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Reforming dance pedagogy: A feminist perspective on the art of performance and dance education

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Reforming Dance Pedagogy: A Feminist Perspective on the Art of Performance and
Dance Education

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedication

To my parents, who always encouraged me to follow my heart

To my dad, who now has an honorary master's in Women's Studies

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This thesis could not have been completed without the assistance of my committee members—Marilyn, Sara and Michael—who offered me both suggestions to make my paper more cohesive and gave me moral support when I became frustrated.

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ABSTRACT

Dancers, in their formal training, are deprived of many basic human experiences and are often not exposed to critical thinking. Expectations about what it means to dance and/or be a dancer shape the classroom environment, performances and both the body and mind of individuals engaged in this particular art form. A professional dancer is expected to plan her day around the dance classroom and this mentality is shared by aspiring professionals as well as dance educators. This structure, in tandem with the expectations for a female dancer to maintain a certain body type- almost always a thin flexible body, toned long limbs, and light smooth skin for ballet performers- is limiting and in fact raises questions about a dancer's agency in the educational and performing processes. This project has originated out of my own experiences in the dance community and my frustration with those classroom structures. Throughout the paper I will concentrate on college level dance training with emphasis on women as dancers and the construction of ballet classrooms, which, like patriarchy, has created the paradigm against which most dance classes and performances are judged.

Chapter One

Introduction

This dance studio is a familiar and reassuring place with gray floors and tea-colored wood barres, but today I hope it disappears. With any luck, the entire building will get sucked into the sandy Florida dirt, never to be seen again. I've skipped at least three classes this semester and walked out during the last fifteen minutes of class probably half a dozen times. I know today will not be any easier. I can't help but think that it does not matter how well or how poorly I will do during the lesson today, the students are just going through the motions and none of the teachers are really interested in helping us become better performers. It seems that they have already determined which students will succeed and which will perish, and I am enraged that I have been cast aside. I know that to even be here taking this class I am privileged but I begin to wonder how many other creative performers will not get an opportunity like the one I had because they do not have the money for necessary materials or classes or because there are no art programs in their area. How is it that some people are allowed and encouraged to make art, while others are not? I sit under the barre wrapping the ribbons from my pointe shoes around my ankles and get completely lost in thought. "Why does this feel so wrong? Why can't we all perform in the fall concert? If we all have certain things that we do better than others, why aren't we valued for the unique movements that our bodies and personalities create? Why is this so hard?" I want to cry. My pointe shoes feel tight like my chest and I know that I will not be coming back next semester.

Dance, for me, was always my favorite activity growing up. The studio was a place where I could use up all my energy and perform femininity¹ in a way I typically did not throughout the remainder of the week as I played football and roughoused with the other neighborhood children. I enjoyed ballet particularly because it was challenging and evocative. At the college level somehow dance became less about performing and more about learning technique. I loved technique but wanted to be more expressive. After a year and a half in two different college dance programs I took a Women's Studies class and one year later I officially changed my major. Women's Studies gave me a background in women's history and feminist theory while illustrating the significance of participating in social activism. I felt as if all of the feminist classes I took as an undergraduate and now as a graduate student pertained in some way to dance.

I wanted to bring my two areas of interest together, so for this paper I decided to write a feminist critique of dance pedagogy. As I was writing several themes emerged in support of my claim that feminist pedagogy can transform dance. I realized that ballet had been situated as the paradigm for dance in higher education and began to explore how this feature of college level dance programs impacts the students. I knew that I was affected by this standard as a student. In fact, I was initially surprised by how much emphasis was given to ballet technique because I always thought of colleges as very open-minded places where rules and traditions were challenged. Ballet seems at odds with those notions, since the discipline does not explicitly attempt to question the established canon. I believed that my experience as a dance major, which consisted

¹ I use the phrase "perform femininity" to highlight the idea that gender is a performance and to juxtapose the "feminine" presentation I enacted during dance class with the usual "masculine" behaviors I exhibited in other arenas particularly when I was younger.

largely of learning traditional ballet technique and dance history as opposed to a focus on modern dance was an uncommon series of events-maybe even just good luck. At that time I strongly disliked the modern technique, which appeared to be ever-present and felt that ballet rightfully deserved to be the model for other forms of dance since, in my mind, it demanded more of dancers physically and mentally. I do not support those ideas at this point, indeed, I argue that adopting ideals put forth in modern dance in combination with a background in feminist theory and pedagogy would actually be advantageous to choreographers, dancers, teachers and researchers alike. For the purposes of this paper, I had to explore the ways in which the ballet paradigm pervades dance education, which forced me to adopt a more impartial view so I could consider the differences and similarities between ballet and modern techniques.

As part of my thesis, I chose to observe a modern dance class that met three times a week. My six-week observation helped ground my research in real world experiences and assisted me in the exploration of my themes. While observing dance classes and researching dance history, it became obvious that the structure of most class sessions and the authoritarian interactions between teachers and students stems from the widely held practice of learning through a “banking model” of education (Freire, hooks “Teaching to Transgress”). I would argue that traditional ballet education relies more heavily on this approach than modern dance, making its’ position of power within the academic community more stable, however, this distinction is blurred by being situated in higher education where all forms of dance taught are subject to current trends in instruction. This realization encouraged me to see parallels in the ways both Women’s Studies and Dance are treated within academia and search for ways that a more liberatory pedagogy

could challenge dancers to think about their craft differently. While Women's Studies may be more readily identifiable as an academic field than Dance, both have been accused of not being sufficiently rigorous, leading scholars to question whether or not these areas of interest belong in the academy at all. Both subjects examine the body and emotions in depth, topics that are regarded as feminine and typically ignored in other academic studies, which may explain why many people reject Women's Studies and Dance.

To show the need for the integration of feminist pedagogy in dance classes, I demonstrate how the social construction of gendered bodies is established through dance classes and via the dance narratives conveyed on stage. The investigation of this matter shows how traditional pedagogy is limiting and highlights the need for change, which is my final theme. I suggest that the incorporation of classes that utilize more critical thinking skills while changing the classroom dynamics so that all students have a voice in a non-competitive environment will open up the possibility of creating transgressive performances. Students will have a better understanding of themselves as performers but also a more complete awareness of the kinds of interactions that shape our everyday experiences. Whether these are pleasant revelations, such as finding out someone else has had a similar encounter, or an unpleasant surprise like realizing that people are not given the same opportunities to succeed in life, dancers, choreographers and teachers will have a larger range of expressions, stories, body types, and genders to work with, which ultimately makes dance more relevant to the community it serves.

Chapter Two

Dance: An Overview

Thinking about an Education in Dance

Dancers, in their formal training, are deprived of many basic human experiences and are often not exposed to critical thinking. Expectations about what it means to dance and/or be a dancer shape the classroom environment, performances and both the body and mind of individuals engaged in this particular art form. A professional dancer is expected to plan her day around the dance classroom. Aspiring professionals and dance educators share this rigid work ethic. This structure, in tandem with the expectations for a female dancer to maintain a certain body type- almost always a thin flexible body, toned long limbs, and smooth light-colored skin for ballet performers- is limiting and in fact raises questions about a female dancer's agency² in the educational and performing processes. If dancers must always meet criteria that are largely out of an individual's control, such as leg and arm length or even skin color, how can dancers ever have agency in this field?

For three years, as an undergraduate, I struggled to assert those statements as I grappled with why dance classes were so unsatisfactory. It took me another two and a half years and the beginnings of a graduate degree before many of the problems coalesced in my mind. This project has originated out of my own experiences in the

² Throughout this paper I intend to focus on the experiences of female dancers, however, when appropriate I will also address the ways male dancers are impacted by the dance discipline.

dance community and my frustration with the classroom structure. That background has led me to concentrate on college level dance training with emphasis on women as dancers. Throughout the paper I will focus on the construction of the ballet classroom, which, like other sexist institutions, has created the paradigm against which most dance classes and performances are judged.

I would have imagined that universities were the places that actively challenged the banking model of education, advocating instead for methods that encouraged students to develop critical thinking. For that reason it seemed a logical extension that the curriculum in any dance department would be based on that same goal of rigorous intellectual development in addition to learning the foundations of dance technique and performance. I do not want to imply that working towards a degree in the field of dance is a non-demanding task but I do question basic assumptions about what it means to be a dancer and the theoretical underpinnings of the pedagogical styles that are traditionally employed in the dance classroom.

Ultimately I theorize the dance classroom, examining the ways that traditional dance pedagogy emphasizes gendered binaries and authoritarianism in the studio, stripping dancers of their agency while creating a docile dancing body. I believe as bell hooks states, that as teachers, “our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students” (hooks 13). I use this statement as a guideline because I think it is important for dancers and dance teachers to begin to theorize what it is we are hoping to accomplish in a university setting. As feminist researchers, dance educators, and dance students, we need to ask several questions: What is the relevance of dance? What is the project of dance education and performance? Who

contributes to research on dance and dancers? How does this art form serve our communities? Is dance used to promote social change? Could it be? Furthermore, we need to consider how agency within structured classes can limit or assist students in the development of artistry³ and whether (or not) our classes encourage exploration, personal and technical development. Dance educators could greatly benefit from exploring feminist epistemologies and implementing feminist approaches to education in the dance classroom. We must also theorize dance as a discipline, looking at the gendered expectations in performance as well as in the dance classroom.

