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BALLET'S CAPACITY TO BE REIMAGINED FOR A NEW GENERATION OF WOMEN

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DANCING BEYOND THE PATRIARCHY:  
BALLET'S CAPACITY TO BE REIMAGINED FOR A NEW GENERATION OF WOMEN

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE SCHOOL OF DANCE

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## **Abstract**

Ballet, an artform conceived in the French courts of royalty, is rooted in elitist European and patriarchal ideals. In the United States today, and particularly in the field's highest echelons, these ideals are often perpetuated through the practice, production and performance of ballet. In this thesis, the author claims that ballet has the capacity to be reimagined for feminist and egalitarian ideals through pedagogical reform, enforcement of body positivity, and choreographic restructuring of the movement vocabulary. The work of pedagogues, dancers, choreographers and artistic directors are reviewed to show instances in which artists have challenged ballet's norms, and even pushed culture towards a more egalitarian future. The restructuring of ballet's movement vocabulary is focused on in particular. Such instances of choreographic restructuring include women and men sharing more equal amounts of their weight with each other, thereby signifying egalitarian ideals and dismantling sexist notions of women being physically weaker than men. Additionally, women lifting other women with the use of ballet vocabulary and partnering techniques, and the presentation of queer romantic relationships through the classical narrative format also dismantle heteronormative ideals. Ultimately, the author asserts that ballet is capable of being reimagined for feminist and egalitarian ideals.

## Chapter One: Introduction

Ballet is a dance form rooted in elitist European and patriarchal ideals. Today, ballet's most renowned institutions continue to perpetuate these hegemonic standards through the practice, production, and performance of the artform. I pose the question, can ballet be re-signified beyond its classist, racist, sexist and heteronormative roots?

In order to answer the question about an art's ability to be re-signified, a theoretical framework of semiosis, or process of "the production, transmission, and interpretation of signs in human communication,"<sup>1</sup> is first required. In this introduction, I lay the semiotic framework with which to view ballet. I borrow largely from the work of Nicolete Popa Blanariu's two articles, "Towards a Framework of a Semiotics of Dance," (2013)<sup>2</sup> and "Paradigms of Communication in Performance and Dance Studies" (2015).<sup>3</sup> In both of these articles, Blanariu speaks specifically about the semiotics of ballet in her work, which I apply to my thesis as I seek to understand if ballet can be re-signified beyond its elitist, European and patriarchal associations. Balariu's work reveals that plasticity that ballet's abstract nature affords, aiding in its ability to be re-imagined by laying fundamental concepts relating to the philosophical question of whether or not artistic codes can be changed from oppressive to empowering.

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1. Jorgen Dones Johansen, *Dialogic Semiosis: An Essay on Signs and Meaning*, (Indiana Press: 1993), description. <https://iupress.org/9780253330994/dialogic-semiosis/>.

2. Nicolete Popa Blanariu, "Towards a Framework of a Semiotics of Dance," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 15, issue 1 article 7, (Purdue University Press, 2013), doi: <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2183>.

3. Nicolete Popa Blanariu, "Paradigms of Communication in Performance and Dance Studies," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 17 issue 2 article 1 (Purdue University Press, 2015): 1. <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2331>.



In her 2013 article, Blanariu weaves the semiotic theories of philosophers Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Roland Barthes with Edmund Husserl's theory of phenomenology in order to create a semiotic framework with which to analyze the signification in dance.<sup>4</sup> When analyzing semiosis in ballet, Blanariu most often employs Peirce's theory of "intelligent consciousness."<sup>5</sup> She describes Peirce's theory as similar to that of dance theorist Rudolf Laban's "kinetic thinking: the image or interior sensation perceived by the creator before its materialization is not an image as an illustration, but it acquires the meaning of shaping a lived or imagined experience."<sup>6</sup> This concept is a critical component to the formulation of signification in ballet in that it explains the unique transmission of sensation into movement.

Blanariu goes on, saying "figures in classical ballet have lost the original significations of actions rooted within them... Thus, the choreographic sign involves its (re)semantization in the particular context of each choreographic composition."<sup>7</sup> The meaning that is symbolized within ballet's vocabulary is pliable, particularly through choreographic reconceptualization. This concept is fundamental to the formulation of signification in ballet.

The semiotics of ballet contrast to the semiotics of, say, Indian classical dance's hand mudras, or gestural signs, "which reveal actions, feelings, and relationships"<sup>8</sup> with the help of the audience's shared collective shared knowledge of what these gestures iconically signify.<sup>9</sup> In

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4. Nicolete Popa Blanariu, "Towards a Framework of a Semiotics of Dance," 2.

5. Blanariu, "Towards a Framework of a Semiotics of Dance," abstract.

6. Blanariu, "Towards a Framework of a Semiotics of Dance," abstract.

7. Blanariu, "Towards a Framework of a Semiotics of Dance," 2.

8. Blanariu, "Towards a Framework of a Semiotics of Dance," 2.

9. Blanariu, "Towards a Framework of a Semiotics of Dance," 2.

simpler terms, ballet falls on the more abstract side of the symbolic/abstract spectrum, and the re-signification is possible within each new choreographic work that utilizes ballet's movement vocabulary. It is because of this plasticity of ballet's semiosis that I propose that ballet has the capacity to be reimagined, at least from a theoretical perspective.

In Blanariu's second article on the semiotics of dance, "Paradigms of Communication in Performance and Dance Studies," she elucidates on the formalism that pervades ballet:

Encoding meant polishing natural movement, "perfecting" it (a classic imperative in all arts), thus rendering it "beautiful," but artificial. Its strong point, the refined elegance of the form, is also, however, the germ of its later challenge: the denial of formalism (convention). Class [ballet] dance is the idealized mirror of the human body and its physical skills, adjusted according to an aristocratic code of measure and brilliance. Ballet is focused on the poetic function *lato sensu* – focusing on the message "for its sake" and, eventually, on the metalinguistic one centered on the choreographic code. The latter is supported by formal scruples of ballet masters and their obsession with "rules" like that of all classical French dramatists.<sup>10</sup>

What is meant by ballet's codified technique is important to define in the discussion of the semiotics of ballet and its potential for re-signification. The uniqueness and identifiability of ballet's finite movement vocabulary of two-hundred or so steps are attributable to its strict adherence to tradition regarding the techniques of movement throughout history.

It is true that ballet is rooted in formalism and has the implicit objective of technical perfection. Ballet's main technical objectives include defying gravity and transitioning seamlessly between positions through specific shape and line,<sup>11</sup> all for the sake of showing the

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10. Nicolette Popa Blanariu, "Paradigms of Communication in Performance and Dance Studies," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 17 issue 2 article 1 (Purdue University Press, 2015): 1. <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2331>.

11. Eve Whelchel, "Dancing Within Your Range of Motion: A Guide to Improve Ballet Technique., *An article for students ages 12 and up.*" *Journal of Dance Education*. (2014). Abstract. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/10.1080/15290824.2014.947648>.

beauty of the body. Classically trained ballet dancers often say that by the time that they truly understand the artform from an embodied perspective, their body can no longer physically perform all of the movements that they understand how to do on a conceptual level. This demonstrates how a dancer never feels as though they have perfected the technique, and that there is always something to be improved upon.

Though the formalism still exists within many ballet institutions today, I do not believe that it must necessarily inhibit ballet from adopting new practices or be re-signified through new choreographic works. The amount of formalism that a particular dance, choreographer, or institution wishes to enforce is pliable. The level of formalism is up to the artist to determine.

Moreover, though ballet undoubtedly has a finite movement vocabulary, the idea that ballet's purity is watered down when new elements are added is an idea steeped in racism, sexism and that has been imposed onto the artform, rather than an inherent reality about the nature of ballet's semiotics. This point is proven through an historical retelling of ballet in the United States that elucidates how ballet gained its perception as a "high art."

As Carrie Casey elucidates in her article, "The Ballet Corporealities of Anna Pavlova and Albertina Rasch,"<sup>12</sup> in the early twentieth century in the United States, "ballet lacked rigid genre boundaries to demarcate it from other dance forms."<sup>13</sup> When ballet first came to the United States, there was no labeling of ballet as "high art," and even the famed ballerina Anna Pavlova (1899-1931) regularly performed her own choreography in the circus, "alongside trained

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12. Carrie Gaiser Casey, "The Ballet Corporealities of Anna Pavlova and Albertina Rasch," *Dance Chronical*, 35, no. 1, "Ballet is Woman": But Where Are All The Women Choreographers?" 8. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/41723022>.

13. Carrie Gaiser Casey, "The Ballet Corporealities of Anna Pavlova and Albertina Rasch," 8.

elephants and acrobats.”<sup>14</sup> Pavlova’s choreography “fluidly crossed dance genres, mixing ballet, modern dance, jazz dance, and tap,”<sup>15</sup> which was not unusual during this time. Ballet was regularly performed in music halls, cabaret shows, and vaudeville.

