Response to Linn Tonstad's "Anthropology in a Different Key"
Unresolved Social Antagonisms on the Dance Floor

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I want to thank Linn for gifting the Society of Adventist Philosophers with a provocative paper that shows appreciation for the best of Adventism and calls our attention to its limits. When I accepted the invitation to be the respondent to Linn's lecture, I did so with fear and trembling. I am not an expert in systematic theology, queer theory, or Adventism. Instead, I am a theological ethicist. Still, I have long admired Linn's work and hope my response will serve as an adequate conversation starter. In the first part of my response, I highlight what I consider Linn's contributions to Adventist theology. In the second half, I raise some questions and concerns about Linn's theological proposal.

In her two books, *God and Difference* and *Queer Theology,* I find a creative and prophetic voice that skillfully engages the tools of queer theory and the Christian tradition to craft a unique theological vision. Linn's theological imagination is a refreshing departure from the logic of sacrifice and hierarchical submission that marks so much of Western theology and practice. Her dancing anthropology paints a picture of human relations characterized by horizontal relations of mutual adjustment and intensification.

I was immediately intrigued when I heard that Linn would make the body the starting point of her lecture on anthropology. The body is indeed making a comeback in theology, philosophy, and the social and behavioral sciences. The emphasis on the body is a much-needed corrective to the influence of Greek and modern philosophical traditions that celebrate the spirit and the intellect at the expense of the body and matter. One might say that Adventist

thought and practice are prophetic in their insistence on the unity or even identity of the body and the spirit.

However, I hesitate to go that far as the body affirmed by many practicing Adventists are, in fact, abstractions. I worry that too many in the Adventist community continue to imagine a body without history, oppression, trauma, social antagonisms, or ethical entanglements. Thus, saying that the body is a starting point is not to have said much. As Linn's lecture makes clear, the body is itself a contested territory. The contests are increasingly violent and traumatic in our society as Christian nationalists mobilize to marginalize lesbian, gay, queer, and transgender bodies. However, the antagonistic struggle is not merely between conservative Christians and the queer community. Citing Gayle Rubin, Linn alludes to the complicated and contentious relationship between the lesbian and transgender communities. The maps we draw have material consequences for others, and given the instability of all conceptual maps and narratives, no one is capable of living free of violence. Therefore, Linn is suspicious of our "best attempts to be good."

Linn's lecture brings these contested sites and antagonisms to the fore. It forces philosophers and theologians in the Adventist community to confront the issues we would often prefer to leave unaddressed, such as the reification of sex, gender, and sexuality. The widespread acceptance of rigid roles, norms, and expectations surrounding gender and sexuality betrays an underlying discomfort with the unruly and complicated dimensions of bodily life and a lingering attraction to the Greek and modern mode of thinking that seeks to master reality through rigid maps and social discipline. Thus, Linn asserts that Adventism promised but failed to deliver on the love of the body. I take this to mean that an essentialist

anthropology, such as that of traditional Adventism, cannot capture bodily life's messy, fluid, and mysterious dimensions. Thus, it cannot fully embrace or celebrate the body as it is.

Given these shortcomings in Adventist theology, Linn appropriately ends with a "dancing anthropology"—what could be more scandalous than dancing? Consistent with her book *God and Difference*, Linn's anthropology breaks with the traditional theological focus on the essence of human nature and instead characterizes human beings as fundamentally relational and in motion. If human nature is characterized by movement, it is never settled or stable. Instead, human nature is what we continue to discover as we adjust to each other in joint rhythmic coordination and collaboration.

However, there are several ambiguities in the lecture that I believe deserve further consideration. First, the apocalypticism of some of Linn's earlier works seems to have dropped out of view in this lecture. I mention apocalypticism because I believe it could clarify some of the background assumptions of Linn's dancing anthropology. In the last section on choreomania, Linn devotes some length to addressing the fear of dancing as disorderly, unregulatable, and disruptive. One might ask why Linn highlights the transgressive and creative dimensions of dance, as she also acknowledges that there are ordered and more regulated forms of dance. This emphasis makes sense, given the background of Linn's apocalyptic theology. In apocalyptic theologies, God works more through discontinuities than continuities.

She writes in *God and Difference*, "… God's action on and for humankind gives humankind a destiny beyond what is given in creation—an unnatural end" (289). Linn's God judges the world from beyond space and time. The world, including our current conception of what is natural and good, is passing away or should give way to the new. The interruption of

what is characterizes the coming of God. This apocalypticism is perhaps another way Linn's theology still resonates with Adventism and helps to illuminate her "suspicion of human attempts to be good." If what we currently take to be moral and decent is full of ambiguity and potentially violent, then even our best efforts at being good must be subjected to divine judgment.