Dance in Higher Education

Dance in higher education in the United States, was in its infancy in the 1920s largely because of apprehension about the morality of dance (Ross 3). There was a belief that dancing helped cultivate loose morals among women and a strong fear that dancing would promote promiscuity or otherwise unfeminine traits associated with the late nineteenth and early twentieth century “new woman” (Evans 147, 160-162, Copeland 131). This common misconception is not surprising considering that as ballet developed in France some centuries before, the performances were attended by bourgeois men who came to ogle the female dancers and frequently used the backstage area for a quick sexual rendezvous (Banes 39-41). Some stories told on stage were even devised in a way that would peak the audiences sexual desires. Obsession with the “Orient” and other non-Western cultures lead to the creation of many ballets including *La Peri*, *Le Dieu et la Bayadere*, *Paquita*, *Revolt of the Harem*, and *Le Corsaire* where portions of the

³ When I refer to artistry I am employing a standard definition, which states that artistry is “a superior skill that can be learned by study, practice and observation” (“Artistry”). For me artistry also refers to the qualities an individual can contribute to any form of art that are unique to that person. I would add that artistry is a attribute that I believe anyone can cultivate given enough time and encouragement

performances were expressly designed to “gratify men’s appetites” (Jowitt 60). For feminists this is clearly an instance of what bell hooks calls “eating the other” where the “other” or the unknown is seen as exotic and desirable. As she states in her article, the commodification of “otherness” allows individuals from the dominant race, ethnicity or other group with significant influence, to affirm their power over subordinates in a way that may appear benevolent, when in fact the relationship is essentially exploitative (hooks 23). In short, whether the European women were dancing as sylphs, farm workers, or sexual temptresses from other parts of the world, their profession was likened to prostitution. Tales of backstage sexual encounters in France, combined with the increasing sexuality of popular dances like the bunny hug and the slow rag in the United States, undoubtedly astonished the middle class in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when dance was beginning to be established in several American universities (Evans 161). For years this presumptive association between dance and morally permissive behaviors among women was left unquestioned and many individuals at that time still considered dance scandalous. It seemed unlikely that dance would enjoy widespread successes in the puritanical United States.

Dance and dance education finally made inroads in the United States during the 1920’s largely because of the early feminist movements for suffrage and the slowly shifting attitudes about women. As Janice Ross notes, “dance in higher education would have another big boom period in the late 1960s and early 1970s- not surprisingly, on the wave of this century’s second big push for women’s rights” (212). The cultural and political movements during these different time periods allowed women to explore options not previously available to them and began to remove some of the taboos about

the capabilities of female-bodied people. In the early twentieth century, as women fought for the right to vote, they challenged other restrictions such as clothing styles that had heretofore been commonly accepted. For dance this was one of the most important changes because, like Isadora Duncan, many women stopped wearing corsets, a staple garment in almost all ballets and everyday fashion (Albright 18). This distinction in style of clothing worn for dancing is just one of many departures between modern dance and ballet, but it allowed Duncan and her dancers to explore a much larger range of motions that were unavailable to ballet dancers (Banes 74).

The correlation between the spread of dance in higher education and the women's rights movements taking place at these times is fascinating but not coincidence, "...there is in our contemporary culture a notion that to dance is to be free...of course dancing in itself would not have liberated these women from the social and economic hardships: dance rather *stands for* the possibility of escape" (Wolff 149). Janet Wolff is specifically addressing a specific scene from *Dancing at Lughnasa*, which is a play by Brian Friel where dance is used as a metaphor, but her points are more generally thought provoking (Wolff 148). How can dance be as a liberatory act? Why is it that dance, predominantly the modern style, flourished during the women's movements in the United States when the dance discipline, in which ballet has been established as the paradigm, generally reinforces gendered binaries and in many ways glorifies unequal relationships between women and men or even between older and younger females?

The first college program to offer a degree in dance was founded in 1926 by Margaret H'Doubler at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, even though, the Harvard school included dance in its summer physical education program in 1887 ("UW Dance

Program,” Oliver 1).⁴ While the program at Harvard created by Dudley Sargeant was designed for the “physical education preparation for female teachers” and was taught exclusively by men, H’ Doubler initiated a program which was concerned primarily with students engaging with movement on an emotional level (Oliver 1, Ross 209). This emphasis left room for dancers to explore a range of movements that have not necessarily been codified in gendered ways like movement in ballet or modern dance have been and increased their focus on developing artistry. The stress placed on developing one’s emotional connection to the bodily movement is in itself a revolutionary concept. While other dancers and choreographers including Loie Fuller, Carlotta Grisi and Jean-Georges Noverre incorporated emotional elements into their movement styles, Margaret H’Doubler is one of the first to create a program based around learning to connect meaningfully with the dance (Jowitt 10, 61, 90-91, Ross 209). The program’s website continues to boast that the dance program “...focuses on the thinking dancer, a dancer with a deep understanding of the physical, spiritual, and artistic aspects of the body in motion” (“UW Dance Program”). What, exactly, is meant by “the thinking dancer”? Considering that Margaret H’Doubler’s program is based in an institution of higher education, where is the statement confirming that establishment’s dedication to challenging their dancers to think critically? What kind of “thinking dancer” are they producing if physical, spiritual, and artistic aspects are their main areas of concentration? Dancers are given some leeway to be individuals and have original thoughts in choreography and improvisation classes, but is that enough to help cultivate well-rounded students?

⁴ Some accounts indicate the program was in progress as early as 1879 (Ross 57).

In part, audiences may see dance as a liberatory pursuit because it centers largely on training the body to move and respond in specific ways while maintaining the illusion that the performance is a spontaneous reaction or portrayal of a series of emotions or aspects of a story. This in fact does require a person to develop problem-solving skills. Passionate and successful dancers have to draw on a variety of resources to accomplish their goals. Ideally, colleges and studios provide training that will be the most beneficial to those students, but which qualities will enhance a dancers ability to perform: the ability to read and respond to theory, exposure to other forms of art that could provide inspiration, time off from the studio so that dancers may explore other interests or interact more with individuals in other professions? Live performances certainly support the notion that dancers are free spirits that are both truly talented and expressive, but the business of dance education and even dance classes themselves are very detached and utilitarian. Today the National Association of Schools of Dance divides programs into three categories (Van Dyke 28). Division I is occupied by schools and studios who want to be acknowledged by the dance profession as reputable sources for training (Van Dyke 28). Division I schools while highly regarded for providing adequate training, do not turn out large numbers of dancers ready to join a professional company. Division II includes most college programs who offer degrees in dance that require at least 65% of course hours to be completed in studio technique and Division III schools focus primarily on producing professional dancers (Van Dyke 28). Division II schools typically train students to be teachers, provide a thorough understanding of the choreographic process and although Division III schools have a much higher percentage of students who enter the professional world, Division II schools will generally yield several students who will

also join a professional company. While these divisions might seem arbitrary, they affect how and what a dancer learns about her craft and demonstrates “a deep divergence of values centering on the question of whether one is trying to train the dancer or educate the person, to teach skills or build inner resources” (Kraus and Chapman cited in Van Dyke 28).

In the late 1960s, Suzanne Langer wrote about dance as an art form and it became apparent that there was concern about the lack of research in dance and how this sets dance apart from the rest of the generally esteemed academic community (Oliver 2). Unlike history, psychology or philosophy, the dance field is not highly populated with individuals who focus primarily on research or construction of grand dance theories. In fact, another issue surrounding professional dancers who came to teach in higher education without suitable academic credentials was raised because many professional dancers were hired to teach technique without a college background or a degree. Teachers were hired despite the fact that most colleges preferred some kind of academic certification, but these educators did have real world experience that many college graduates lacked (Oliver 3, Ross 201). In academia, I imagine it is greatly frowned upon to have a department made up of professionals with limited educational backgrounds. Since dance departments generally are concerned that their students learn the academic side of dance (including but not limited to history, kinesiology, and labanotation)⁵ as well as a variety of dance techniques, this situation continues to be problematic and seems to point again to the ongoing debates about whether a school should be trying to train professionals, in which case it may be more constructive to have instructors with a

⁵ Labanotation is a method of writing, created by Rudolf Laban, which allows dancers and choreographers to document and analyze movement.

professional background or to prepare academic dancers, in which case, having teachers with more academic experiences would be most beneficial. I would argue that both pursuits could and should be integrated. Who would be able to theorize about dance better than someone who has spent significant amounts of time performing professionally? How could a more thorough understanding of one's goals regarding dance, not enhance someone's performance? Additionally, how could an improved understanding of what it means to be a gendered person inspire one's artistry? As Judith Butler argues, gender *is* a series of performative acts which "...brings with it ostracism, punishment and violence..." when it is staged in a way that does not uphold heterosexual norms (Butler 309). Exploring and acknowledging this aspect of gender seems particularly necessary and useful for dancers as it may lead them to revelations about their own art form. For example, the recognition that gender norms infuse dance as extensively as they do reveals the fact that many parts of the human experience have been excluded in order to maintain the gender binary. The understanding that dance has upheld this dualism may open dancers up to new opportunities or, at least, will make them aware that they are choosing to highlight specific characteristics over others rather than performing in a particular manner because of their biological attributes.