Today, the most common historical narrative of Pavlova is that she danced in men’s choreography on reputed stages. Her choreographic career often goes completely ignored. Historians like Casey excavate women ballet artists’ early choreographic works, giving evidence against the notion that ballet has always been pristinely distinguished from other dance forms.

Indeed, the conceptualization of ballet as “high art” was constructed by Lincoln Kirstein, impresario, co-founder, and financier of George Balanchine and the New York City Ballet, in a campaign effort to establish Balanchine as the father of American ballet and the rightful heir to the succession of White, male, cis-gender choreographic geniuses.<sup>16</sup> The notion that ballet is a “high art” form has political roots in the United States. Though Blannin’s analysis on formalism in ballet is important from a semiotic standpoint today, it also perpetuates historical narrative that largely omits women artists who were re-signifying the artform with less rigid, formalistic strictures on movement vocabulary. This historical information is useful when asking the question, can ballet be re-signified?

I analyze the many instances throughout history in which ballet is reimagined, even despite its formalism. Choreographers are restructuring ballet’s movement vocabulary, particularly through more egalitarian sharing of weight between partners, and also presenting

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14. Carrie Gaiser Casey, “The Ballet Corporealities of Anna Pavlova and Albertina Rasch,” 11.

15. Casey, “The Ballet Corporealities of Anna Pavlova and Albertina Rasch,” 16.

16. Carrie Gaiser Casey. *Ballet's feminisms: genealogy and gender in twentieth-century American ballet history*, dissertation, University of California, Berkeley (2009) 9-10.

queer romantic partnerships that challenge the heteronormative norms. Through examining the works of these artists, I claim that ballet is capable of being reimagined for feminist and egalitarian ideals.

### **1.1. The epistemic framework.**

I aim to use phenomenology as I grapple with the aforementioned question, does ballet have the capacity to be reimagined for egalitarian or feminist ideals? Phenomenology is a philosophy that was initiated by Edmund Husserl in the early twentieth century.<sup>17</sup>

Phenomenology is defined as “the study of structures of consciousness as experiences from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about something.”<sup>18</sup> Using the epistemological philosophy as a framework, I present the embodied experience of ballet dancers in Chapter 3, using their own words from interview that I conducted in which they describe feelings of empowerment when dancing the artform. I also briefly describe my own experience dancing ballet. These recounts of embodied experiences in ballet show how ballet has the capacity to be (re)signified in the mind and body of the dancer as an artform of empowerment.

The use of phenomenology when asking a question of this nature in dance is important because it allows for the avoidance of perpetuating academia’s disregard towards embodied experience. Even in dance scholarship, there continues to exist an “ambivalence towards the

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17. A. Giorgi & B. Giorgi, *Phenomenology*. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods*, (2003), 1.

18. David Woodruff Smith, "Phenomenology." *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science* (2006).

material body and tendency to privilege the body as metaphor.”<sup>19</sup> The ambivalence towards embodied experience perhaps says less about dance than it does about the politics behind the marginalization of the body in Western culture,<sup>20</sup> western epistemology and the Cartesian self. I seek in my thesis to be as self-reflexive as possible, and to avoid the duality of mind/body by providing women ballet dancer’s embodied experience of the artform.

Academia’s ambivalence towards the body is a residue left behind from the politics of western epistemology. Early western philosophers. (Plato, René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, Richard Foley and others who were exclusively White European males), and how their place within the hegemonic group shaped their thinking in epistemology. It is easy to ignore the importance of the body and how it shaped one’s understanding of the world when one’s body has signifying features of the hegemony (i.e., White, male, cis gender) and is seen as the default.

Feminist philosophers work towards extracting patriarchal influence from western epistemology. For instance, with respect to the duality between the body and the mind, “Susan Bordo has shown the correlations between... fear of the feminine [body] and the dominant Cartesian paradigm of disembodied objective knowing.”<sup>21</sup> These political implications to traditional western epistemic assumptions run so deep as to become invisible, and affect dance scholarship’s perception of ballet, as it is rarely questioned that ballet dancers themselves have not historically been cited as a main source of knowledge about the nature of ballet.

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19. Anna Alten, “‘The Moment When it All Comes Together’ Embodied Experiences in Ballet.” *European Journal of Women's Studies* 11.3 (2004): 264.

20. Wolff, Janet. *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*. (Durham: Duke University Press: 2003), 135.

21. Linda Martín Alcoff, “How is Epistemology Political?” from A. Bailey and C. Cuomo, *The Feminist Philosophy Reader*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 2008), 708.

It is a form of misogyny to think that traits considered ‘feminine (i.e., intuitive, emotional, private, body) are hindrances towards the act of seeking truth, whereas stereotypically male traits (i.e., rational, logical, public, mind) are requisite in order to embark on the quest to seek truth. These patriarchal assumptions continue to plague academia, even at an intersection that ought to be so self-reflexive as to be immune to it, that of dance studies and feminist analysis. Without utilizing phenomenology, we are actually complicit in reifying the gaze of the audience over that of the dancer’s experience, thereby promoting patriarchy’s marginalization of the body.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, even if the artform is re-signified for the audience, but it still somehow feels oppressive to the dancer, then there is nothing gained from that re-signification. However, instances when ballet dancers feel empowered by the artform should be emphasized so that we may have a more holistic examination of ballet in dance scholarship.

In this thesis, I argue that ballet is capable of reclamation and re-signification from its hegemonic roots to an art that celebrates diversity and inclusivity through upholding feminist and egalitarian ideals. Ballet’s capability to be recreated is partly due to dance’s flexible, translucent nature as a “particular configuration of the time-space-energy system,”<sup>23</sup> making it more pliable than other modes of communication that are more static or linear.

The restructuring of ballet’s movement allows for the re-signification of the artform for feminist ideals for both dancer and performer. In performance, ballet movement’s restructuring that challenges sexist and heteronormative values include greater sharing of weight between male and female dancers. This dismantles the sexist notion of women as physically weaker than men, as well as concepts of chivalry.

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22. Helen Thomas, *The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 72.

23. Blaniariu, “Towards a Framework of a Semiotics of Dance,” 9.

Restructuring also occurs when women share their weight with each other or lift each other in partnering. Similarly, to the example above, this dismantles the sexist idea that women are too weak to lift and support others. It also breaks down heteronormative values by allowing the presentation of queer romantic relationships through partnering. Other restructuring includes novel use of the pointe shoe. Though the shoe was originally intended to present women as even lighter and more ethereal, choreographers have reimagined the pointe shoe. Finally, there is more general re-signification, such as through dancers of color embodying and performing ballet, which upends ballet's racist ideals, or through presenting an empowering narrative with the use of ballet vocabulary.

Through studying the history, works, and words of feminist ballet artists, artists of color and queer women artists, sharing my own embodied experience in ballet as well as that of another former professional ballet dancer whom I interview, and recounting my first teacher's egalitarian pedagogical philosophy, I demonstrate the ways in which the artform is already being reimagined. First, I discuss the philosophical question of whether or not artistic codes can be changed from oppressive to empowering. Then, I give examples of other artforms besides ballet that have accomplished this evolution.

A culture's ability to recreate, re-signify and reclaim an artform has been proven throughout history. An example from the world of dance includes a contemporary African American movement reclaiming swing dance, a dance form that had its origins in Harlem and other predominantly African American communities. Swing dance includes "Lindy Hop, Balboa, and the Charleston,"<sup>24</sup> and other movements rooted in the African diaspora vernacular. Swing

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24. The Beautiful Times: The times and places that still touches us: Swing Dance. <https://thebeautifultimes.wordpress.com/the-swing-era/swing-dance/>.



dance was largely taken over by U.S. White culture for a period in the 1950s,<sup>25</sup> but is now being reclaimed through the competitive swing dance community's effort to invite back the originators of many of these dances in order to teach a younger African American generation about swing dance and its heritage.<sup>26</sup> Thus, swing dance is reclaimed and re-signified as an Afrocentric artform by the contemporary swing dance community.

A more recent example from the world of music is the Dalit drummers in India, whose reclamation of their music was documented by Zoe Sherinian in her film, *This is a Music! Reclaiming an Untouchable Drum* (2011). These drummers reside in the lowest or out-caste of society. Though their ritual drumming is necessary for the funeral rites of the higher castes to properly proceed, their services are demanded with "threat of violence."<sup>27</sup> These artists actually transcend their place in society *through* reclaiming and re-signifying their music, using it as the icon of the Dalit civil rights movement with the slogan "Dalit arts are tools of liberation."<sup>28</sup> The Dalit drummers prove the social, cultural and even political potency that the reclamation of an artform can hold. These are two examples of genres (swing dance and Dalit drumming) that were reclaimed for a purpose that honors their source of origination. I propose that there is a need for ballet to be reclaimed beyond its elitist patriarchal origins if it is to remain relevant to both the artist and the audience.