As a theological ethicist, though, I wonder if Linn thinks my field is inherently ideological in its attempt to discern and define justice, however provisionally. If human beings have no access to the good, how might we make everyday judgments of right and wrong or distinguish justice from injustice? How might we know whether we have learned "to do antagonism better" to borrow Linn's phrase? I am sympathetic to the apocalypticism and the critical thrust of Linn's dancing anthropology. However, it seems that we won't be able to tell whether we are dancing well with others without some normative criteria. In other words, what is the source of moral knowledge and wisdom? Is there an invisible dance governing spontaneous dances that guarantees the emergence of enriching relationships rather than reproducing oppression? However, if one were to interrogate the norms governing dancing, one must somehow treat dance as a rule-governed activity like a language or another social practice. A second ambiguity I find in the lecture is, thus, the relationship between the body and language.

Linn states that dance precedes and grounds language. Since dance precedes language, perhaps it must also precede norms and rules. Nevertheless, Linn recounts learning to read body language as a raver and acknowledges the risk of interpretive failure. If dance is prelinguistic, what might it mean to misread the body? It seems, then, that dancing may be a rule-governed practice, after all, with the same risks and ambiguities that plague other social

practices. If dance is rule-governed, we can ask critical questions about the norms, culture, and assumptions that organize it. These questions lead me to the third ambiguity, the connection between dancing anthropology and social antagonisms.

In Linn's account of butch-femme relationships, she teases out the class and racial dimensions of gender construction. Against the middle-class characterization of butch-femme as reproducing heterosexuality, Linn shows how working-class and black lesbian culture transcends the gender binary of male and female. Race and class are intertwined with gender and sexuality. Living in the aftermath of a neoliberal economic system and culture that exploits the bodies of laborers, especially black and brown bodies, how might dancing escape such antagonisms? Are there divides in our society not bridgeable by dancing? What if the music selection represents the culture of a particular class, race, and ethnicity? Would not some feel alienated and marginalized? What if some feel self-conscious and thus won't have the courage to dance without an invitation? What if some have a physical disability that prevents them from moving and adjusting as efficiently as others? I worry that without critical examination, dancing anthropology may risk remaining as abstract as the Adventist anthropology of which Linn is rightly critical.

Linn acknowledges that the body is a simultaneously natural and cultural artifact. If so, the body—and by extension, dace—is necessarily shaped by a social habitat already permeated by class and race and a history of oppression. This history would have various impacts on different bodies. These concerns, which were prominent in the first half of the lecture, seem to be marginalized towards the end. Of course, I do not think dancing is meant to be a panacea in Linn's anthropology. However, I think it is worth asking whether the same critical suspicion Linn

has for the rhetoric of virtue and goodness also applies to the dance floor. We might not be able to construct a blueprint for utopia or finally resolve these social conflicts, but does that mean we should not fight for better institutional arrangements that might bring more equity? Doing so requires activists, leaders, and politicians to draw provisional maps, legislate new laws, and enact new policies knowing that new injustices will emerge. In other words, regulation and discipline are not always negative things to be discarded but the conditions of social justice. Perhaps, as much energy should go into drawing maps as deconstructing them.

At the end of the lecture, I am left wondering about the practices accompanying Linn's dancing anthropology. I am curious about what this anthropology looks like in practice. Is it simply that churches should incorporate more dancing it their worship programs (some churches already do)? I wonder if more Adventists start to dance more on Sabbath, it will move the community towards greater justice and solidarity. Indeed, some will find it scandalous or threatening. Others might appreciate the change. However, since dance, like other social practices, is embedded within an ideological and historical context, I am not confident that dancing can finally make up for the failures of denaturalization and anti-essentialism in dethroning reigning ideologies of gender, sexuality, race, and neoliberal capitalism. I believe dancing will teach us new ways to be with and for each other in a way that other practices do not. Still, I am unsure if dancing would render marginalized bodies more visible in practice.

In sum, Linn is correct in lamenting the failures of denaturalization and anti-essentialism as adequate tools of social justice. Making the body the point of departure for philosophical anthropology is also the right move. However, I hesitate to fully embrace Linn's dancing anthropology because I am uncertain how social antagonisms can be successfully negotiated on

the dance floor. More importantly, I worry that the non-verbal sociality dancing provides may, on its own, cover up social antagonisms that require critical examination and Socratic questioning.