatically looking into one another's eyes before embracing, are made self-consciously aware of each other's watchful goodwill. It becomes the sealing of a pact whose collective nature is explicitly expressed during final circle dances. Thus, as participants begin to move together as a single group while holding hands, looks and smiles of complicity begin to blossom, their steps become freer and the circle itself often becomes deformed, buckling in on itself to allow dancers to give each other playful, passing kisses. As participants attend more and more sessions, a trust, born of their shared awareness of having been made aware of themselves through one another grows, facilitating their willingness to convey their aspirations during talking circles and while dancing.

Ritual experiences

As mentioned at the start, Biodanza, 5 Rhythms and other collective dances of self-discovery rely on a mode of interaction – distanced intimacy – also found in contemporary psychotherapy (see also Moisseeff and Houseman in press). However, as Biodanza facilitators are the first to point out, while these practices may have therapeutic effects, they are not therapy sessions: they do not claim to be treatments intended to heal specific psychological or physical disorders. Nor are they esoteric apprenticeships, dance classes, fitness programs or recreative dance parties. I suggest they be understood as ritual practices, albeit of a type largely overlooked by anthropologists. Unlike more canonical ceremonial activities, these dances are not organized around what Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) have called “archetypal actions”. Thus, while certain ways of acting are acknowledged as appropriate (this or that dance step, or way of looking or touching), these items of behaviour are not presumed to have value and efficacy in and of themselves. Instead, what are deemed to have such inherent value and efficacy are the exemplary emotional and intentional qualities the dancers' behaviour is enjoined to express and/or bring about: “spontaneity”, “creativity”, “authentic connection with others”, etc. As in much contemporary Western ceremonial (Houseman 2007, 2016), ritualization pertains here less to the obscure, condensed actions participants perform than to the uncertain, refracted agencies their performances enact. As mentioned, these dances enable participants to take on exceptional, dilated identities in which their embodiment of certain axiomatic ways of thinking and feeling, and their aptitude to undertake and to be affected by this effort are rendered inseparable. In affording participants with the experience of these special, unresolved, short-lived personifications, these practices allow them to become present to themselves and to others as at once ordinary and extraordinary beings.

People's actual thoughts and feelings, because they are volatile, often ambivalent, largely idiosyncratic, and directly inaccessible, are generally held to lie beyond the bounds of rigorous anthropological inquiry. This is all the more so where ritual is concerned, for as Rappaport (1979) and others have stressed, one of the features of ritualization is the boundary it establishes between invariant public acts and the vicissitudes of individuals' inner states. Thus, treating Biodanza as ritual entails focussing on the recurrent, observable properties of the practice itself. In other words, contrary to what Biodanza practitioners themselves might expect, description and analysis is concerned not with participants' singular experiences of “spontaneity”, “creativity” or “authentic connection with others”, but with how such experiences are conventionally elicited and displayed.

There is one definite advantage in recognizing Biodanza, 5 Rhythms and the like as having ritual characteristics. On the basis of anthropological accounts of ceremonial activities generally, we can presume to have a fairly good idea of what these practices can and can not

accomplish. Rituals do not provide answers to problems raised by daily life. At best, they recontextualize particular predicaments in ways that allow answers to be sought more easily elsewhere, by means of the myriad resources humans have at their disposal: intimidation, seduction, logical reasoning, secrecy, story-telling, negotiation, bluff, and so forth. Similarly, rituals do not provide realistic models for everyday behavior. Rather, they act as compelling yet largely unfathomable yardsticks in reference to which participants can reevaluate themselves, their everyday relationships, and their place in the world. Rituals do this by affording participants with conventional yet difficult-to-decipher experiential corroborations of certain axiomatic yet inevitably ambiguous cultural values and ideas. “Incarnated divinity”, for example, is a short-hand label for one such set of values and ideas; “connection with oneself, with others and with life as a whole” is another. In rendering such ideas and values as performances presumed to have worth and meaning in and of themselves, rituals contribute to their transmission, all the while providing the conditions for their own reiteration. In this way, ritual performance does not so much clarify identities or set things straight as it perpetuates, in a way that makes them particularly difficult to deny, the mysteries and unresolved issues that we hold dear. In other words, ritual promotes the ongoing relevance of certain exemplary cultural values and ideas by packaging them, along with their attendant ambiguities and contradictions, in the form of somewhat enigmatic, yet highly memorable enactments that are hard to argue with (cf. Bloch 1974).