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25. Susan Glatzer, *Alive and Kicking* (2016, Magnolia Home Entertainment), Film.

26. Susan Glatzer, *Alive and Kicking* (2016, Magnolia Home Entertainment), Film.

27. Matthew Allen, "Reviewed Work: *This is a Music: Reclaiming an Untouchable Drum*," by Zoe Sherinian. *Ethnomusicology*, 62, no. 1 (2018): 163-66. Accessed July 21, 2020. doi:10.5406/ethnomusicology.62.1.0163.

28. Barley Norton. "This Is a Music! Reclaiming an Untouchable Drum. 2010. Directed by Zoe Sherinian. 74 Minutes. Colour, DVD." *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 46 (2014): 249-50. DOI:10.5921/yeartradmusi.46.2014.0249.

In addition to utilizing the semiotic theoretical framework and phenomenological philosophy that supports my argument that ballet is capable of reimagination for empowering ideals, as a sub-thesis, I also use the theoretical framework of intersectional analysis in order to examine the problematic structures perpetuated within U.S. ballet culture today. The theoretical framework of intersectional analysis is a major contribution to sociology from the field of African American feminism, which “involves the concurrent analyses of multiple, intersecting (and interacting) sources of subordination/oppression... is based on the premise that impact of a particular source of subordination may vary, depending on its combination with other potential sources of subordination (or relative privilege.)”<sup>29</sup> Thus, from the perspective of representational analysis, ballet is most aptly examined as a signifier of elitist European and patriarchal ideals in the public perception of contemporary United States. I summarize the relevance of class, race, and gender to examine if and how ballet can overcome its past, seeking to answer the question of whether it can be reimagined for feminist and egalitarian ideals.

In order to do so, first I analyze the ways that ballet perpetuates and upholds these ideals throughout history, and in U.S. contemporary society today. I then examine how artists use ballet’s movement vocabulary to subvert those systems through reimagining and re-signifying the artform. My analysis centers on ballet teachers who undermine patriarchal ideals through the employment of feminist pedagogical principles to their teaching methodology. In addition, I draw attention to how choreographers, who do not identify with the U.S. contemporary hegemony, negotiate their identity through the use of ballet in their work. Also, I focus on artistic directors who have established ballet companies that are inclusive of intersectional identities and uphold institutional policy consistent with their values. Pointing to these examples while relying

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29. Ann Denis, “Review essay: Intersectional analysis: A contribution of feminism to sociology,” 677.

on an intersectional analysis framework, I reveal ballet's capacity to be reimagined for a new generation of women dancers, as well as the entire dance community.

I review ballet artists throughout history who have challenged the European patriarchal and elitist ideals through the works that institutions that they created. These artists include Bronislava Nijinska, Katherina Dunham, Arthur Mitchell, Annabelle Lopez Ochoa and Katy Pyle. I also use brief interviews with dancers who performed in these works or danced in these institutions to demonstrate how their embodied experience dancing ballet is one of empowerment rather than oppression.

## **1.2. Overview of the U.S. ballet economy**

Today, the cliché image of a ballerina in the United States is a white, heterosexual cis-gender woman who comes from a middle-class background. In the U.S., ballet students generally receive their early ballet education through privately owned studios, where the cost of tuition and pointe shoes are prohibitively expensive for many families. In effect, the parents of the young ballet dancer become the patrons of the ballet economy.

Many ballet dancers enter into the profession directly out of high school. Other pre-professional ballet dancers enter university programs that focus heavily on classical ballet for additional training before auditioning for professional companies. These university programs often require a huge amount of rehearsal time in the studio with little self-reflexive study on the artform itself built into the curriculum. For instance, at the University of Oklahoma, rehearsals may add up to over twenty hours a week, sometimes requiring class, rehearsal and performances on the weekends. Though undergraduate and graduate students are required to take a semester of dance history there are no academic courses offered within the school that cover intersectional

analysis race, gender and class in dance, or of economic policies that affect the arts in the study of western contemporary concert dance.

When these pre-professionals are ready to audition many find the cost of the audition process itself prohibitively expensive, as dancers often must travel to auditions in order to be considered for a position. Those who are chosen through an audition are usually considered for apprenticeships. The apprenticeship business model is a growing trend in most U.S. ballet companies. The terms apprentice, trainee, and second company member are all fluid and are interchangeable in the U.S. ballet culture's vernacular.

Colette Kelly notes in her work, *Dancing Up the Glass Escalator: Institutional Advantages for Men in Ballet*, that apprentices are typically female dancers.<sup>30</sup> Many classical ballets like *The Nutcracker* or *Swan Lake* require a large number of women, so apprentices will "fill the ranks." The demand for men in ballet is so high that they oftentimes are taken straight into the corps after their first professional audition, bypassing the apprenticeship rank. These apprenticeship positions may or may not offer training and performance opportunities for tuition, pointe shoe allowances, stipends or salaried contracts depending on the company.<sup>31</sup> These apprentices are, in effect, also donors to the ballet economy, providing their skilled labor to the stage, and enabling companies to put on the works that attract the largest crowds and ticket sales, particularly through *The Nutcracker*.

For instance, I apprenticed at Oklahoma City Ballet, a regional ballet company, from 2014-2016. During my time, there were eight apprentices, two men and six women, who traveled

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30. Kelly, Collette. "Dancing Up the Glass Escalator: Institutional Advantages for Men in Ballet Choreography," *Columbia Undergraduate Research Journal* 2.1 (2015).

31. Gavin Larsen, "Reading the Fine Print: Decoding What Trainee Programs and Second Companies Can Do for You," *Pointe Magazine*, July 1, 2019. <https://www.pointemagazine.com/trainee-programs-second-companies-2638686929.html>.

from all over the country and world in hopes of securing a contract with the company (I was the only one originally from Oklahoma; others came from as far as the Ukraine and England.) The culture was highly competitive as we were told to consider the apprenticeship a yearlong audition.

We all rehearsed, trained, performed and toured for an average of eight hours a day for thirty-eight weeks for no pay, and a pointe shoe allowance that provided us with twenty pairs of pointe shoes (worth about fourteen hundred to two thousand dollars, depending on the type of pointe shoe a dancer wears). After the first year, only two of us were invited back, and the rest were told that their apprenticeship was over. The second year, I received a one-hundred-dollar stipend for the same amount of work plus the same pointe shoe allowance.

In another example, Colorado Ballet states explicitly on their website that “the importance of other financial support from family, a savings account and sound budgeting skills for Studio Company members cannot be downplayed... university study is encouraged, but only if it can be managed around the Ballet’s schedule, which can be an extreme challenge.”<sup>32</sup> These time constraints and lack of pragmatic guidance affect these young ballet dancers who are financially able to continue dancing by stunting their education and career opportunities outside of ballet, while also completely barring dancers who cannot afford to dance. Thus, one can see that the exorbitant amount of time that it takes to become a professional ballet dancer, along with the lack of self-reflexive political education in the common ballet curriculum, actually perpetuates elitist and patriarchal norms.

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32. Colorado Ballet, “The Studio Company: Frequently Asked Questions: Can I secure a job while involved with the Studio Company?” <https://www.coloradoballet.org/company/studiocompany>.

### 1.3. Intersectionality of gender, race and class in ballet

In the United States, the reality is that class disparities and racial inequities are layered and intersect. In ballet, racial disparity overlaps with the financially prohibitive nature of ballet. Therefore, addressing the lack of diversity in ballet calls for increasing access to the arts through programs that go into communities to provide more affordable class.

In the United States, programs that provide access to the arts are often funded through grants and foundations. Misty Copeland, American Ballet Theater's first Black principal dancer,<sup>33</sup> credits the Boys & Girls Club in San Pedro, California for exposing her to ballet.<sup>34</sup> Today, American Ballet Theater spearheads this issue with their initiative, Project Plié, that transcends socio-economic boundaries in ballet by providing affordable ballet class to underserved communities.<sup>35</sup> In many cases, these programs require financial support through government grants and other means of assistance. Unfortunately, funding for the arts is dwindling in the United States, and President Donald Trump has vowed to defund the National Endowment for the Arts.<sup>36</sup> Ballet is in a unique position to fight against the policy decisions because of its visibility with donors who tend to be older, white, and middle to upper class. Ballet often makes odd political bedfellows, such as when the New York City Ballet accepted one-hundred million dollars from David H. Koch, the conservative oil-and-gas billionaire, for

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33. Misty Copeland: Misty's Story. <https://mistycopeland.com/>.

34. Hilary Howard, "Ballet Dancer Has a Day Off, but She Still Moves," *New York Times*, October 17, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/19/nyregion/ballet-dancer-has-a-day-off-but-she-still-moves.html>.

35. Ayoko Hickman, "Project Plié: Building Diversity in Ballet," master's thesis Drexel University (2016) 1.

36. Naomi Adiv, "Goodbye to the National Endowment for the Arts?" *Arts and International Affairs* (2018) 49. : [https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/usp\\_fac](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/usp_fac)

renovations on the New York State Theater.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, in today's increasingly neoliberal climate in the U.S., the arts are increasingly relying upon private benefactors in order to keep their institutions afloat, and then must sometimes defer to benefactors' taste over the artists' visions.