Dance, like Women's Studies, has been accused of lacking academic rigor and even within departments some teachers and students believe "...that all creative efforts should be directed toward performance and choreography and others" have the belief that there is a "need or desire to legitimize the field through publication" (Oliver 3). As a feminist educated in both traditional dance techniques and Women's Studies, I would agree with Edrie Ferdun who writes that, "although the dance profession may understand

that it continues to have a role as a change agent and symbol for women's opportunities, achievements, and dreams of cultural transformation, there is little momentum from which to build" at this point in time, and I hope to contribute to the continuing "discussion of what constitutes an appropriate education in dance at the college level" (Ferdun 8, Oliver 3). I would like to add that although right now I see only a little momentum for change, we can look to the women and men who have actively challenged stereotypes through their work in dance for inspiration as we continue to decide if it is necessary for dance to be legitimized via academia. For me some of those insightful people would include; Njinska, Matthew Bourne, Matts Ek, Jiri Kylian, Isadora Duncan, Katherine Dunham, Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane, all of which have been studied in some manner by well-known scholars. Another way to build this momentum for change is to actively pursue research and creativity in higher education without as Betsey Gibbons states, "dissecting the person into three parts of body (which is trained in technique classes), mind (which is taught in theory classes) and spirit (which is generally not dealt with at all in the educative process)" since all are integral in every step of developing intelligent and emotive dance performances (Gibbons 12). Feminist approaches to research, which both avoid the mind/body split and which encourage interactions between the researcher and the participants thus working to reduce the disparity in power among all parties involved, could serve as a model for dance educators or dancers who wish to analyze the complex dynamics involved in performance and the learning environment created in the dance classroom (Reinharz 197-213).

Chapter Three

The Dancing Body

Dance, specifically ballet, has been situated as a “feminine” art form regardless of whether it is performed at a college or professional level or whether the dancers are masculine or feminine (“Classical Ballet” 289). The commonly assumed association between a person who dances and femininity is, in my opinion, directly related to the way dance is integrally linked to the female body. Nancy Hartsock explains that while men occupy a world with “...a number of fundamentally hostile others whom one comes to know by means of opposition...” women are grounded in the concrete materiality of the world (Hartsock 229). This materialist observation highlights how the separation of “self” and “other” is believed to be relatively unimportant for women while bodily experiences in the reproduction of the sexual division of labor are central to women’s experiences (Hartsock 229). Women thus have been put in charge of the daily work associated with the reproduction of the body. Drawing from that work we can see why dance, which is closely associated with the body, has come to be characterized as a feminine profession not worthy of serious academic consideration.

In dance the body cannot be extracted from the work; even in theorizing about dance we must analyze how the body functions in performance. In professional companies and schools that train women and men to dance, individuals are expected to maintain specific body types. Frequently, the goal for females in a traditional ballet performance has been to portray an ethereal being. Sylph-like qualities that are revered in

many women's performances and that have come to be expected by observers include: long lean muscled performers, light floating and graceful movements, soft pale skin, large round eyes, and extreme flexibility of the dancers bodies (Jowitt 29-47). These characteristics correspond with current notions about feminine beauty and are achieved with the help of intensive training, pointe shoes, which elongate the visual line of the leg, proper lighting, makeup, and costumes. These characteristics exclude a number of individuals who have arbitrarily been determined to be too short, too fat, too dark-skinned or too inflexible and are not necessarily restricted to the world of dance. Looking at feminist theory we find much scholarship supporting the social construction of gendered behavior and outward appearance. Bartky details how to be beautiful in North American culture, female bodied people must pursue many of these same goals including: having a slender body, moving delicately while wearing high-heeled shoes which, like pointe shoes, also exaggerates leg length, speaking infrequently and participating in other grooming rituals such as the application of makeup or exercising in a socially prescribed manner (Bartky 66-73). These characteristics examined in isolation may or may not seem inherently negative but they become damaging when the absence of long legs, white skin or thinness prevents a woman from interacting with others socially or from pursuing a career in the performing arts because she fears or experiences discrimination.⁶

Size of the female body is the most important aspect in determining the level of appropriate femininity of a body for a dancer as well as more generally for females in a

⁶ Many scholars have addressed the ways in which socially prescribed rituals produce gendered bodies and the ways in which these social norms *are* indeed harmful particularly for females. For example, wearing high heels limits a woman's ability to walk fast or run if necessary while something like dieting to maintain a specific idealized body type can cause fatigue or even, ultimately, organ failure.

social setting. A small frame indicates submissive, non-threatening femininity and delicate gracefulness to many people. Diminutive size is even accentuated in ballet through the slight angling of the body, which presents the dancer's body in a slim long line to the audience. It is demanded that ballet students conform to this standard, whereas there is a slightly wider range of acceptable sizes for modern dancers. Many characteristics about our bodies including body size and shape, we believe are predetermined at birth; however, bodies *are* malleable. Generally we assume that women will be smaller than men in both height and weight. We also imagine that a woman cannot build as much muscular strength as a man, but it is the fear of losing one's femininity rather than actual limits created by a woman's body structure that prevent women from pursuing activities like weight lifting (Dworkin; Crawley, Foley and Shehan). Dance reflects the cultural standards about women's bodies as described by Dworkin and Bartky and exaggerates many of those features. Many people have not been aware that training for a career in dance "...has the capacity to delay and modify an individual's physical development, preserving the linear, adolescent body form so well suited to aesthetic and performance values in dance" (Vincent 135). Most professional dancers, in fact, have the long un-rounded bodies associated with preadolescents because of their intensive exercise routines. It should not come as a surprise that consistent physical training has the ability to alter the shape of a person's body; this is especially true for youthful athletes whose bodies are still growing. Young dancers, like gymnasts, though, experience a delay in the onset of puberty and many girls will either not menstruate until they stop dancing or have a delayed menarche (Vincent 134-141). Dance literally helps create, preserve and exaggerate prepubescent body qualities through

repetitive exercises and quite surprisingly through an extensive selection process, both of which eliminate individuals with “undesirable” bodies and mentalities.

Dancers are not born, they are made. Movements are performed in a manner that reaffirms patriarchal notions about women’s and men’s positions in the world and dance classes actually construct the desired bodies that are considered appropriate based on an individual’s anatomy. Women adhere to strict regimens, which minimize overall size, builds flexibility and leg strength while men build stamina and speed. “The [se] disciplinary practices...described are part of the process by which the ideal body of femininity- and hence the body-subject- is constructed; in doing this, they produce a ‘practiced and subjected’ body, i.e., a body on which an inferior status has been inscribed” (Bartky 71). Even the clothing worn for ballet is highly regulated and differentiated based on sex categorization (West and Zimmerman, Frye). Males must have cropped hair, wear black tights and ballet slippers with a light colored shirt while females will wear their hair in a bun, pink tights and ballet slippers (or pointe shoes) with a black leotard.⁷ Dance educators prescribe many of these routines that shape the body, but dancers share and implement their own rituals outside of the classroom to help attain the “perfect” dance body. The reduction of body weight in ballet is a common goal among female students and professionals but serves little to no function except to assist males in lifting their partners. This is particularly concerning when it becomes apparent that as males are encouraged to strengthen their leg and arm muscles as much as possible and are given a considerably larger range of accepted body weights, females are

⁷ The color of the dancers’ apparel varies depending on what the instructor specifies, but in most professional and college level programs the dancers are required to dress in a uniform color (for example, all women will wear a red leotard daily or on Monday, Wednesday and Fridays all female dancers will wear black, on Tuesdays and Thursdays all female dancers will wear green leotards, etc).

encouraged to develop muscles that are not quite as obvious to the audience. Arguably, increased upper and lower body strength could help female dancers perform more challenging movements with less effort: however, generally ballet choreographers prefer female dancers with waif-like bodies that can be lifted, twisted, and thrown about without difficulty by their male partners. Dance professors are inclined to favor repetitive muscle building exercises, which tend to promote strength but limit overall muscle size thus helping dancers maintain a sleek and diminutive body. While there is no generic dancing body, since different techniques create bodies capable of performing better in some ways and not others, dance teachers still urge performers to conform to this gendered norm—small, delicate bodied women and strong, expansive bodied men (Wolff 160).

Dance, however, being unmistakably about bodies in motion, has the ability to challenge current patriarchal notions about women's and men's capabilities while delving into family dynamics, relationships and sexualities in ways other disciplines and art forms could never explore because it actually builds bodies. There are theoretical benefits to the fact that dance is closely linked to the body. As feminists, we have inherited “the notion that the body is both the ground of cultural (and gendered) oppression and the potential site of its overthrow” evidenced by the fluidity of body size and shape so, “it is no coincidence that the metaphoric locus of social revolt is the body, in a culture in which the corporeal has been progressively repressed” (Wolff 153). This history of devaluing that which is associated with the body provides feminist scholars and dancers a unique perspective from which to critique traditional ways of thinking about bodies and gender.