What, then, are the cardinal yet ambivalent values and ideas that are transmitted and renewed in the course of practices like Biodanza? First and foremost, they provide participants with memorable experiences of deliberate self-(re)construction, mediated in this case by bodily movement, emotional expression, music, and close physical interaction with others. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, engagement in such a process has been heralded as one of the hallmark precepts of contemporary Western individualism. From this standpoint, fellow dancers, like the music played, the exercises proposed, and the facilitator’s presence, can be appreciated as resources participants make use of in pursuit of this goal. Indeed, the aim of Biodanza is not to encourage dancers to develop interpersonal ties among themselves, but to allow them to demonstrate and experience, through each other’s intermediary, their promising aptitude for cultivating such ties with others. In short, it is their *potential* for “spontaneity”, “creativity”, and “authentic relationship” that participants are given to experience during dances of self-discovery, and that they are expected to put into effect beyond the confines of the sessions themselves.

It would be abusive, however, to see Biodanza as oriented solely towards participants’ ongoing production of their individual “selves”. There is an undeniable feeling of communal engagement and partnership that develops among dancers. This is made explicit during circle talks, when participants repeat how pleased they are to “be here” or speak of participants as “a family” or say how much they feel “at home” with the group. It is also openly expressed during solemn thank-yous and in the joyful displays characteristic of final circle dances. However, unlike families or homes, this feeling of like-minded community is pointedly not founded on networks of close interpersonal ties with their halting complications of ongoing accountability and negotiation. Instead, it derives from something more ephemeral and less constraining: mutual acknowledgement of the enabling capacities participants willingly assume towards each other, and the feelings of personal fulfillment this generalized reciprocity occasions. In this way, Biodanza, like other dances of self-discovery, also provides participants with emblematic experiences of a particular social model in which their mediated self-actualization can be assumed to prosper, namely that of a collectivity composed of independent, self-directed individuals. Such a sociality in which personal sovereignty is paramount is unheard of and even un hoped for in many cultural traditions. However, it is a

collective state of being to which many contemporary Westerners might readily aspire: that of becoming autonomous together.

Intimations of a perfect society?

In many respects, the model of “the social” that Biodanza participants are given to experience dovetails with influential accounts of what contemporary Western society is supposed to be. In psychological terms, dances of self-discovery provide a collective, self-conscious iteration of what pediatrician and psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott (1958) deemed the necessary conditions for the “ego-relatedness” underlying the development of a “true self”, namely, the experience of being alone in the presence of someone. He suggests that it is only in an interpersonal environment allowing for such a degree of individual autonomy, prototypically provided by a “good enough” (as opposed to an overbearing or absent) mother, that the growing child will not become alienated to a “false self” determined by the expectations of others. Under the guidance of a good enough facilitator, and acting by turns as developing persons and as good enough caregivers towards one another, Biodanza participants afford each other just such a non alienating interpersonal environment. As one facilitator put it, by inviting participants to interact with others in such a way as to “recover their childhood proclivities for spontaneity, affectivity, expressiveness, and dance that the process of socialisation and the expectations of society have repressed”, Biodanza allows individuals to “be themselves, to find their identity”, to mindfully experience, as adults, whom their “true self” might be.

A more sociologically informed perspective might see the distinctive sociality of dances of self-discovery as a mode of integration founded on what M. Granovetter (1973) called “the strength of weak ties”. Those with whom one has strong ties (close friends), he argues, are more likely to be socially involved with one another than those with whom one has weak ties (acquaintances). As a result, strong ties cluster into densely knit “cliques” of socially homogeneous individuals who, because of their mutual trust, are highly motivated to help each other, but who remain isolated from other parts of the larger social field; strong ties favour fragmentation into many small, independent, cohesive groups. By contrast, weak ties form “bridges” between such groups, providing access to information and resources lying beyond what is immediately available to their members; by linking socially heterogeneous individuals between whom trust is more tenuous, but also less costly, weak ties connect disparate social sectors into a loosely integrated whole. While most weak tie research has focussed on the circulation of information between groups, some work has shown that weak ties can also play an important role in group organization. For example, J. Blau (1980, 1991) attributed the exceptionally high morale (and low turnover) of staff of the psychiatric hospital she studied to the surprisingly predominance of weak ties among them. Membership in any given department, committee or clinical team overlapped extensively with many others, interaction being so evenly distributed that cliques were absent and everyone knew each other on a first-name basis. Dances of self-discovery can be appreciated as an extreme case of such a pattern in which the bridging function of weak ties has become the sole basis of group structure. In this light, it is significant that Biodanza participants involved in real-life partnerships studiously avoid any display of their everyday intimacy. Analogously, in the hospital studied by Blau, “neither homogeneous work groups nor strong friendship relations could be identified”, and “[t]he institution’s intolerance of close dyadic ties is expressed by the ritualized avoidance patterns among those who have a sexual or family alliance outside the institution”. This led her to suggest that “in a complex structure [...] extensive weak networks can remain viable only when close ties are prohibited” (1980: 21, cited in Granovetter 1983: 222). Finally, recalling Biodanza’s emphasis on interactions with a

