

Henry Spiller. *Erotic Triangles: Sundanese Dance and Masculinity in West Java*. London and Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010. 268 pp.

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Readers with interests in issues of gender, power, and performance are in for an intellectual treat with Henry Spiller's book *Erotic Triangles: Sundanese Dance and Masculinity in West Java*. Spiller argues that men's dancing in West Java exists in a variety of forms because it satisfies the cultural need of participants—professionals and amateurs, musicians and dancers, males and females, performers and viewers—to explore and reconcile the contradictions of Sundanese gender ideologies (p. 1). To develop and support this argument, Spiller synthesizes ethnographic fieldwork conducted in West Java over the course of multiple decades, archival research in the Netherlands, Indonesian writing, and Western scholarship. He fuses methodological and theoretical approaches from his home discipline of ethnomusicology with those drawn from a variety of other fields, including anthropology, gender studies, and, strikingly, geometry. In so doing, he contributes fresh insights into West Javanese arts and pushes the analysis of culture in new directions.

In the first chapter, "Discourses of Sundanese Dance," Spiller establishes that while particular dance forms, including *ketuk tilu*, *tayuban*, *bajidoran*, *jaipongan*, *tari kursus*, and *dangdut*, differ in many respects on the surface—such as instruments in the accompanying musical ensemble, dance movements used, and styles of dress—they share an underlying structure. This structure, which Spiller refers to as the erotic triangle of Sundanese dance, comprises three gendered "clusters of Sundanese dance practice": female singer-dancers called *ronggeng*, a common Sundanese term for such performers; drumming, which is gendered male because drummers are almost inevitably men; and males who dance in ways they describe as free (p. 38). In focusing on the erotic triangle as a structure in which two males negotiate their power and senses of masculinity in relation to a female, Spiller builds from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's ideas about erotic triangles, developed in her analysis of European literature,¹ and also from Nancy Cooper's² analysis of triangular relationships in central Java that involve a female singer and two males (p. 40).

In developing the concept of the erotic triangle as a structure of Sundanese dance, Spiller demonstrates that each side represents contradictions of Sundanese gender ideologies. Chapter two, "Drumming and Power," centers on the drumming side as well as the relationship between drumming and men's dancing. Through analysis of connections between drumming patterns and dance movements, interactions between drummers and dancers, and concepts of power in Java as developed by Benedict Anderson³ and others, Spiller shows that who is leading and who is following—the male drummer or a male dancer—is not always clear. This ambiguity, Spiller posits,

¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1985).

² Nancy I. Cooper, "Singing and Silences: Transformations of Power through Javanese Seduction Scenarios," *American Ethnologist* 27,3 (2000): 609–44.

³ Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture," in *Culture and Politics in Indonesia*, ed. Claire Holt (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 1–69.

allows drummers and dancers to negotiate their power as well as the contradictory social and ideological expectations that men should be free and lead but also conform and follow. This chapter involves more detailed musical analysis and transcriptions in musical notation than do the other chapters. While such detail is targeted more towards specialists of music, Spiller has clearly presented his main points in the prose, offering specialists and non-specialists alike a productive analysis of music's cultural implications.

The third chapter, "*Ronggeng* and Desire," examines the role of the female singer-dancer historically and in current times, illustrating that the *ronggeng* evokes and embodies contradictory images—a sacred, benevolent, and fertile rice goddess, on the one hand, and a profane, greedy, selfish sex worker, on the other (pp. 76–103). In his treatment of the *ronggeng* side of the erotic triangle, which includes analysis of the contradictions in Sundanese ideologies of femininity, Spiller is careful also to recognize women's subjectivity and agency. He notes that women who choose this profession do so for a variety of reasons—artistic and economic, to name a few—and use performance as a means of empowerment (pp. 100–3). In the course of this chapter and in the chapter that follows, Spiller demonstrates that, although individual women actively negotiate contradictory senses of femininity through their activities as *ronggeng*, the *ronggeng* image is part of what inspires men to dance and thereby negotiate their masculinity.

In chapter four, "Dance Events and Freedom," Spiller focuses on male dancers and dancing as the third side of the triangle. These male dancers are usually amateurs who are initially members of the audience. Inspired by the *ronggeng* and the drumming, they enter the performance space and dance. By dancing with the *ronggeng* in a way that the male dancers perceive as free—and in negotiating this "freedom" with the male drummer—male amateur dancers negotiate contradictory expectations for men to be simultaneously independent, powerful, responsible, and modest "in a social world that demands conformity" (p. 104). In other words, men can challenge social norms that demand modesty and conformity by dancing publicly, and, in some cases, by dancing in ways that are sexually suggestive. As men perform their independence and power in these ways, they navigate the contradictions of Sundanese masculinities. Spiller thus importantly develops one of the book's key themes: that the heterosexual senses of masculinity so often assumed to be normative and unmarked are, in actuality, unstable, complex, contradictory, and actively negotiated through performance.

Spiller deepens his analysis of the erotic triangle as a theoretical structure in the final two chapters. In chapter five, "The Erotic Triangle of Sundanese Dance," he shows that, while the erotic triangle has persisted as an underlying structure of Sundanese dance events, it has also been a flexible framework in which participants have both reinforced and contested ideologies of gender and power (p. 143). In the next chapter, "Triangulating Sundanese Dance," he emphasizes that, although the erotic triangle is a theoretical construct, and Sundanese do not necessarily view dance events in terms of an erotic triangle, it provides a useful framework through which to analyze cultural responses to change and innovation (pp. 207–9). Drawing from Euclidean geometry, he demonstrates that innovations resulting in "noncongruent" dances—those that depart too far from the erotic triangle or deform it beyond recognition—tend

to be evaluated negatively, while innovations resulting in “congruent” dances—those that maintain the structure of the erotic triangle—tend to be evaluated positively (p. 209). In offering this distinctive treatment of innovation and change, Spiller invites readers to rethink the possibilities and limits of structuralism, as well as to consider the tools that geometry can provide to the analysis of culture.

In many ways, this review only scratches at the surface of what *Erotic Triangles* has to offer readers who are interested in gender, power, performance, or Sundanese arts and culture. The theoretical sophistication of the book makes it particularly appropriate for a graduate-level seminar on gender or performance, but it would also provide a good challenge for advanced undergraduates. The book is rich in theory, and Spiller convincingly grounds his analyses in the lived experiences of his interlocutors, writing very clearly in a delightful, engaging style. Some readers (myself included) may find that they will need to read the book slowly and carefully in order to appreciate the nuances and complexity of Spiller’s points. Luxuriating in this book is well worth it, and I, for one, very much look forward to using it in my own research and teaching.