Additionally, today's neoliberal and "individualistic understandings of female emancipation have gradually replaced the more expansive, anti-hierarchical, egalitarian, class-sensitive, anti-capitalistic understanding of feminist that flourished during the 1960s and 1970s."<sup>38</sup> As a sub-thesis, I claim that in order for all women to have equal opportunities for positions of power in the ballet world, particularly in this neoliberal and post-feminist era, there must be efforts towards reclaiming the political life in ballet's educational curriculum. An educational philosophy founded upon the premise that no human activity is apolitical is necessary in order for ballet artists to locate themselves within the political landscape of contemporary U.S. economy and culture and to advocate for policies that affect access to the arts.

Though the idea of a political education embedded in ballet's curriculum may seem odd, or seem suspect of some indoctrinating agenda, upon closer inspection of the history of epistemology in western culture, this proposition seems less radical. The founders of western philosophy claimed that the field of philosophy is 'transcendent' of politics. This philosophical presumption effects the educational system to this day. Many recent feminist philosophers have pointed out the immense privilege of being able to navigate the world without considering how

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37. Robin Pobegrin, "David H. Koch Gives \$100 Million to Theater," *New York Times*, July 10, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/10/arts/10linc.html>.

38. Helene Brodin, Alin Peterson, "Equal Opportunities? Gendering and Racialising the Politics of Entrepreneurship in Swedish Eldercare," *Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, (2020), 28, vol. 2, 99.

one's own body shapes one's version of reality, or to claim that truth could only be found above the fray of the political. Examples of current feminist scholars who are pointing out this fallacy in western epistemology include:

Andrea Nye has argued that Western formulations of logic from Parmenides through Frege exemplify the desire of aristocratic males to maintain their own authority and control over the behavior of all social subjects, and thus to maintain a system of strictly controlled hierarchical relations that benefit them. Genevieve Lloyd has shown that the ideals of reason developed throughout the history of Western philosophy are integrally connected to ideals of masculinity. For a more contemporary case, Lorraine Code has argued that Richard Foley's epistemology commits the error of assuming that he can generalize from his own experience to the experience of all other human beings.<sup>39</sup>

A significant task of feminist philosophy has been to prove that philosophy is not a body of texts and ideas, and rather that philosophy is a human endeavor and therefore inherently apolitical.

Very recently, Eve Yaa Asantewaa, Senior Director of Artistic Development and Curation at Gibney, and recipient of the 2017 Bessie Award winner for Outstanding Service to the Field of Dance,<sup>40</sup> was interviewed for the magazine *Hyperallergic*, to cover the challenges facing women of color in dance are largely economic. Asantewaa says, "Everybody is going to need higher levels of funding. We've gone too long doing a lot for very little... I'm in New York where the issue is not so much *can a queer arts worker catch a break? It's can a queer arts worker pay the rent? Can anybody?*."<sup>41</sup> Gender and racial and class disparities will not be

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39. Linda Martín Alcoff, "How is Epistemology Political?" 705.

40 Research Movement: Eva Yaa Asantewaa. <https://movementresearch.org/people/eva-yaa-asantewa>.

41. Dessane Lopez Cassell, "Queen Art Workers Reflect: Ave Yaa Asantewaa Dancers Speaking Out Against a Capitalist System," *Hyperallergic* June 6, 2020. <https://hyperallergic.com/568326/queer-art-workers-reflect-eva-yaa-asantewaa-supports-dancers-speaking-out-against-a-capitalist-system/>.



corrected until the workers are equipped with the knowledge of their own oppression and are able to aid in the fight to protect funding for the arts.

Beyond the racial inequality in ballet attributable to class inequality, there exist explicitly racist codes in the world of U.S. ballet. For instance, directors and choreographers are cited saying different skin colors “destroy the corps de ballet’s illusion of symmetry,”<sup>42</sup> which prioritizes an aesthetic preference over inclusion and diversity. Even Misty Copeland has been detracted by dance critic Alastair McCauley for not appearing “classical,”<sup>43</sup> which presents a racially coded bias associating light skin with femininity. Chrystyn Fentroy, soloist at Boston Ballet, describes her experience as a Black woman in the ballet world with microaggressions, such as, “You don’t have the right body type for ballet, you couldn’t possibly dance there because there are not others like you, powder your skin lighter so you blend in, you’re so good at contemporary.”<sup>44</sup> These Black women artists describe putting up with overtly racist messaging from people in power. Though Copeland and Fentroy are women who persevere, there are likely countless women who leave the field precisely because of this kind of intolerance.

Today the highest echelons of U.S. ballet remain entrenched in White culture. The racial representation within ballet companies does not match that of the cities in which they serve, and the disparity becomes worse in the more prestigious institutions. Moreover, of the top ten U.S. ballet companies, the only one artistically directed by a woman of color is Lourdes Lopez’s

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42. Erin Lauren Brown, “‘As Long as They Have Talent:’ Organizational Barriers to Black Ballet,” *Dance Chronical*, 3 no. 41 (2018), 360. [10.1080/01472526.2018.1518076](https://doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2018.1518076).

43. Ruth La Ferla, “The Rise and Rise of Misty Copeland,” *New York Times*, December 18, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/20/fashion/the-rise-and-rise-of-misty-copeland.html>.

44. Chrystyn Fentroy, “My Experience as a Black Ballerina in a World of Implicit Bias,” *Pointe Magazine*, June 5, 2020, <https://www.pointemagazine.com/chrystyn-fentroy-2646155391.html>.

Miami City Ballet.<sup>45</sup> The conversation around race remains “an issue of optics rather than a deep analysis of systemics.”<sup>46</sup> Ballet companies’ public relations messages tend to focus on images of dancers of color within their companies rather than to address ways that they intend to implement or improve on anti-racist policies within their institutions, make ballet more accessible financially, or even stand in solidarity against capitalism and neoliberalism.

In addition, there is a lack of feminist leadership in ballet’s highest echelons, which stands in stark contrast to the hyper-feminine artform. For example, 2020 data from the Dance Data Project (DDP) show that, of the top fifty U.S. ballet companies, 75% of the artistic directors are male, and of the top ten companies, 90% of artistic directors are male.<sup>47</sup> The DDP further found that only 21% of resident choreographers were women in the combined data from U.S. and international ballet companies.<sup>48</sup>

Jessica Teague conducted a regional statistical analysis in her dissertation, *Where are the female choreographers? A study on the gender balance among professional choreographers working in the fields of classical ballet and contemporary dance*. Teague chose “New York City Ballet, Houston Ballet, the National Ballet of Canada, San Francisco Ballet, and Miami City Ballet”<sup>49</sup> to represent North American ballet companies.<sup>50</sup> Teague found that within these North

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45. Dance Data Project, “The Artistic and Executive Leadership Report,” March 2020. <https://www.dancedataproject.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Leadership-Report-2020.pdf>.

46. Stephanie Ogden, *Promoting Racial Equity in Ballet: Strategies and Challenges*, master’s thesis, American University (2018), 4.

47. Dance Data Project, “Artistic and Executive Leadership Report,” March 2020. <https://www.dancedataproject.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Leadership-Report-2020.pdf>.

48. Dance Data Project, “Artistic and Executive Leadership Report.”

49. Jessica Teague, “Where are the female choreographers? A study on the gender imbalance among professional choreographers working in the fields of classical ballet and contemporary dance.” (2016). 37. [http://www.danceicons.org/\\_doc/FemanleChoreograohers.pdf](http://www.danceicons.org/_doc/FemanleChoreograohers.pdf).

50. Of these, only Miami City Ballet has a woman artistic director, Lourdes Lopez

American companies, only 2% of the choreographers being represented are women.<sup>51</sup> These statistics show how ballet, despite its hyper-feminine appearance, is plagued by patriarchal forces that push men disproportionately into positions of leadership. The ‘glass ceiling’ refers to invisible systemic enforcements of misogyny that keep women from rising to powers. This straightforward discrimination against women may explain the lack of women as artistic directors and choreographers of major ballet companies.

Besides the ‘glass ceiling’, sociologists have identified other, more subtle ways in which institutional misogyny is perpetuated. Christine Williams defines the ‘glass escalator’ effect as the preferential treatment of men in women-dominated fields.<sup>52</sup> This occurs when men are promoted to higher-paying positions of leadership because traits that are lauded for those positions, such as assertiveness, independence and critical thinking, are coded as male. Men are essentially whisked up the escalator, leaving women behind on lower levels.