Why then, if the body has so much potential to destabilize our current modes of thinking, do we value prepubescent figures instead of the rounded curves that many adult

women have?⁸ There is nothing inherent about a slender figure that makes it more successful at ballet than a curvier one, so we might conclude that thinness is a stylistic choice, however there is an intricate process occurring in dance education both at the college and professional levels leading to the success of those individuals who have what are determined to be the more “appropriate” dancing bodies. Vincent claims that females who mature later are better suited to a variety of movements such as running, jumping or throwing since it is assumed that the post-pubescent female body will have too much body fat and for that reason late maturing girls are more successful in sports while boys who mature ahead of schedule have an advantage (159). Although these statements are intriguing, I am not sure that girls who mature earlier are any less capable of performing the movements required of ballet dancers. Muscle strength and flexibility in my opinion are much more important characteristics for a dancer to have than narrow hips or small breasts. Having large breasts or hips will not prevent a dancer from moving in the prescribed fashion, however, a limited range of motion or strength in the legs could significantly hinder a student. Ballet technique is particularly concerned with developing strength and flexibility in specific ways on a dancer’s body to allow for a maximum range of motion in a performance, but these two technical requirements can be achieved without regard to breast and hip size. While dancers may not be able to control every detail of their bodies, they do learn how to act appropriately feminine or masculine. Most of this education about how to perform “female” and “male” is learned throughout society but college dance educators also prepare their students to master feminine or

⁸ It is important to note the contradiction here between what is typically valued in women on television, in movies and in magazines- large breasts and/or curvy hips and buttocks- and what is valued in ballet- women with small breasts and narrow hips.

masculine traits, depending on the sex categorization of the student, and teach them to utilize these qualities as they pertain to performance. Subsequently educators, other students, and audiences hold the dancers accountable for performing “correctly” as a woman or as a man (West and Zimmerman 46).

Unfortunately, rather than seizing the body as a place to promote social revolt, many of these dance training programs assume that all individuals can fit into one of two categories (male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, thin/fat, able-bodied/disabled, etc) thus limiting the creative potential produced by not “belonging” (and not performing) as if all people could belong to either category. In this way, dance is not unlike any other institution in the United States, most of which primarily recognize only two sexes and two genders. Many aspects of our society reinforce the idea that sex and gender are clearly identifiable characteristics since they are believed to be linked with our physical make-up. We learn at a young age that our gender and sex are innate characteristics we develop at birth, however, “...gender is a performance that *produces* the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core...” (Butler 312). The accepted “naturalness” of these qualities reinforces heterocentric standards making individuals who do not clearly fit in one of the opposing categories “other” (Ingraham). For me this binary is problematic, both for the reasons Butler and Fausto-Sterling have explained at length, and also because it imposes severe restrictions on dance which is theoretically supposed to be breaking with the academic tradition and, to a large extent, is thought to be ahead of its time. Dancers, who do actively challenge current ideas about sex and gender, in their physical presence or through their movement styles, have not been represented in traditional ballets and have only appeared fleetingly in modern dance performances.

Instead of celebrating the body and the variety of capabilities that are made manifest in class, dance is structured in a way that reinforces the mind/body split where the body must always be controlled by the mind. In a traditional class setting the teacher assumes an authoritarian stance towards the students perpetuating a cycle where, in the teacher's absence, the mind continues to reign over the body. The experience of a moving body becomes sublimated in an environment where success is measured by how well students can regurgitate the information or movement combinations presented in class. How do we expect students to learn to be evocative on stage if the curriculum is based on the conventional banking model of education (hooks)? While both Women's Studies and dance deal with bodies and with feelings, dance actually requires that the body be properly regulated before a dancer can instill emotion into her movement. Even then, she is supposed to *portray* sentiments, not actually examine her own. In feminist research and in many Women's Studies classes, individuals are expected to incorporate their experiences and feelings without hesitation as the topics are discussed. I have not seen teachers insist on this prerequisite in dance classes, instead, it is assumed that once the technique is mastered, students may begin to incorporate emotion into the movement, but not before that goal is achieved. This kind of training hardly supports the development of artistic, intellectual or emotional distinctiveness among students.

Conversely, feminist classes are often taught in a way that compels students to engage emotionally with the material and to be active agents in the learning process. This style of teaching is based on the theory that the classroom is a place for sharing and creating knowledge which should reflect student's needs, while encouraging students to question systems of inequality (Bell et al, Mayberry). Teachers with a feminist

background could draw on feminist theories about oppression, social construction of gender, and subjectivities to persuade dance students to think critically about what they are hoping to accomplish. Such a teacher can invite students to consider why it is that in Western society we think in such dichotomous terms about the body or even explore why a specific character in a dance is choreographed differently based on the sex categorization or ethnic identity of the performer (West and Zimmerman 44-45). This level of complexity and thoughtfulness on the part of the teacher provides the class environment with the sustenance necessary for drawing out the creativity of the students. In general, we tend to think of creativity as a rare talent. Creativeness is considered exotic or child-like but, nonetheless something that is held by a special few. We remarkably attribute these qualities to those who our society might deem troubled in one way or another, or who live their lives in a hedonistic fashion; however, inspiration and originality can result from intense discussion, meditation, boredom or even fleeting thoughts or sensations; outlandish behaviors and direct memorization are not requirements for the development of artistry. As students and teachers we need to use the opportunity provided by the college classroom to delve into these subjects.

Returning to the body, we see that the restrictions placed on female bodies by traditional dance class settings, also intensifies a dancer's need to camouflage the effort that goes into any combination of movements. Although this is standard for all dancers, female dancers probably have the most difficult and intricate steps to perform. A woman's choreographed steps frequently involve quick foot movements with a complex series of arm motions and thus she must work harder at concealing her pain or struggle to maintain her ethereal "feminine" persona. This characteristic echoes the "superwoman"

role that women are encouraged to take on in this society. We expect women to do it all, be financially stable, work, bear children, which she will provide the predominant care for, cook, clean, all while smiling and looking like a fashion model. Dancers, like women in other fields, of course cannot meet all the requirements and must hide the exhaustion the results from trying to meet those demands. Women's work whether engaged in a wage earning pursuit or daily family and household upkeep remains concealed (Shaw 733). To be fair, male-bodied performers must also mask their efforts but the movement composition generally given to men allows for a different range of motions, which collectively creates a grandiose presence on stage. Male dancers, even in traditional ballets, tend to perform larger movements that emphasize their specialized jumping skills and utilization of the entire dancing space. While female dancers are expected to remain silent and must compete with each other for starring roles, "...limits for males seem made to be broken..." (Stinson 28). For example, in my experience, if a dance educator asks you, a female dancer, to perform a double pirouette-that is a turn on one leg with two rotations-you had better perform exactly two rotations, any less and you may be ridiculed for not meeting minimal expectations and any more and you may be told you were asked to perform only two so that your level of control over your body could be evaluated. With a male dancer, however, if he opts to execute a triple, he will be commended for taking initiative and striving to exceed expectations.

Dance education reinforces social norms for male gendered bodies as well. Nonetheless, my observation indicates that there is more latitude given to male dancers in the range of accepted body sizes, muscular build and flexibility. Within this assortment of body types, male ballet dancers are generally tall and lean with a greater variation in

weight among the men than there is among female dancers. Male ballet dancers, like female dancers are required to be strong and flexible, but they must also be able to lift their female partners, requiring considerable upper body strength. Onstage, men are expected to play masculine characters whose purpose involves courting, rescuing or clashing with a feminine counterpart or engaging in a journey or battle where women are conspicuously missing from the sequence of events. His physique and movement becomes symbolic of his position within the community represented on stage and also complements the “feminine” aesthetic desired for female-bodied dancers.

Both sexes work hard in performance but they are clearly engaged in disparate tasks and are expected to perform differently based on expectations about anatomical attributes. This divergence highlights the fact that dance discourse is firmly “...rooted in the notion of ‘inborn’ or ‘natural’ gender difference” in which males are dominant and females are othered, but it can change (“Classical Ballet” 289, 290). Clearly there is a discrepancy between what male-bodied and female-bodied individuals are supposed to do in most class settings, however in a dance class, those differences are significantly more apparent. Using feminist ideologies as a basis for forming a dance curriculum could help address some of these issues, but we must also consider the narratives that go along with these dichotomous classroom expectations. When we acknowledge that the majority of traditional ballet stories tend to be heteronormative portrayals of a soon to be married couple, dance performance becomes increasingly problematic (Banes 16).

Chapter Four

Cultural Narratives

Heteronormative Narratives and Gender Surveillance

It is interesting that the masculine persona assumed by dancers onstage is juxtaposed with the widely held stereotype that most male dancers (predominantly those that practice ballet) are homosexual. In the larger society these men are seen as effeminate because of their profession but in an isolated performance they exude masculinity by commanding the space on stage and through their dominance over female dancers. Heterosexual relationships form the basis for most traditional ballets leading to several common characters and themes.

One theme that emerges in ballet that demonstrates the need for feminist critiques of dance narratives is the “marriage plot” (Banes 5). In many ballets, marriage is a common subject matter since many of the earliest ballets were performed during royal weddings (Banes 5). Working women are rarely portrayed or are dismissed as comical or tragic in the dance narrative, a consequence that Sally Banes sees as arising from dancing on the lyric and concert stage which are venues associated with the aristocracy (Banes 6). If ballet was created as a community form of dance, we would see different characters and themes emerge; perhaps the most common theme would revolve around religion or farming but surely there would be more than sylph-like creature for women to play. Banes continues, stating, “...the tendency is to represent on stage bourgeois, rather than working-class, values toward sexuality and marriage” in ballets (Banes 6-7). Today,

ballet still embraces and represents those bourgeois values towards sexuality and marriage, and as researchers, teachers and dancers, we need to ask why? Is it possible, for example, to conceive of a dance where the central character is a single-mother and to represent her life using traditional ballet technique? My intention is to question whether or not ballet as it has been traditionally conceptualized has a sustainable and optimistic future. Embracing tenets of modern dance, which allows a larger range of movements to choose from and which incorporates more aspects of a particular dancer's personality, is certainly a good way to update ballet, which has not typically been known for keeping up with current ideas and trends; however, how would we distinguish these new modern ballets from modern dance and is this distinction even necessary? Will the ballet technique continue to change as it is adapted to fit contemporary narratives or will the technique remain the same becoming obsolete except during performances where classical ballets are revisited?