multiplicity of partners as a source of self-knowledge, it is worth noting Gravovetter's observation, for which he convokes classical authors like E. Durkheim and G. Simmel, to the effect that weak ties, whose inherent heterogeneity acts to promote the construction of a person's ongoing identity in the face of a variable interactive expectations, "are actually vital for an individual's integration into modern society" (1983: 203).⁵

Looking to the field of political science, it is tempting to see Biodanza and other dances of self-discovery as an enactment of "collective individualism". This oxymoron-like expression, while difficult to pin down, is often used to evoke a fruitful compromise between individualistic and collectivist paradigms in connection with claims of cultural communality.⁶ Recalling philosopher R.B. Perry's suggestion that "[American] individualism is a *collective* individualism – not the isolation of one human being, but the intercourse and cooperation of many" (1949:9), historian Y. Arieli, for example, maintains that "[s]ince Jefferson and Paine, this 'collective individualism' has signified for the American people the essence of their social system, of their national identification" (1964: 176). Similarly, in her analysis of South Indian cultural nationalism, Barnett uses "collective individualism" to distinguish a Western "abstract individualism" from a more holistically derived form in which "each self [...] represents and embodies a particular cultural tradition bounded by the collectivity of similar selves (1976: 163). In still another context, E. Poljarevic has qualified the pursuit of authenticity by young Egyptian Salafis as "a form of collective individualism" (2012: 139) in which commitment to the idea of community (*umma*) and an intense focus on individual morality go hand in hand.

The political dimensions of Biodanza, while not entirely absent, are played down, and participants' shared white middle class identity remains largely unsaid. Hence, the collective individualism it brings to mind resonates above all with the growing usage of this expression as a largely undefined yet positively connoted label for socially sensitive free-spiritedness. It has been used in this way in connection with activities as ideologically divergent as counter-hegemonic activism – e.g. Soon (2010) on political bloggers in Singapore,⁷ Dobernig and Stagl (2015) on urban food cultivation in New York City – and the "me-to-we' mentality shift amongst Chinese adolescents" reported by the Pepsi Cola company to justify their new nationwide "Voice of Next Generation" campaign (*China Daily* 2 April 2009). The trendy, conspicuously Western fields of fashion and design provide additional if somewhat caricatural expressions of the vital connection between individual initiative and collective feeling, as attested, for example, by the Butter Boyz modelling crew's self-affirmation that they "don't follow rules like wearing pink on Wednesdays – they celebrate their collective individualism instead".⁸

The wide-ranging correspondences and affinities briefly indicated above suggest that the social ideas and values that Biodanza and other dances of self-discovery put into effect are precisely those that underlie much contemporary Euro-American thinking about society. The imperative of personal autonomy in the face of possible alienation by others, the usefulness and integrative potential of (weak) ties with consequential strangers, the ongoing tension between personal fulfillment and collective sentiment, are all essential aspects of what Elias (1991) has called a "society of individuals". From this point of view, one of the advantages of convoking "collective individualism" in connection with these dances is to emphasize the degree to which both of the notions this expression brings together are to be approached not as natural givens, but as cultural productions, upheld among other things by ritualized undertakings such as dances of self-discovery. Indeed, by enacting a happy reconciliation between individual precedence ("an encounter with oneself...") and collective interdependency ("...through others"), these practices consecrate these qualities as dichotomous poles whose interplay is presumed to be constitutive of any social life worth living.