Discrimination in the hiring process occurs in every field, including female-dominated ones. Williams studied men “in four predominantly female professions: nursing, librarianship, elementary school teaching, and social work... to [demonstrate how] sexism can outweigh the effects of tokenism when men enter nontraditional occupations”<sup>53</sup> in her 1992 work, *The glass escalator: Hidden advantages for men in the “female” professions*.<sup>54</sup>

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51. Teague, “Where are the female choreographers? A study on the gender imbalance among professional choreographers working in the fields of classical ballet and contemporary dance.” 37.

52. Christine L. Williams, “The glass escalator: Hidden advantages for men in the “female” professions,” *Social Problems* 39, no. 3 (1992): 253. <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/stable/3096961>.

53. Williams, “The glass escalator: Hidden advantages for men in the “female” professions,” 253.

54. Williams, “The glass escalator: Hidden advantages for men in the “female” professions”

Colette Kelly shows that Williams' glass escalator theory could be applied to the field of ballet in her work, *Dancing Up the Glass Escalator: Institutional Advantages for Men in Ballet*, through her statistical analysis of American ballet companies and interviews with female ballet choreographers.<sup>55</sup> Her work compares the career trajectories of male and female choreographers. Kelly exemplifies how misogyny is enforced in the administrative offices of ballet companies. Women, and particularly women of intersectional identity, face an uphill battle when seeking to attain positions of leadership in ballet. Thus, ballet is obviously not immune to sexism that pervades the rest of the U.S. job market.

The 'glass cliff' effect is another discriminatory force that allows women to step into undesirable positions of power with the potential of 'falling off the cliff.' The 'glass cliff' phenomenon was coined by sociologists in the early 2000s, and is described as "leadership positions that are relatively risky or precarious since they are more likely to involve management of organization units that are in crisis."<sup>56</sup> When an institution is on the brink of collapse, unattractive job offers in leadership may be a last-ditch effort to save the organization.

An example of a 'glass cliff' event was the promotion of Lourdes Lopez to the artistic directorship of Miami City Ballet. Lopez succeeded Edward Villella, who left the company amid "frequent troubles with the company's board,"<sup>57</sup> and near financial ruin. Lopez is a trailblazer, being the only woman, as well as the only Latina, leading a top ten U.S. ballet company.<sup>58</sup>

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55. Colette Kelly, *Dancing Up the Glass Escalator: Institutional Advantages for Men in Ballet Choreography*.

56. S. Alexander Haslam and Michelle K. Ryan, "The road to the glass cliff: differences in the perceived suitability of men and women for leadership positions in succeeding and failing organizations," *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19, 530.

57. Lisa DeFrank-Cole and Renee K. Nicholson, "The slow-changing face of leadership in ballet: an interdisciplinary approach to analyzing women's roles," *Leadership and Humanities*, vol. 4 no. 2, 2016. 82.

58. Teague, Jessica, 42.

Besides the glass ceiling, escalator, and cliff effects, another force at play in women's limitations for leadership is the concept of the "clout" or prestige of a ballet institution. The more esteem a field enjoys, the more likely it is that society expects men to fill its position of power. Conversely, it is more "permissible" for women to hold leadership roles in institutions of less esteem. As dance historian Lynn Garafola writes, "The more influential a ballet institution, the less likely that a woman will be in a position of power, and that includes choreographing. Once ballet is institutionalized, it becomes a man's world."<sup>59</sup> . Chapter 2 gives examples of men dominating the field of ballet when the artform was used to uphold the divine rights of kings in the courts of European royalty, as well as examples of women taking on leadership roles in dance organizations that had little or no clout.

Misogyny is perpetuated internally in the ballet world through ballet's practice, production and performance. In classroom practice, authoritarian pedagogical structures encourage the obedience of female ballet students. In production, the choreographer is typically perceived to be the male master or genius, and the female plays the role of body and muse. In performance, the gendered movement idiom perpetuates stereotypes of the man as chivalrous support to the ballerina, particularly in the pas de deux.

Classical narrative ballet presents heteronormative sexual relationships. Dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster claims that ballet is too deeply entrenched in its patriarchal representation to ever "allow for the dismissal of gendered content as a superfluous formal feature analogous in impact only to that of an irrelevant cliché."<sup>60</sup> According to Foster, ballet does not hold the capacity to be reclaimed or re-signified beyond its patriarchal roots.

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59. Lynn Garafola, *Legacies of Twentieth-Century Dance* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 241.

60. Susan Leigh Foster, "The ballerina's phallic pointe," *Corporealities: Dancing knowledge, culture and power* (New York: Routledge, 1996)

Feminist work that does not include intersectional analysis of race and class “frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences”<sup>61</sup> by undermining and distorting the political relevance of race and class at the systemic level as well as in individual lives. Through studying the history of feminist ballet artists, artists of color and queer women artists, and recounting my first teacher’s personal pedagogical philosophy, I pursue a different, less common stance than Foster’s. I claim that ballet as a movement idiom - specifically, a movement idiom that enables the body to defy gravity – has the capacity to be reclaimed and re-signified into a more feminist, egalitarian artform for new generations of women. The reimagination of ballet’s vocabulary involves redistribution of weight sharing between partners, the allowance of women to partner woman (and men to partner men), and for a re-signification of the pointe shoe.

In the following chapter, I overview the history of ballet in order to uncover how the movement vocabulary came to be gendered, and why the standard for the ballerina’s body became androgenized. I uncover how misogyny is perpetuated in the artform. Finally, I review dance scholar’s general consensus that ballet is inherently oppressive to women.

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61. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Feminist Philosophy Reader* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008): 279.

## Chapter Two: Ballet's European, sexist ideology

Ballet is a form of dance that was born out of the Italian influenced French courts of Catherine de' Medici (1547-1589).<sup>62</sup> I analyze ballet's European patriarchal and elite heritage in order to understand the sexist ideologies that continue to plague ballet and the meaning of its movement vocabulary. Though the artform has been commanded by women performers for over two centuries,<sup>63</sup> misogyny continues to be enforced in ballet's most esteemed male-led institutions. In reviewing the history of ballet, it becomes clear that sexist ideology (along with racism and classism) and the evolution of ballet are indelibly intertwined and continue to impact ballet's culture today.

Before Catherine de' Medici, ballet's earliest influences are found in the social dances of the Italian Renaissance (approximately 1330-1550),<sup>64</sup> a time when nobility mounted lavish entertainments, including "flaming torch dances, elaborate horse ballets... and masked interludes with heroic, allegorical, and exotic themes."<sup>65</sup> The Italians developed *ballo* and *balletti*, a form of social dancing that employed a type of secular instrumental music that was unique for its time.<sup>66</sup> Though it is generally assumed that women could not have played any role in dance at this time, dance historians are excavating evidence to assert otherwise, as Judith Bryce does in her work *Performing for Strangers: Women, Dance, and Music in Quattrocento Florence*:

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62. Una McIlvenna, "'A Stable of Whores?' The 'flying Squadron' of Catherine de Medici," in *The Politics of Female Households: Ladies-in-Waiting across Early Modern Europe. Rulers and Elites* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2014), 183. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004258396\\_009](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004258396_009).

63. Lynn Garafola, "Where Are Ballet's Women Choreographers?" *Reconfiguring the Sexes*. (2005), 215.

64. Italian Renaissance, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191736551.timeline.0001>.

65. Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (New York: Random House, 2010), 182.

66. Barbara Sparti, The 15th-century *balli* tunes: a new look, *Early Music*, Volume 14, Issue 3, August 1986, Pages 346–357, <https://doi.org/10.1093/earlyj/14.3.346>.

Contrary to a tradition of scholarly insistence on the invisibility of Florentine patrician women outside the domestic sphere, it can be argued such women did in effect perform a significant, public, or quasi-public, function in the negotiation of relationships between the Republic and other Italian, and European, elites... with fragmentary evidence concerning dancing and musical performance by women.”<sup>67</sup>

Or, as Renaissance art scholar Richard Trexler explains, “governments knew that without girls and women, there was no dance.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, women played an integral role as the dancers who were to shape and influence ballet.

Besides dancing for visitors, there exists historical evidence of women dancing during festivals and feasts in the Italian Renaissance.<sup>69</sup> Though Renaissance women may have had more visibility via dancing than previously thought, historians note that it should not be assumed that this visibility was necessarily grounds for social or political mobility for them, as Judith Bryce elucidates in her article “Performing for Strangers: Women, Dance, and Music in Quattrocento Florence,”:

The nature of female performance as hazardous [towards the patriarchy] but, nevertheless, within precisely (male-) defined limits as sometimes socially acceptable, and even politically and socially advantageous, can be seen as simply constituting a conscious (and/or unconscious) patriarchal manipulation and exploitation of women in which the latter are positioned, and, more insidiously, position themselves, as objects.<sup>70</sup>

Though Italian Renaissance women’s ability to use dance as a tool for empowerment is doubted, their influence on the artform itself is not questioned.

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67. Judith Bryce. “Performing for Strangers: Women, Dance, and Music in Quattrocento Florence.” *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 4, 2001, 1078. doi: [www.jstor.org/stable/1261967](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1261967).