These issues become all the more important as we look at how they are manifested in other dance classes. While patriarchal notions about bodies and behaviors are widespread, these concepts are not established or accepted in the same ways in all forms of dance. Modern dance, having a more diverse history, does not seem to fall in to the same trap as many ballets where marriage is one of the most common themes. I do not want to imply that modern dance has not or could not address an issue such as marriage, just that it is not one of the most prevalent themes. Themes in modern dance seem to vary based on the choreographer, and not entirely on which trends and subject matters were being explored comprehensively during the time periods when the dances were composed. Perhaps the most notable difference between the origins of ballet and the

emergence of modern dance is that women, not men, dominated in the creation of modern dance techniques, undoubtedly affecting the themes that were chosen by modern choreographers (Copeland 124). Unlike ballet, modern dance covers a wide range of subjects and more frequently incorporates pieces that could be interpreted strictly as movement compositions in which there are no discernible stories or relationship between dancers and even little to no identifiable emotions exhibited by the performers. More current ballets share some of these characteristics but I have found that modern dance companies often perform these dances, which raises the question, what makes a dance a ballet performance? Does simply wearing pointe shoes make a dance a ballet? If a dancer wears pointe shoes and performs in a classical manner with her head upright and arms carefully placed in the prescribed positions but every once in a while dives to the floor and rolls around while paying careful attention to where the movement is initiating in her body, does that make her performance a modern dance or a ballet? The distinctions between the two major techniques and the narratives that they explore are very noticeable but not completely important if we focus on creating an evocative presentation.

Another common theme for traditional works of ballet that is noticeably absent in modern dance involves tales of morality that promote endogamy or marriage within one's social group (Banes 16). *La Fille Mal Gardee* is a ballet in which marriage between classes threatens to destroy the local community. Although this warning is disguised in a light-hearted tale about a widow's "badly guarded daughter," the importance of maintaining one's social status is highlighted. This theme encourages viewers and participants to accept inequity and even blames inequality on moral deficiencies of the characters. In *La Fille Mal Gardee* the rebellious daughter achieves her goal and is

allowed to remain with her love who is a farm worker like herself. In this storyline, endogamy is celebrated. Normally this tale is accepted as a heterosexual “love conquers all” story without considering the message it sends about class relations, which again reveals that feminist educators are needed to problematize this kind of story. In narratives like these, gender surveillance serves an important function. Masculinity and femininity are reinforced throughout the story as male and female-bodied individuals perform tasks deemed appropriate for their sex. Characters that do not follow prescribed behaviors are usually humiliated, ostracized, or even killed.

We do not see same-sex couples in any traditional ballet. Narratives portrayed in traditional ballets are heterocentric, rarely showcasing dancers of the same sex categorization together except to show opposition. In works such as *Swan Lake*, the lead female characters, in this case, the white swan and the black swan are even danced by the same individual. It is understood that these women are shaping his moral dilemma as they pull in opposite directions both striving to gain Prince Siegfried’s devotion. One contemporary version of this ballet by Matthew Bourne, however, recreates the story with an all-male ensemble. Within his story we find an allusion to a same-sex relationship, but again this is a modern adaptation, which incorporates both ballet and modern techniques allowing the story to morph into a non-traditional tale. Bourne’s choreography is truly amazing and unique but I have to wonder if we could capture this same compelling story strictly using ballet technique and an all male cast. While it would be an undeniably worthwhile endeavor to explore the possibility of a same-sex subtext in other traditional ballets, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

The last interesting theme that emerges from ballet narratives, which I will address here, involves the portrayal of the deadly femme fatale. She is not a rare occurrence as one might expect in traditional ballets but she still conforms to current expectations about femininity. She is a character who is “subject to her own libido, with the hero as her prey” (Jowitt 110). Her sole purpose in the performance, however, is to pose a challenge for male characters to overcome. Unlike the sylph or young women destined for marriage in other ballets, the femme fatale acts on her own behalf but she is portrayed in a negative manner. Banes effectively employs a feminist stance towards these issues showing how even a strong female character is subject to the patriarchal underpinnings of dance but I have to wonder how many dancers are privileged to read her arguments? Given the time constraints of a dancer’s day it is not likely that many performers have read this kind of work unless it was incorporated into the curriculum or the individual has a pronounced interest in reading about dance which is pursued during free time throughout the day or evening.

Although many of the traditional ballet narratives are told from the hero’s point of view and feature heroines who are destined for marriage or demonstrate passive traits, it is indeed the ballerinas who dominate the stage (Jowitt 41). When we hear about dance, whether it is discussed in a print article or visually documented we are frequently presented with the image of the corps de ballet, a mass of women moving in tandem as a group. There is no question that women outnumber men in a ballet performance and choreographers have found ways to incorporate large numbers of females using the chorus to fill the background while featuring one or two of women with a male partner. The majority of solos are also performed by a select group of female dancers, however,

men still hold more positions of power within a dance company as well as in their onstage personas (Stinson 28). “Her partner is always the one who leads, initiates, maps out the territory, subsumes her space into his, and handles her waist, armpits, and thighs. She never touches him in the same way: she does not initiate the moves. Metaphorically, she makes no movement of her own; her position is contingent on the manipulations of her partner” (“The Balanchine Woman” 284). A female ballet dancer’s worth is established by her relationship to a male partner and thus the woman must always be concerned with how her appearance and movements reflect on her partner. I argue that there is no reason that women and men have to interact in these scripted ways particularly within an artistic form of expression like dance. Sandra Lee Bartky writes on a similar note that, “Higher-status individuals may touch their subordinates more than they themselves get touched...What is announced in the comportment of superiors is confidence and ease, especially ease of access to the Other” (74). In modern dance it is not uncommon for women to touch men, to guide them with their hands, but in ballet this is a very rare occurrence and indeed, males occupy dominant positions in most traditional ballets. In fact although there are more women than men there are relatively few female ballet choreographers.

Female characters in traditional ballets, which were created primarily by male choreographers, have to negotiate the world around them through interactions with men; they are spun around, twisted and bent over backwards as the males in their lives serenade their bodies. These observations seem to strengthen the idea that “a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women” (Bartky 72). Every movement a female makes on stage during a ballet is a demonstration for the male

protagonist and ultimately for the masculine gaze of the audience; therefore she must consistently monitor herself to make sure her display is being appropriately received as “feminine.” Gendered movement, though, is not confined to the stage. Female and male dancers must also scrutinize their performances inside and outside of the dance classroom to train their bodies in a gender appropriate manner. The body is not a free flowing tool for expression as it generally appears on stage, rather, “in the traditional dance classes the body often seems to be regarded as an enemy to be overcome or an object to be judged...merely [intensifying] the values of the larger social world...” (Stinson 29). Marilyn Frye claims that observable feminine and masculine characteristics are assumed to be representative of the actual physical bodies we each inhabit. These suppositions we make are tightly linked with our socially determined beliefs about how “men” and “women” should dress, behave and interact. Frye continues on to say, “...one appears heterosexual by informing people of one’s sex *very* emphatically and *very* unambiguously...” (Frye 24). Dance, like such other institutions as religion, education, and governmental policies, helps create and maintain heteronormative bodies by regulating gestures, ways of speaking and even limiting the kinds of interactions people experience due to the extensive time that must be dedicated to learning and practicing the profession.

Narratives in Practice

In my experience, young students are expected to devote their lives to dance in order to portray these one-dimensional characters in a variety of narratives. They are frequently required to practice between one to four hours a day depending on the type of school they attend and this time increases to approximately four to six hours on average

for a dance major in a college setting. The long days of practice dancers are subjected to stems from the time when Marie Taglioni, a famous ballerina from the late 1800s, notably worked a total of about six hours a day practicing with her father for her debut performance (Jowitt 43). Modern dancers have also been held to these standards and not surprisingly one of the founding mothers of modern technique, Isadora Duncan, also helped to set the bar by standing for hours with her hand on her solar plexus before deciding this was the place from which all movement originated (Jowitt 76). This exalted form of dedication explains why many dancers spend little time socializing with individuals outside of the studio or opt to take academic coursework that requires minimal commitment. The goal in much of dance training is to facilitate individual achievement "...with little emphasis on community and caring, values most often regarded as feminine" and thus hard work and long hours spent in training are highly valued characteristics of a dancer (Gilligan qtd in Stinson 29). But are the performers being exposed to critical thinking through classical training at the college level with all of the required commitments to maintain a "dancer's" body and identity? Are they learning to value individual successes over their own ties to their communities? When classroom surveillance extends beyond the classroom, how can dancers develop an artistry that is unique to their experiences, particularly if they are given choreography which excludes large groups of people including those who identify as homosexual, bisexual or asexual, people from lower class backgrounds, or people whose bodies are differently abled?

Education in current dance classrooms serves a reproductive function, meaning that classes are structured in a way that transmits and reproduces modes of thinking that have already been established as "true" (Stinson 27). Dancers learn to imitate their

instructors and memorize movement combinations relying primarily on the banking model of education described by Paulo Freire and bell hooks. In this situation the teacher is the final authority and seen as the only valid source of knowledge (Stinson 27).

