

MILLS, DANA 2021. *Dance & Activism. A Century of Radical Dance Across the World*. London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 197 p. ISBN 978-1-350-13701-1 (hardback)

Dance & Activism. A Century of Radical Dance Across the World introduces to the reader the fascinating, and very physical, world of dance, placing its focus clearly on ‘the dancing body, not the writing hand’ (2021: 20). The book wants to place the dancers-activists on center stage and let them speak out. Mills skillfully shows how dance has expressed reactions to war, misery, loneliness, inequalities, politics, racism, migration, social injustice, oppression, and the legacy of slavery in diverse contexts over the last century.

Mills considers the phenomenon of activism in dance through the concepts of solidarity and alienation, which in reciprocal tension to each other either connect and converge people, or divide and take them further apart from each other. I found it very refreshing that the author uses Eleanor Marx’s works as one theoretical point of view and discusses structural oppression in detail. Indeed, as Mills (2021:12) crystallizes, ‘Lives that do not intersect, phenomenological experiences that do not meet in the everyday, are the deepest evil those fighting for progressive politics must encounter. This is also the hardest challenge as there is a lack of lived knowledge of another’s oppression and conditions that bring about alienation in the twenty-first century’.

The book is divided into seven chapters. After the introduction, Mills introduces in chapter two three important personalities that, each in their own way, launched dance as activism in North America from the 1920s: Martha

Graham, Anna Sokolow, and Pearl Primus. The third chapter concentrates on ballet in different parts of the world and investigates the question, can something as classical as ballet be radical? The fourth chapter is about an Iraqi dancer, who emigrates and discovers new dimensions in his dance. In the fifth chapter Mills looks at dance as part of political movements, such as demonstrations and marching, and the sixth is dedicated to questions of migration, belonging, and telling one’s own story through dance. In the concluding chapter the author ponders more the legacy of dance and the messages that it can transmit directly between the dancers, to the audiences, but also beyond timely limits. As ‘[p]resent, past, and future meld together, open up new possibilities, new horizons’ (2021: 166).

I was a bit missing a more contextualizing historical background when it comes to dance as a natural means of self-expression and expression of resistance. However, Mills clearly states in the beginning that her aim is to investigate the century previous to contemporary times. Through the prism of case studies, the author takes the reader to, for instance, the Middle East, South Africa, France, the UK, and the US. It most certainly is very important to bring in a lot of concrete material as ‘radical dance starts from a lived experience and in part always transcends theory’ (2021: 106). I found that the descriptions of dance works were very detailed and conducted with care, which reveals the author’s own perspective as a dancer to the case studies. This certainly

helps people who do not dance themselves and have not seen the works to understand more nuances and the many layers in these pieces of art. Mills uses a considerable amount of interview quotes in some chapters of the book. As valuable and rich as the field work is, in some occasions I wished to see a more analytical and theoretical approach to the interviews and other material gathered.

The concrete examples of dance as activism in diverse countries were very enjoyable to read, but I remained wondering if the book was still concentrating too much on modern dance and ballet, as the world of dance is so rich in variety of styles and traditions. Probably the choices of the case studies have been directed by the possibilities of traveling, opportunities to gather data, and linguistic access to the field. I would, however, wish to see that the topic be elaborated more in other contexts besides the North American one. I fully understand that the amount of work is immense, as people dance everywhere and have always done so, and that

this book, as Mills states is the beginning, is the first one in this particular field of study.

All in all, I found that the book offers an important opening and a fascinating perspective to the world of dance and the messages it is capable of transmitting. Like Mills (2021: 63) herself crystallizes it: 'Dance as activism, as elucidating responsibility and the power of dissent in response to horrific constraining frameworks, is anything but a metaphysical move. Dance as activism is the sole dancer gathering her audience's consciousness to resist the evils of her time but also those that follow.' Constantly changing, its expression attached to the timely context and the space used, personal and individual, dance has the capacity to move people and connect them even over temporal limitations. I wish to see soon more research accounts that explore this beautiful and bodily field full of spellbinding stories to be told.

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