68. Richard Trexler, *The Libro Cerimoniale of the Florentine Republic by Francesco Filarete and Angelo Manfredi*. (Geneva: 1978), 236.

69. Judith Bryce, “Performing for Strangers: Women, Dance, and Music in Quattrocento Florence,” 1100.

70. Judith Bryce, “Performing for Strangers: Women, Dance, and Music in Quattrocento Florence,” 1100.



Though most women across all socioeconomic statuses during the Renaissance era endured countless forms of oppression, it is important to note that this time also coincided with the reign of one of the most powerful women in sixteenth century: Catherine de' Medici.<sup>71</sup> Medici's role as a patron of the arts cannot be overemphasized in the development of ballet, as she used the arts to soothe sectarian violence in an attempt to hold on to the throne for her family.<sup>72</sup> It is also under her rule that the first spectacle to combine dance and narrative, known as *ballet de cour*, was conceived.<sup>73</sup> Ballet as we know it today would have never occurred had de' Medici not brought her Italian artistic tastes to the French courts.

#### 1.4. Catherine de' Medici

Catherine de' Medici was born into a family of high nobility.<sup>74</sup> In 1533, Henri II of France married Catherine de' Medici when they were both fourteen years old, and, "like all royal marriages of that time, this marriage served a political goal: the alliance between the de' Medici pope Clement VII and the French King."<sup>75</sup> The marriage solidified the alliance between Italy and France.

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71. Mark Strage, *Women of Power: the life and times of Catherine de Medici*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.)

72. Homans, 12.

73. Homans, 11.

74. Jean Héritier, *Catherine de Medici*. (Philadelphia: Touledge, 2019), 1.

75. Martin Gosman, Alasdair James MacDonald, and Arie Johan Vanderjagt, *Princes and Princely Culture: 1450-1650* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 104.

Catherine de' Medici had little political influence over her husband, the French king Henry II, who favored the advice and opinions of his mistress.<sup>76</sup> The slighted de' Medici “indulged in her love of arts and introduced aspects of Italian court life to the French court.”<sup>77</sup> It was after Henri II was killed in a jousting accident that Catherine gained agency to shape her political life.<sup>78</sup> Catherine maneuvered her way through patriarchal law to become one of the most influential rulers in history, as her power endured throughout the reigns of her three sons.<sup>79</sup>

In France during this time, Salic law ensured that royal powers were only passed down to the hands of men.<sup>80</sup> Catherine navigated through the societal norms of her time brilliantly, and employed dance and splendid court festivals “as a political tool, expressing both the greatness of the Valois kings and her own ideas concerning religious tolerance in a France that risked falling apart as a result of the wars of religion.”<sup>81</sup> Thus, ballet’s roots are truly intertwined with de’ Medici’s ascent to power and her fight to maintain control of the throne.

Ballet was not only a tool of political propaganda, but a cultural and religious one as well. In 1570, Charles IX (probably through his mother’s guidance) established the Académie de Poésie et de Musique, a cultural institution that idealized dance as a potential artistic channel to a higher realm.<sup>82</sup> By melding “religious beliefs with the Platonic notion of a secret and ideal realm

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76. Una McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation at the Court of Catherine de Medici* (Philadelphia: Routledge, 2016): 47.

77. Durante, Viviana, *Ballet: The Definitive Illustrated Story*. (New York: DK Publishing, 2018), 15.

78. Martin Gosman, Alasdair James MacDonald, and Arie Johan Vanderjagt, *Princes and Princely Culture: 1450-1650* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 105.

79. Jean Robert Knecht, *Catherine de' Medici* (Philadelphia: Routledge, 2014), xi.

80. Jean Robert Knecht, *Catherine de' Medici* (Philadelphia: Routledge, 2014), 71.

81. Gosman, M., et all. *Princes and Princely Culture 1450-1650*, 105.

82. Homans, 5.

more real than their own perceived world, they [the Académie] sought to remake the Christian church – not through the old practices of Catholic liturgy but through theater and art, and above all through the classical forms of pagan antiquity.”<sup>83</sup> Thus, ballet’s early roots are tied with Italian Renaissance Christianity as well.

The religious roots of ballet are still visible today, with the use of the term *en croix* (French for “in the shape of a cross”), or the outlining of a cross shape on the floor with the feet in *tendus*. Ballet also exhibits an upward lift with the body towards the heavens, and a repudiation of the flesh, metaphorically, as the ballet dancer practices in order to transcend the body through the technique. As an aside, there is also a quite literal repudiation of the flesh seen through the high prevalence of eating disorders in ballet today. There exists an historical lineage of anorexia in Western ascetics as a practice of renouncing earthly wants in order to become closer to God.<sup>84</sup> Expectations of an almost devout devotion to ballet and the desire to transcend the body still exist in the ritualization of class, and the obedience to the artform’s technique.

The first example of ballet de cour, or court ballet, was performed at the Great Hall of the Louvre in celebration of the Queen’s half-sister’s marriage.<sup>85</sup> The five-and-a-half-hour work, known as the *Ballet Comique de la Reine*, proved groundbreaking as it was the first work to combine dance, music, design, and plot to create a narrative piece.<sup>86</sup> Though Balthasar de Beaujoureux, the violinist, composer and choreographer, is historically given credit as principle creator of the event (signifying the status given to a ballet master during this time), it was “... a

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83. Homans, 5.

84. Nonja Peters, “Ascetic Anorexic,” *The International Journal of Anthropology*, no. 37, (1995), 48. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23171771>.

85. Homans, *Apollo’s Angels*, 6.

86. Homans, *Apollo’s Angels*, 6.

fundamentally collaborative genre, combining as it did the efforts of choreographers, composers, musicians, dancers, set designers, costume designers, and many others.”<sup>87</sup> This trend of crediting one single person for the group’s work continues in ballet today, which erases many (usually female) artists’ work from the history books.

The barrier between audience member and performer was a loose one. As observed by Mark Franko, French court ballet was “ closer... to twentieth-century performance art than to classical ballet.”<sup>88</sup> The politics happening inside the ballet itself were as potent as any other political happening elsewhere, as French courtiers found honor and privilege performing alongside the Queen and her nobility. These amateur dancers were also the audience members, as there was no concept of dancing ballet as a profession yet.

Under de’ Medici’s era, women commonly made appearances in the ballets, as did the Queen herself.<sup>89</sup> When Catherine de’ Medici died in 1589, she left a major legacy of art patronage, and her use of ballet as a political, social, and cultural tool to reify the divine rights of royalty was long admired and emulated by her descendants. De’ Medici used ballet not only to celebrate great occasions, but to quell religious turmoil of her people and “legitimize the monarchy with their splendor.”<sup>90</sup> De’ Medici wielded ballet to her advantage in maintaining her status as queen.

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87. Prest, *Theatre under Louis XIV: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet, and Opera* 77.

88. Prest, *Theatre under Louis XIV: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet, and Opera* 78-79.

89. Una McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation at the Court of Catherine de Medici*, 13.

90. Carol Lee and Allyn Bacon, *Ballet in Western Culture: A History of its Origins and Evolution* (Boston: Psychology Press, 2002), 41.

## 1.5. Louis XIII (1610-1643) and Louis XIV (1643-1750)

The major developments towards the masculinization of ballet began in the ballet de cour, which evolved under Louis XIII's rule (1610-1643),<sup>91</sup> whose reign was marked by suspicion and authority via force.<sup>92</sup> Louis XIII became king of France just shy of his ninth birthday, after his father was assassinated, and after he executed his own mother, Marie de' Medici, who acted as regent for a brief time until 1617.<sup>93</sup> Confiding in the advice of his first minister, Cardinal de Richelieu, Louis XIII sought to strengthen his absolute rule over France. In this political climate ballet took on a bombastic style in order to flatter Louis XIII as ruler.<sup>94</sup> Thus, ballet's earliest conception as a practice of bodily comportment directly affirmed a king's prestige and power. It was under Louis XIII's reign that men began dancing *en travesti* and women were generally not allowed onstage.<sup>95</sup>

Comparing ballet under Louis XIII's reign to Catherine de' Medici's, it becomes clear that the entire purpose of the artform had changed. Under Louis XIII, ballet became the representation of foreigners as caricatures for the manipulation of French public mentality:

*Ballets des nations*, that is, the ritualized parade of foreigners on the court stage, was a common feature of French royal entertainments in the 1620s and 1630s. It developed from occasional entries of such exotic characters as Turks, Blackamoors or Indians into comprehensive reviews of diverse peoples and nations from the four corners of the world, come to pay homage to the French king.<sup>96</sup>

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91. A. Lloyd Moote, *Louis XII, The Just*. (University of California Press: 1989), iv.

92. Homans, 52.

93. Homan, 22.

94. Homans, 53.

95. Homans, 54.

96. Marie-Claude Canova-Green, "Dance and ritual the Ballet des nations at the court of Louis XIII," *Renaissance Studies*, vol. 9, 4, (1995), 395. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/24412293>.