Dancers are not encouraged to question the teacher, they learn to be silent observers and, because they are dependent on an external source for feedback about a performance, “any comments or lack of comments take on exaggerated import” (Stinson 28, Smith 128).

This style of teaching requires students to emulate their professors while minimizing their own experience or observations related to the movement. Considering that ballet was created and codified by individuals from privileged backgrounds, we might wonder if impersonating the teacher would ever allow for a diverse group to be represented in movement styles and performance. It is obvious that homosexuality is typically unexplored in ballet narratives and that women and men of color are absent from these works, except when they were considered exotic and were consequently imitated in dances by Europeans.

The limited cultural scope and repetitive nature of “the dance classroom, with its mirrors, watchful teachers, and self-critical students is a key site for both the external and internal surveillance of dancing bodies...” where homogenous and docile forms are ultimately produced (Smith 131). Dance training emphasizes gendered movements which do not originate from within; dance does not necessarily “...articulate the authentic expressions of the body,” rather these steps and positions are imposed on the body through years of training and discipline (Wolff 158-159). Like most other forms of socialization, gendered training in dance helps support the myth that only two sexes and genders can ever be represented in performance whether or not that presentation is

carried out on stage or in front of a group of ones peers. In dance, women become objects of male desire rather than agents in their own lives (“The Balanchine Woman” 286).

Feminist dance teachers or choreographers interested in developing cutting edge performances should examine the unquestioned assumptions about how female and male-bodied people ought to look, move and interact. The dance classroom could be a transformative space and considering that the class is structured around teaching women to dance like “women” and men to dance like “men” the possibilities for unveiling the accomplishment of gender are immeasurable (West and Zimmerman 42-47).

Chapter Five

New Directions

Modern Dance: A Possible Exception?

As I began to formulate more ideas for this project, I decided that I would like to observe some dance classes to refresh my memory of how it feels to be in a class and how teachers and students interact. Sitting in on different classes, I thought, could help me identify pedagogical issues in dance that I found problematic. I tried to make connections between my experience as a dancer and my desire as a feminist to have a classroom environment where students are engaged with one another as well as the teacher and learning in a way that promotes both student achievement and critical thinking (Parry, Mayberry). I thought hard about what I witnessed as a dancer and discovered that the dichotomy between ballet and modern, which I thought was true and uncomplicated, was indeed very complex. I had to deconstruct notions about learning and performing that I had previously believed were unequivocal. Because I was socialized as a young dancer to believe that ballet should be held in the highest regard, it was hard to acknowledge that this form of modern dance, which I so much disliked, could actually destabilize the mythical ideals upheld by ballet that also greatly troubled me. Going into the class knowing that modern dance, at times, has been viewed as completely antithetical to the ballet tradition and equipped with a basic understanding of pedagogy, I had hoped I would find distinct divergences in the ways classes were taught.

Observing a modern dance session, you will find that each class is slightly different depending on who facilitates the learning experience and the exact technique being taught. For instance, there are several codified versions of ballet and modern dance education including: Cecchetti, Vaganova, and the Royal Academy of Dance schools for ballet and the Limon, Horton, and Graham techniques for modern. While these styles have similarities, they have their own specific movement vocabularies and theories about dance, which are apparent upon inspection. There is more variation between modern styles of dance than there is between the main schools of ballet, which is a testament to the flexibility and tolerance associated with modern dance. To be clear, while many modern dance classes at the college level are structured in a way that parallels ballet, studios or colleges with well-known programs often do not prescribe to that arrangement. Instead they may encourage students to warm-up on their own, allowing teachers to begin immediately with a choreographed routine or work on very specific aspects of performance that they want to emphasize. In classes like these, the development of artistry may be highlighted more than learning the exact technique. Modern dance educators seem to have more leeway to try new things when it comes to creating an effective pedagogical style (i.e. permitting students to make up or lead an exercise, altering the order of events to better suit students needs or desires, promote dialogue and cooperation between students, etc) because they are not tied to a traditional canon of knowledge (Davis 76-78).

Ballet classes, on the other hand, are all taught in a very similar and consistent manner. Whether you take class in a small town in Nebraska or a large studio in Paris, the classes will be noticeably comparable. Class begins with a warm-up at the barre, which

consists of very specific exercises done in the same order every class period. These movements are followed by work done in the center of the class space and combinations taken across the floor and usually the class concludes with a brief “reverence,” which entails a quick cool-down stretch.⁹ Sometimes modern dance classes also follow this routine typically beginning class with the same general outline; some kind of warm-up, work that is done center floor and exercises that are performed across the floor, however as discussed before many of the movements practiced are distinct from those seen in ballet. These movements appear to be different because, for example, in modern dance the body is not always held in an upright posture whereas in the three major schools of ballet, the upper torso remains habitually straight. These modern techniques allow dancers to fall to the floor, to bend backwards and sideways or even perform handstands and cartwheels giving modern dancers a more substantial movement vocabulary.

During a six-week period, I observed a modern dance class that met three days a week. The class was an introductory technique course in which three of the fourteen students were dance majors. I started my observation in a modern dance class, taking notes about everything I saw the teacher do; I was particularly interested in how he had decided to approach the class. I wanted to know how his pedagogical style would affect the students. Constantly, I evaluated his performance as “teacher” to see if he was empowering students or challenging them to think critically about the movement process. In many ways it felt like I was still observing a rigid ballet session where the barres were not utilized. The instructor still led the students through a series of very structured warm-

⁹ Reverence is a term used to describe the formal goodbyes conducted at the end of a class session. During this time students may curtsy to the teacher, accompanists, the “audience,” (which is designated by the mirror) and even each other before concluding with a round of applause.

ups designed to increase the dancers' flexibility and strength. The entire six weeks was devoted to learning the warm-up exercises from which certain shapes and movements were extracted for other movements performed across the floor. All of these aspects can be found in ballet, so what then makes modern dance so different in the minds of dancers and teachers alike? Certainly the two forms have unique beliefs about the foundations of movement and distinct historical origins. As we have seen, modern dance also has a broader range of subject matters, movements, and more unconventional partnering between individuals, but there must be other reasons that modern dance is considered more progressive.

By the end of my time with the students and teacher, however, I was frustrated- as far as I could tell, the most feminist aspect of the class was the excitement the instructor showed for helping the students learn the exercises (hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*). I had expected to find that modern dance classes would be radically different from ballet classes: more expressive, interactive, and generally extemporized, but that was not my experience.

Disappointed, I began to examine how the studio space was employed. Not only did I find that the room was not handled differently, I also began to grasp the ways in which the dance class set-up discourages student participation. Students in a modern dance class typically begin facing the "front" which is designated by a large mirror.¹⁰ The instructor commands the space by standing at the front to speak and demonstrate movements while the dancers listen and watch attentively. In this class that I analyzed, all movement was carried out with meticulous consideration given to where the "audience"

¹⁰ Some studios have mirrors on all of the walls; in those cases the front is usually the mirrored wall without an attached barre.

would be located. After warm-ups, the dancers generally traversed the space going from the sides of the stage directly across or by moving at an angle towards the audience from the back corners. Throughout my time with them, the instructor never began an exercise from the front of the stage moving back or even from the front corners moving at a diagonal towards the back wall, which I would have regarded as an exceptional use of space not seen in ballet. It is possible that I did not observe this kind of movement due to the fact that this was an introductory course; however, as a modern class, it did not live up to its reputation as a more freeing style of dance. Despite the technique being taught, the physical makeup of the studio is the same and the treatment of class space is analogous. These issues encourage a rigidity that is uncharacteristic for feminist classrooms and quite abundant in traditional ballet settings.

Although I have taken several modern dance classes throughout my life, I only have had one experience in which I felt like the instructor was able to completely move away from the ballet paradigm. This shift helped me understand that my body could move in ways I had never been shown in ballet. We were challenged in that class to analyze movement and to make the routines, even the warm-ups, expressive in our own way. The teacher broke with the traditional ballet model as well by having us rely on the expertise of other students in the class thus sharing her role as the authority figure. I do not recall her ever particularly addressing gender issues in the class but she used language that at this point, seems to demonstrate a commitment to treating all students equally. Unlike many ballet classes I have taken where women are referred to as “girls” and men are called “guys” or “men,” this teacher referred to us either by name or as “dancers.” Additionally, we had to study movement and anatomy on a daily basis and were

encouraged to ask analytical questions while we were developing an internal connection with the choreography.

Her style of teaching was intimidating for someone like me who was used to hiding in the back of a class when I felt uncomfortable with the movement. My uneasiness was caused not by the style of dance I was learning, however, but the way she taught which entailed holding us accountable for learning the material, contributing to discussions and participating in the construction of knowledge. I now understand that her approach to education was more feminist than the traditional dance classes I had encountered. While at the time the class was frightening, I learned an incredible amount about modern dance. I was also forced to really think about what my goals were as a dancer and artist, and was exposed to an arena where I had a voice and could share in the process of learning instead of just memorizing information. I had more access to my own agency in her class than I did in my ballet courses where my desires for myself as a performer were masked by the demands of the technique.