Biodanza, 5 Rhythms, Movement Medicine and the like can thus be seen as the ritualized vehicles of the cardinal cultural values of self-actualization, on the one hand, and of a sodality of distanced intimacy that honors it, on the other. As in the case of rituals generally, these ideas and values are given new life and handed on not in the form of unequivocal understandings, but in the form of memorable, partially unresolved experiences upon which disparate yet somewhat overlapping personal meanings are inevitably imposed. Thus, while it is sensible to assume that those who participate in these dances take these cultural expectations away with them, they do so, and translate them into action, in a largely idiosyncratic fashion, in keeping with their individual dispositions and the particular circumstances of their respective lives.

Although dances of self-discovery are statistically limited, they are in no way marginal. They do not pertain to a fringe element of the population (whose specific “needs” they are supposed to meet), but are part of the multifarious set of culturally characteristic, collective practices regularly pursued by contemporary Westerners of almost all walks of life to “understand” or “rediscover” whom they “really are”. Thus, many features of these dance sessions resonate with other popular practices of mediated self-(re)construction as found in New Age movements, Contemporary Paganism, and Personal Development ventures, but also in more mainstream activities such as psychotherapy, various well-being techniques, coaching, advertising, reality TV, stardom, the reading of self-help books, etc. In this light, it is not unreasonable to see Biodanza and other such initiatives as providing a readily observable and therefore privileged access to the workings of non-institutionalized, grass roots practices whereby the axiomatic precepts of contemporary Western society, together with their attendant ambiguities, are being continually reshaped and passed on.

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¹ The first quotes are from the official Biodanza website (<http://www.biodanza.org>); the last is one version of an idea often expressed on Biodanza websites and by Biodanza practitioners. Biodanza is well-established in South America and Southern Europe; less so in Northern Europe, USA and elsewhere. Official teacher training schools (143 in all, eleven in France) grant diplomas recognized by the world-wide International Biocentric Foundation founded in 2003. There are at present close to 100 active Biodanza teachers in France. Spinoffs of Biodanza include Vital Development or Vitaldanza in the United Kingdom, Dansevida in Germany, Heart in Motion in Norway, and Sistema Javier de la Sen and Otra Mirada in Spain.

² For the social composition and patterns of participation of dance sessions, see Houseman and Mazzella di Bosco 2020.

³ I regularly attended weekly Biodanza sessions run by two different facilitators in Paris, one from 11 September 2014 to 2 July 2015, the other from 15 September 2014 to 13 July 2015 and from 31 August 2015 to 9 May 2016; I also participated in occasional sessions run by other facilitators, and in a weekend training workshop. The names of participants have been changed, and all translations from French are mine. I would like to thank the facilitators and participants for their warm and tolerant welcome, as well as Daphna Arbell Kehila, Cath Elderton, Delphine Le Roux, Marika Moisseeff, Sarah Pike, Bambi Schieffelin and Peter Wortsman who kindly commented on previous drafts.

⁴ Musical selections, while not limited to those of the official repertoire, tend to be “organic” compositions whose internal coherence is particularly self-evident (Dixieland marches, Latin rhythms and mid-1960 Beatles songs are especially favored).

⁵ For the pervasiveness of weak ties in contemporary society, see Blau and Fingerma 2009. The Internet provides further evidence to this effect; as Fine has remarked, “Chat rooms, discussion boards, networking sites, and email lists enshrine the weak tie as the essential connection of the digital age” (2012: 149).

⁶ Although not always. Tocqueville, for example, writing in 1886, uses this expression to describe the “frozen [social] body” (1967: 153) of pre-revolutionary France composed of a multitude of small cohesive interest groups of homogenous persons thinking and acting only for themselves (*ibid.*, 176). More recently, but just as negatively, the CEO of a Danish cooperative bank has castigated a large “sharing economy” platform like Airbnb or Uber as being “more like a collective individualism. It organizes a lot of people, but everyone is acting on their own, for themselves” (<http://www.we-economy.net/case-stories/merkur-bank.html>, accessed 20 April 2017).

⁷ In a later, published paper (Soon and Kluver 2014) she uses the expression “individualized collectiveness”.

⁸ <https://superbalist.com/thewayofus/2016/12/30/butter-boyz/1065>, accessed 15 April 2017.