The influence of Louis XIII's presentation of groups of people as caricatures is seen in the most popular ballet in the United States, *The Nutcracker*, during Act III's divertissements.

Louis XIV was noted as an avid dancer and balletomane, even establishing the first dance institution in the western world, the Académie Royale de Dance.<sup>97</sup> The king "sought to raise both the technical and artistic standards of dance and choreography in order that even more spectacular entertainments could be created."<sup>98</sup> The king's demand for great technical excellence was the catalyst that drove ballet dancing into becoming professional pursuit.

Under Louis XIV's reign (1643-1715), ballet's movements became codified.<sup>99</sup> Men continued to play the roles of women *en travesti*, as they had under Louis XIII. Under Louis XIV, however, ballet performances "affirm[ed] the traditional model of male-female sexual relations, [and] it also served... to enforce the feminine ideal."<sup>100</sup> Through their *en travesti* roles, men not only exemplified the ways that the ideal woman should look and act through their performance, but also seduced the women in the audience, thus enforcing heteronormative sexual relationships from multiple levels.<sup>101</sup>

During Louis XIV's reign, ballet was danced almost exclusively by men (though with notable exception) with female roles cross-casted by men. The men were allowed to reveal more

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97. Homans, *Apollo's Angels*, 59.

98. Homans, *Apollo's Angels*, 60.

99. Julia Prest, "The Politics of Ballet and the Court of Louis IV," *Dance, Spectacle, and the Body Politic, 1250-1750*. (Indiana University Press, 2008), 149.

100. Prest, *Theatre under Louis XIV: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet, and Opera*. 86.

101. Prest, *Theatre under Louis XIV: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet, and Opera*. 93.

of their legs when performing as women than was customary for women to show at the time.<sup>102</sup>

Thus, the male ballet dancer was not only free to play male or female roles but was actually allowed to reveal his legs *as* a cross-casted performer, creating a new conception of gender onstage: a man playing the role of a woman who enjoyed the freedom of revealing more of the body. The overtly sensual manner of this role exemplified in the opening verse of the *Ballet de Cassandre*:

*Beauties who have come here  
To witness the triumph of Cassandra,  
She is about to descend from the heavens:  
Make no mistake,  
It is for your beautiful eyes.  
Every heart will be under your command.  
Beauties, whose eyes burn our hearts to cinders,  
After we have set up Cassandra's dwelling,  
Given the quality of our bodies and our minds,  
Will you have the heart  
To leave us to sleep outside?<sup>103</sup>*

It is worth mentioning that, during this time in ballet, the persona of the actual performer was just as important as the identity of the female character he was playing. In the programs given to the audiences, the names of the performers were written alongside their character and were referred to by their real name throughout.<sup>104</sup> This is part of the reason why all-important men, even Louis XIV himself, did not risk losing the audience's perception of their virility or masculinity when playing female roles. Louis XIV playing a coquettish young woman is exemplified in this following stanza:

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102. Prest, *Theatre under Louis Xiv: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet, and Opera*. 81.

103. Prest, *Theatre under Louis Xiv: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet, and Opera*. 87-88.

104. Prest, *Theatre under Louis Xiv: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet, and Opera*. 93.

*How many admirers walk in my footsteps,  
And kiss my path,  
And how many people would like to receive my good graces  
Who will not do so.*<sup>105</sup>

This stanza conveys how the heteronormative concept of chivalry towards women, and the sexual power that women held, was used as an analogy to a king's power. Men employed their freedom of being able to identify with the opposite sex because of their biological advantage of being male. This spectrum that associates adolescent boyhood with young womanhood reveals this era's conceptualization of man as a more mature, complete version of a woman.

There is further evidence that Louis XIV even owned the right to acknowledge an unusual duality, as his female character proclaims, "*I feel that in the body of an attractive young women/ I have the soul of a great king.*"<sup>106</sup> Though there is a similarity in the ability to embody a duality, Elizabeth I's claim is very different in her Tilbury Speech of 1588:

*I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm: to which rather than any dishonor shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder or every one of your virtues in the field.*<sup>107</sup>

Whereas Louis XIV could flaunt the sexuality of a coquettish woman without risk of undermining his own authority, Elizabeth I had to convince her people of her masculinity in order to validate her power.

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105. Prest, *Theatre under Louis XIV: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet, and Opera*. 90.

106. Prest, *Theatre under Louis XIV: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet, and Opera*. 90.

107. Prest, *Theatre under Louis XIV: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet, and Opera*. 90.



Interestingly, ballet, an artform to be performed only by men during Louis VIX's reign, eventually became a hyper-feminine artform. Women increasingly played female roles, but only ones that were deemed suitable.<sup>108</sup> The male gaze was overtly invited upon to the female dancers' bodies by the stanzas made to accompany their appearance:

*Whose plump, round, white arms,  
And whose breast, capable of burning us to a cinder,  
Are seen by the thieving eye that  
Looks at what it would not dare to take.*<sup>109</sup>

At this time, a considerable number of roles were deemed inappropriate for women to play, including 'wild' women, old women, or ugly women.<sup>110</sup> The coexistence of cross-casting with the arrival of women on the ballet stage suggests that women were personally or politically unwilling to perform roles that made them appear unfeminine.<sup>111</sup> Whereas men had long had the freedom to impersonate any range of characters, women were unable and unwilling to perform any character that was unflattering. (These conventions are still seen today in ballet, as men often play the role of Cinderella's stepsisters and mother, Widow Simone in *La Fille Mal Gardée*, and Carabosse, or the evil sorceress, in *The Sleeping Beauty*.)

Ballet spread across Europe and Russia as courts sought to emulate the grandeur and authority that the French courts displayed. For instance, in 1689, Peter the Great brought ballet to his courts not as art, but as etiquette, in order to usher French aristocratic culture into his

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108. Prest, *Theatre under Louis XIV: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet, and Opera*, 124.

109. Prest, *Theatre under Louis XIV: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet, and Opera*. 107.

110. Prest, *Theatre under Louis XIV: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet, and Opera*. 124.

111. Prest, *Theatre under Louis XIV: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet, and Opera*. 108.

kingdom.<sup>112</sup> In western Europe after the French Revolution (1789-1799),<sup>113</sup> ballet became associated with the bourgeoisie. Working class society expressed the need for emancipation from political, social, and economic oppression. The stereotype of the frivolous male dancer sharply contrasted with the new, burgeoning concept of masculinity that aligned itself with economic productivity; men fled the stage, allowing for women to replace them.<sup>114</sup> Thus began the hyper-feminization of the artform, a characteristic and expectation that endures in ballet today.

### **1.6. The classical canon of ballet of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: *Coppélia* as an exception.**

Ballet's relatively small surviving classical canon,<sup>115</sup> created mostly in the 1800s, continues to present western hegemonic patriarchal ideals through its enforcement and presentation of traditional gender norms in performance. These works consist almost entirely of narratives involving a female heroine falling in love with a man, whose requited love becomes essential for her very happiness and success, and sometimes even her ability to overcome the threat of an evil spell. This narrative enforces sexist ideology, which perpetuates the idea that women are inferior and thus dependent on men. The comic ballet *Coppélia* (1870), however, is a notable exception.

*Coppélia's* heroine, Swanhilda, actually saves her (male) lover from Dr. Coppélius, who attempts to transfer the lover's spirit into a doll in order to animate it. She "carries out what might be seen today as a feminist revolution in Dr. Coppélius' workshop, zestily attacking the

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112. Homans, *Apollo's Angels*, 247.

113. Peter McPhee, *The French Revolution, 1789-1799*. (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2001).

114. Homans, *Apollo's Angels*, 129.

115. These works include *La Sylphide* (1832), *Giselle* (1841), *Le Corsaire* (1856), *Don Quixote* (1869), *Coppélia* (1870), *La Bayadere* (1877), *Swan Lake* (1877), *Sleeping Beauty* (1890), and *The Nutcracker* (1892).

patriarchal control of the father-figure and flaunting her indocility.”<sup>116</sup> In analyzing a clip from Leanne Benjamin’s performance as Swanhilda in The Royal Ballet’s production of *Coppélia*,<sup>117</sup> ballet’s vocabulary and pantomime is shown melded with the exaggerated physical humor of slapstick comedy.

To set the scene, Dr. Coppélius, the diabolical inventor, has lured Franz into his house and drugged him with wine laced with sleeping powder so that he can take Franz’s spirit and animate the doll, Coppélia. Swanhilda, who is hiding behind a curtain after trespassing, watches the scene unfold. While Dr. Coppélius is busy reading his spell book, Swanhilda quickly changes into Coppélia’s clothes and pretends that she has become the animated doll. Dr. Coppélius turns around from his spell book to find what he thinks is his doll, Coppélia, standing before him. Stunned, he summons her towards him. Swanhilda moves towards him with a stilted doll dance. As she approaches him nearer, he attempts to grab her torso, upon which she feigns a limp forward fold, pushing him away with a bump of her bottom. This physical humor shows the ballerina as the opposite of ethereal.