Reviewing the overall experience with the introductory class, I was also struck by how much the dancers influenced one another and the subtle ways agency is utilized by the dance students. When I refer to agency, I mean the degree to which students are able to interact with and affect the dance discipline as well as the ways in which students negotiate the expectations placed on them by the discourses that constitute dance education. As an undergraduate dance student, I overlooked agency in the classroom because it never occurred to me that I actually had a choice about what and how I learned or the way I behaved in class. I took for granted that the teacher was the ultimate

authority and should never be challenged even if it meant not understanding the assigned task.

As a spectator I found that many of the students conducted themselves in the same manner I had years ago. Prior to the start of class, students gathered in small groups around the room, speaking to one another until the instructor arrived. As soon as this took place, students began to spread out, finding places for the beginning routines, and ceased talking unless the professor directed questions to the class. Throughout the class period I was able to observe instances where students greatly influenced each other. For example on numerous occasions during a combination if someone forgot or messed up the steps, frequently, at least one other student would get confused. This confusion results from self-doubt and the perception that other students must know the combination better. In short, it seems to be more important for a dancer to remain with the group-to not stand out from the rest- than it is to perform the exercise exactly as it was given. Indeed, even when the teacher was not in the room or left temporarily, I found that if one student began to stretch or practice turning out of their own volition, other students would start stretching or turning as well. These observations, while entertaining, are not trivial. To me, they indicate that dancers survey themselves and each other, further demonstrating that Foucault's conception of Bentham's panopticon has been internalized (Bartky 64). If the goal of dance education is to teach students to move in unison, internal surveillance would be a desired quality, but with these limits set in place, how does a dancer learn to be a distinct artist, particularly if she is learning a modern technique where it is assumed that she will not be hidden in the corps?

Liberatory Pedagogy

Pedagogy in the conventional dance class is based on the banking model of education and the belief that teachers and texts should be the primary sources for transferring information to subsequent generations (hooks). Critical thinking skills are not developed through this version of education. Even in dance classes where collaborative learning is encouraged, students ultimately do not question their teachers or the information they are supposed to unequivocally accept. Difference gets erased or overlooked in this model as well and thus “the race, class and gender aspects of how knowledge is produced and used are not addressed” (Mayberry 5). This is problematic for a discipline that developed out of bourgeois forms of entertainment and where the majority of students continue to be white, middle to upper-middle class women. In the traditional model we imagine that femininity in dancers is “either entirely voluntary or [entirely] natural” because we are not aware of the structures that encourage us to maintain the “right” body (Bartky 75). Learning in these classrooms does not challenge students or teachers to think about why something is being studied, taught or considered inconsequential which is the case generally with gender, race and class. We need to be thinking critically about “why most dance studios are populated primarily by white middle-class students” and “explore why dance is a stereotypically female activity and what girls have learned through dance about being female” (Stinson 41). A feminist pedagogy, which arises from feminist theories on inequality, gender, race, class and sexuality issues, has the potential to address all of these aspects.

Dancers, choreographers and teachers would benefit from participating in a more liberatory pedagogical style that challenges them physically and mentally without stifling

the creative processes. Feminist pedagogy has emphasized the necessity of a student-centered approach where knowledge construction is shared and teaching is recognized as a value-based activity (Bell, et al., O'Brien and Howard, Shapiro). This approach does not mean that we abdicate responsibility in the classroom; rather we assume responsible authority which O'Brien and Howard describe as, "recognizing or developing convictions about how and why one teaches and acting on the strengths of these convictions" (328). There is an asymmetry of power in a dance class but it does not have to degenerate into a strictly authoritarian space (O'Brien and Howard 28). In this method of teaching, dancers can be empowered as agentic and artistic individuals not docile bodies prepared only to receive direction.

In a feminist dance classroom, self-exploration could be a valued form of learning in which each dancer is given the opportunity to explore their own capabilities. This kind of learning where students rely on their own experiences and knowledge base has been relegated to improvisation and choreography classes, but I am convinced that any dance course could be refocused so that the structures that make gender seem natural and inevitable could be examined as they pertain to the students. Additionally, classes that are modeled on feminist beliefs help to create an atmosphere where students and teachers are not diametrically opposed, rather teachers and students may feel encouraged "to connect with others in mutually productive ways" (Shapiro 14, O'Brien and Howard 7, Stinson 31). Feminist pedagogies also "...highlight knowledge and ways of knowing that have traditionally been subjugated or invalidated, and they foster emancipatory aims" which ultimately will allow individuals involved in dance to access and express concepts which may not have been represented in performance ever before thus assisting artists in

making a sincerely revolutionary piece (Bell et al. 23) For dancers and choreographers these aspects of a feminist approach to teaching have enormous potential for transforming the discipline. Incorporating feminist epistemologies and pedagogies in dance curriculum will permit dancers and choreographers to experience and construct works that have been excluded from the traditional dance canon.

As Edrie Ferdun states, “What dance seems to have forgotten” as it was integrated into higher education, “is the dynamism of commitment to social change and personal integrity that was so vital to its early years” (Ferdun 11). Considering that ballet was founded by elite individuals and then established as the paradigm for dance, her statement seems paradoxical. How was dance committed to social change if the narratives reflected bourgeois values and so many experiences and groups of people were left out as dance was codified? While modern dance and ballet have always been compared, it is important to understand that modern dance originates out of a more progressive ideology reflecting a wider range of experiences.

We need to theorize dance in academia from a feminist perspective and, as Cheyenne Marilyn Bonnell’s research shows, almost any course can be adapted to address feminist concerns. Dancers and teachers need to engage in research of their own, making their “voices heard in the world of arts curriculum innovation and development” formulating alternative epistemologies that support their methods of teaching, creating dance and performing (Bolwell 86). We have to revisit the question: are we training dancers to be professionals or are we training them to be educators? Either way, incorporating critical thinking with feminist pedagogies will help dancers do both in a more meaningful and effective manner.

What then is the value of art? How do we determine if a dance is meaningful or effective? Unlike paintings or sculpture, dance is a dynamic art form. Once a piece is choreographed it is never the same unless it is captured on film. Clearly a work changes as it is adapted from one group of dancers to the next or even to accommodate a new dance space, which may be much larger or smaller than the place where it was initially choreographed, but each performance is different from the last even if the works are performed by the same artists in the same setting. Dancers forget their cues or must compensate for a minor injury affecting the way a production is viewed from night to night. Additionally an artist's emotional outlook changes in subtle ways, which can alter their performance profoundly. These minor adjustments may not change the overall tone of a performance but can in fact change the performer or viewer's experience with it. In all the dance classes I participated in as an undergraduate, the aforementioned aspects of dance were touched on briefly, acknowledged but not central to what was viewed as important- the reception of a performance by an audience or the acquisition of a job as a paid professional which was determined by your performance in front of a panel of highly regarded dance personalities. What seems to get lost in the evaluation of what is important and therefore what educators should relate to their students are the fine details of artistry. "Francois Delsarte considered that to value art for art's sake was as absurd as to value the telescope for the telescope's sake instead of for what it brought into focus" (Jowitt 80). The point as educators is not to transmit only technique from one generation to the next, for in this way the art form will become stagnant and a monument to itself. More precisely, the desired goal is to equip students with both the technique and the tools necessary for creating art, as well as the vision which will allow them to perceive their

own potential for bringing to the stage subjects and themes relevant to their lived experiences. Dancers, like feminists, can strive to highlight issues that have been marginalized by reframing arguments about dance and performance.

Implications

Janice Ross argues, “dance has never been fully at home in the humanities in higher education, however until recently it lacked the historical and theoretical scholarship that the other art forms have long possessed” (106). I agree that dance is not at home in higher education and that very little research has engaged dance as an academic discipline but I would add that particularly it is feminist perspectives on dance that are missing the most. Feminist scholarship on dance generally focuses on one of three concepts: the patriarchal biases or archetypal characters in various works by different choreographers, eating disorders among performers or the pervasiveness of authoritarianism in the classroom (see for example Adair, Banes, Jowitt, Shapiro, and Smith). While these works are groundbreaking and foundational, a strong assessment of the dance discipline could show the interconnections between these ideas and how they inform our experiences as dancers and educators. It is tempting, although simplistic to say that those issues are directly caused by patriarchy but an in-depth analysis of how systems of power are deployed and circulate in a college level dance setting, would be indispensable. In doing this kind of analysis, we will have to acknowledge that “technique classes often fail to promote the imaginative thinking, inquiry, and discovery that lead to the ability to creatively order and make flexible worlds from experiences” and be wary of the ways in which theory classes idolize choreographers neglecting “the

concept of the performer as a creative individual who also employs artistic process strategies” (Gibbons 13).

Dance curriculum at a college level should be organized in a way that highlights a “web of experiences rather than a collection of narrowly defined and discrete areas of study” and take into account the way dance has conventionally emphasized gendered binaries (Gibbons 12). As Marilyn Frye writes, “Sex-marking behavior is not optional; it is as obligatory as it is pervasive” but does this mean that “women” and “men” in dance are relegated to traditional roles (21)? “Can women ever represent themselves in classical ballet,” can dance provide women a source of agency and personal power (“The Balanchine Woman” 286)?

There are no complete answers to these questions. One could argue that classical training prevents dancers from fully recognizing and utilizing their own agency because the classroom relies on the banking model of education and limits female dancers to portraying characters that are socially recognized as feminine. Another argument might address the idea that there is nothing inherent about the structure of dance as a field of study that prevents a dancer from questioning the status quo. These conversations are important and need to be happening within the academic dance setting as well as the professional world so that students, professionals and teachers can contribute to the construction of knowledge about dance.

If we begin to expand our notions about what bodies can do with less focus on the “sex” of the individual performing would we not have more movement options and complex dynamics of expressiveness that we would be able to portray on the stage? “Labeling someone a man or a woman is a social decision” so why don’t well-known

ballet choreographers develop more gender bending performances (Fausto-Sterling 3)? Traditionalists may argue that this thinking moves us towards favoring modern dance techniques and would in fact not be ballet at all. I want to be clear that I am arguing for dance to become a more intellectual and artistic project and would like to remind the reader “today’s modern dance is just as gender-dichotomized as ballet” (“The Balanchine Woman” 287). The majority of dance classrooms codify masculine and feminine bodies in very specific ways, reflecting and amplifying the ideals of our societies. As performances “...heighten our perception of reality” they may “present images to us of ‘what should be’” and in this way observing a dance or participating in the creation of an artistic display can be a transformative experience (Shapiro 18). While dance in higher education is by no means solely responsible for constructing gendered bodies, dance teachers, educators, and choreographers should recognize how they reaffirm gendered binaries. Becoming familiar with feminist ideologies and styles of pedagogy will allow teachers and dancers to interact in hope-filled ways that promote critical thinking and creativity and will encourage them to see that “the disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere: the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular” (Bartky 74).

Chapter Six

Conclusion

I began this project to demonstrate how familiarity with feminist theory and pedagogical styles could augment dance education. I was disappointed that dance classrooms tend to be homogenous and are incredibly laden with negative messages about bodies, genders, and sexualities. I adamantly believe that feminist theory and pedagogy should be incorporated in dance curriculums. Fortunately, there are several scholars who have written about dance from a feminist perspective and the possibilities for integrating these techniques in classrooms. Of course there is still more work to be done, including having dancers and choreographers themselves working in the areas of research and theory. Pursuing a career or continuing to study a topic like dance after realizing that it is imbued with an abundance of negative cultural messages can be a daunting task. Understanding how patriarchal concepts operate in a dance classroom is a great place to start theorizing but it is important not to be deterred from actually implementing changes, which may intimidate many individuals.

In this paper I provided a literature review to assist in the exploration of the genesis of dance in higher education. I found that this subject did not immediately emerge as a field of academic study and that in most colleges in the United States during the early twentieth century, dance programs were either non-existent or closely associated with physical education departments. These athletic programs, which began to incorporate dance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were decidedly

valued for being one of a few forms of exercise that women could participate in without compromising their femininity. Although professional dancers were criticized for having loose morals and female dancers were likened to prostitutes, dance eventually lost its stigma and came to occupy a small space in academia. In this atmosphere a traditional authoritarian classroom developed in which students were discouraged from actively participating and were encouraged to perform rote memorization of ideas and movements. In addition to not challenging dancers to be critical thinkers, this widespread traditional pedagogical style also reinforces gendered binaries by constructing masculine and feminine bodies and by creating different expectations for individuals based on their sex categorization (West and Zimmerman).

Drawing on the research I have read, my own background in dance and my observations from a modern technique class, I came to realize that while dance classes are expressly designed to regulate human bodies (at least the bodies that have access to these courses), during the time spent in class or onstage, these regulations also influence a dancer's actions outside of the studio. The body is under constant scrutiny and within the dance discipline, failing to acquire the ideal body shape and mannerisms is grounds for exclusion. Limitations placed on bodies translate into prohibitions of certain actions and themes in dance performance, for example, we typically do not see, particularly in ballets, same-sex partnering. Dance helps construct "appropriately" gendered bodies and reinforces culturally accepted notions about masculinity and femininity while reaffirming the normality of heterosexual and patriarchal relations (Crawley, Foley, and Shehan; Bartky). What gets represented then in dance performances, are homogenous bodies, derivative characters and themes that are predominantly heteronormative. These aspects

of dance limit the ability of dancers to fully create and explore their own artistry. For students, teachers, and choreographers, it would be advantageous to employ a feminist lens to analyze the components of dance that reinforce a multitude of inequalities and acknowledge that many creative individuals have been excluded from traditional dance techniques. This awareness will open up the possibility of reaching more people and discovering new ideas within a class setting.

Dance, like Women's Studies, has been accused of not being rigorous enough to hold a place within the academy. I would argue that both fields have valuable knowledge to contribute to the academic world, and in a way that is uncharacteristic of other areas of study; both dance (the ideal dance program) and Women's Studies necessarily seem to be engaged in consciousness-raising endeavors. It is my hope that teachers and students who find it necessary to prove the academic worth of dance do not lose sight of the emotional and transformative nature of performance as all three qualities are central to the continued development of this subject. I assert that by adopting feminist principles in a college level dance setting students, teachers, and choreographers will be able to incorporate more original thoughts and experiences into performances allowing dancers to act as an independent agent in the classroom rather than as an insignificant cog grinding through the banking model of education (hooks, Freire).

I think it is important to return to the question, are we training students to be professional dancers or are we training students to be educators? Ultimately both kinds of training are necessary and will be beneficial to students whether they pursue employment as a performer or as a teacher. It is my understanding that one of the many goals of a liberal arts education is to produce well-rounded students who can adapt to handle a

multitude of situations as they arise throughout their academic careers. Preparing dancers for both of those paths will provide students with the most opportunities and make them more knowledgeable artists. While there may be a dispute about whether colleges should focus on turning out professional dancers or educators, there are specific feminist concepts we can integrate into dance classes that will definitely benefit students and teachers, regardless of the path they will eventually undertake.

First, dance educators who wish to teach utilizing a more feminist method than the traditional classroom offers, could introduce feminist philosophies about bodies to their students. This might be achieved during a brief lecture or by assigning dancers articles to read outside of class. A thorough discussion, for example, of the social construction of gender will help students recognize that performance is something we all engage in on a daily basis and that to a large extent we have learned how to behave and move based on whether or not we are considered female or male. One exercise to help students visualize the differences in movement based on sex categorization could involve assigning students a gender identity that does not match their usual gendered performance and then have them choreograph a short combination. Following from that, students could discuss how their work departed from what they are generally expected to do with their bodies and explain how they had to think or work in a different or similar manner to portray their assigned identity (West and Zimmerman). If this subject is studied in the context of dance performance students may become aware, upon reflection, that we have chosen to accept a limited range of movements (particularly in ballet) in an effort to maintain a gender binary. Another change might include incorporating performance videos of dance companies that have actively sought to include in their work themes and

identities that have traditionally been unexplored. Both of these suggestions are designed to help students be more creative while recognizing that dance, along with many other institutions, helps construct “appropriately” gendered bodies.

Second, teachers and students must work together to develop a more cooperative and interactive approach to learning. Authoritarianism in the classroom discourages critical and creative thinking while fostering a highly destructive competitive atmosphere among students. Using a feminist model, educators can help alleviate this problem by recognizing students for their various talents and encouraging them to look to one another for support or answers to questions rather than relying first and foremost on the instructor. Students learn that they can be a source of knowledge to their classmates and teacher in addition to discovering that there are a variety of ways to think about movement and narratives all while valuing what each person can bring to the dance classroom. For instance, instead of expecting students to remain silent the entire class and follow a predetermined series of exercises, teachers may engage students using a collection of techniques including working with students to create a syllabus and or goals for the course, allowing students to work together (i.e. have students correct each other when learning a new combination or step or having a group of students facilitate an entire class period, etc), using the classroom in a different way so that the teachers position does not always designate “front,” or even giving students assignments that require them to think reflexively about the ways they themselves support or challenge authoritarianism in a class setting.

Finally, teachers and students can benefit from seriously reflecting on and analyzing what they are hoping to achieve as a person involved in a college level dance

program. Not only does this prevent a one-way flow of information it also opens up a space for dissenting voices. Students may not have the same beliefs or aspirations as their teachers (or their peers) therefore it is necessary and important to discuss goals and expectations on a regular basis. Reflexivity in a dance class that employs feminist pedagogy should encourage students to critique unequal social relationships, ask why they exist and enrich the dancers' class experiences (Mayberry). As students and educators we can promote reflexivity by participating in consciousness raising activities, which for example, may include something like sharing personal narratives or having dancers create their own curriculum in which they must add race, class and gender-based analyses of dance to the current syllabus (Bonnell; Higginbotham). Most importantly, we can help cultivate reflexivity among dancers and educators by providing safe places for self-expression by assigning journals or anonymous free writes, in which students respond to a prompt or general topic, during class time (Parry).

These suggestions aim to deconstruct current modes of teaching that inhibit student growth and participation by altering the way dance is conceptualized in the academic world. Although it was not Margaret H'Doubler's goal to have dance established as an art form in academia, her efforts "could be seen as one of the first volleys in a radical reconceptualization of the arts as vital educational forces and as disciplines that might be thought about, and taught, as means toward the development of the mind" (Ross 211, 214). It is my hope that dance will continue to be reevaluated, and that feminist theories and pedagogical styles will be common in college dance classes. These alterations and observations that the field of Women's Studies can bring to the studio, will help dance be reconceptualized both as a means to challenge and develop the

mind but also as an entertaining and evocative art form that can highlight inequity and promote social change through ingenuity. As Sherry Shapiro argues in Dance, Power and Difference, arts education can only become revolutionary as it shows us what is happening in our lives and communities and gives us a heightened awareness of what we think things should be.

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