Swanhilda begins an animated doll dance, amazing Dr. Coppélius, who follows her around closely, watching what he thinks is his creation. In a series of piqué soutenus (quick steps up onto pointe in fifth position) traveling in a diagonal upstage and using a port de bras (arm movement) that opens and closes, Swanhilda slaps Dr. Coppélius across the cheek, causing him to reel backwards, the audience audibly laughing again at his expense. This is doubly funny coming from a ballerina, who the audience expects to move only with grace and delicacy.

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116. Sally Banes, *Dancing Women: Female Bodies Onstage* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 38.

117. Rentadancer, “Coppelia – Carlos Acosta/Leanne Benjamin – Part 7/12.mp4.,” Youtube, 10:01, July 24, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqdNq5hYKF4>.

After this doll dance, Swanhilda returns to her static position in which Dr. Coppélius first found her. Amazed and hoping for even more realistic results, Dr. Coppélius rushes over to Franz (who is still fast asleep) in order to magically transfer more of Franz's spirit to the doll. After the attempt, Swanhilda takes on more humanlike movements, delighting Dr. Coppélius. He rushes to give her a hand mirror so that she can admire her own beauty.

Swanhilda takes the mirror and promenades in arabesque admiring her own reflection as Dr. Coppélius drops down onto his knees in adoration. The image of Dr. Coppélius on his knees near Swnahilda while she tilts her arabesque into a penché, gives a visual that references many romantic pas de deux. Yet, the mirror complicates the gaze. The audience and Dr. Coppélius set their eyes upon a ballerina who is gazing at herself in adoration. She moves into a tendu devant, leaning into a deep back bend, never taking her eyes off of the mirror.

Then, in a sudden snap of character, Swanhilda stomps off with the mirror, preening herself and leaving Dr. Coppélius stunned on his knees. He attempts to distract her attention from her reflection in the mirror, tapping on her shoulder, upon which he shines the mirror into his face, as if to say, "Look at who you are, looking at me like that!" and he reels back in disgust from his own reflection.

Swanhilda asks Dr. Coppélius through ballet pantomime, "Who are all of these dolls in your workshop?" He answered, "They are dolls that I made." She asks, "Why do you need that man's spirit?" pointing to Franz. Dr. Coppélius replies, "To make a woman doll of my dreams!" Upon which she slaps Dr. Coppélius and walks away with her arms crossed.

Swanhilda proceeds to tear up Dr. Coppélius' shop, ripping up his spell book, pushing over his dolls, and even chasing him with a dagger. Eventually, she calls her girlfriends from the window to come into the shop to help her save Franz. Her girlfriends rush in, spinning Dr.

Coppélius dizzy as Swanhilda wakes up Franz. In a final jab to Dr. Coppélius, Swanhilda reveals the body of the doll Coppélia, hanging limp in its closet. Franz thanks Swanhilda for saving him, and together they run out of Dr. Coppélius' shop.

This departure into a “feminist revolution”<sup>118</sup> in Act II fades from view in Act III, as the ballet ultimately returns to the traditional heteronormative theme when Swanhilda marries her lover, the mayor of the town repays Dr. Coppélius for the property damages, and everyone is happy. However, the melding of slapstick humor and ballet demonstrates one of ballet's earliest nudges towards subverting patriarchal norms.

### **1.7. Gender and body issues in 20<sup>th</sup> century ballet**

It is not simply the narrative of the ballet that is sexist, however. The practice of gender in ballet's vocabulary is directly tied to ballet's European patriarchal roots as well. For example, while women train en pointe, men's class devotes extra time to athletic bravura steps, such as jumps and turns. The athleticism of codified male steps, such as a double saut de basque (a traveling jump that takes off on one foot, requires two revolutions of the body in the air, and lands on the same foot) versus the finesse of codified female steps (hops en pointe with intricate hand and foot movements) are coded in sexist stereotypes about how women versus men move. This is likely based on the assumption that men are physically stronger than women which itself is based on a sexist belief that gender is biological, rather than merely a social construct.

Though men's jumps and women's jumps differ the most, the most gendering happens in the pas de deux (French for “step of two”), which are the partnered variations seen in every classical ballet. The female ballet dancer's step vocabulary remains essentially the same in the

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118. Banes, *Dancing Women: Female Bodies Onstage*, 38.

pas de deux, while the man functions essentially to lift and support her. She performs her movements in front of the male dancer as he supports and enhances the female's movements as she dances. For instance, when a ballerina performs a grand jeté (a split leap), the male partner assists by holding onto her waist and elevating her higher into the air. The partner helps her execute extra rotations as he balances her waist between his hands when a ballerina performs a pirouette (a turn on one leg). In adagio, or slow movements, the man stabilizes the ballerina as she develops her legs into high extended poses.

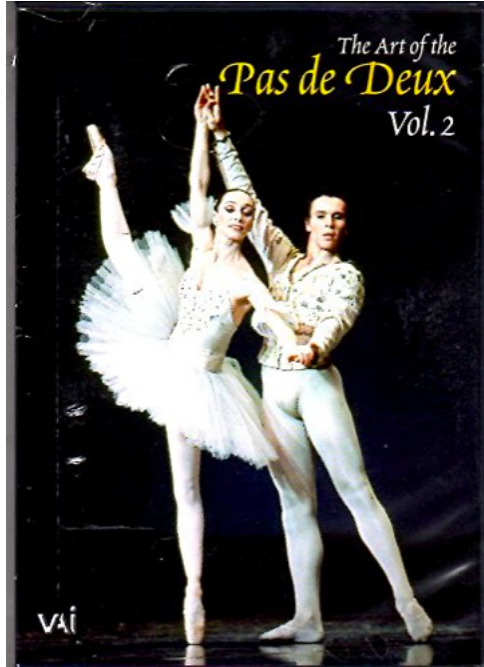
Though the ballerina is dependent upon her male partner in the pas de deux to assist and enhance her moves, she is also often the site of allure for both her male partner and the audience, particularly in classical narrative works. Foster applies feminist theory to the understanding of partnered dancing bodies in her work, *The ballerina's phallic pointe* (1996) in order to show how the ballerina metaphorically representing the phallus in the pas de deux. She describes the partnered ballerina's extended back leg while performing a promenade in arabesque as "ever erect, a strong reminder of her desire... The leg, a full 180 degrees vertical, looms behind them, white-pink, utterly smooth, charged with a straining vibrant vitality."<sup>119</sup> By analyzing the phallogocentric ideology of ballet's pas de deux movement structure, Foster claims that ballet's vocabulary is too deeply entrenched in heteronormative gendering to ever allow for the possibility or reimagining:

Whether visible in reworked versions of the classical masterpieces – *Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, *Coppelia*, etc. – or merely in the vocabulary and style of the dancing, the weight of these past bodies presses too hard upon contemporary ballet to allow a nongendered reception of its meaning, or even to allow for the dismissal of gendered content as a superfluous formal feature analogous in impact only to that of an irrelevant cliché.<sup>120</sup>

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119. Foster, "The ballerina's phallic pointe," 1.

120. Foster, 3.



*Figure 1. An image of a ballerina being partnered in a pas de deux (image from cover of the DVD, *The Art of the Pas de Deux*, Vol. 2)<sup>121</sup>*

Foster suggests in her work that the ballerina is the embodiment of phallogentric ideology, and that it is impossible for ballet to escape the weight of its own gendered history. In this claim, Foster refutes ballet's capacity to be reclaimed by a new generation of ballet dancers.

Beyond the classical ballet narratives and the gendered movements of ballet's vocabulary, ballet continues to uphold sexism through the enforcement of androgynous physical ideals for women. The thin, long, sinewy and exaggerated lines of a female ballet dancer's body can be seen as an extension of Foster's "ballerina-as-phallus"<sup>122</sup> concept. Alternatively, these bodily requirements could be seen as ballerina-as-teenage-boy, where the ballerina must

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121. The Art of the Pas De Deux, Vol. 2 DVD cover. <https://www.amazon.com/Art-Pas-Deux-Vol/dp/B000GY723S>.

122. Foster, 3.

transform herself into her body's most androgynous iteration in order to satisfy a male homosexual counter-reading of the pas de deux.

Historical evidence suggests that these preferences for certain physical proportions of female ballet dancers began under Sergei Diaghilev, the impresario of the Ballets Russes. Diaghilev, along with his male dancers who were also sometimes his lovers, revolutionized ballet in western Europe into an arena that accepted gay men and their perspective as important contributors to the artform:

With Diaghilev, however, ballet in Western Europe no less than in America became a privileged arena for homosexuals as performers, choreographers, and spectators. It was a feat unparalleled in the other arts, and for gay men (to use a modern term) it was a revolution. The captain of ballet modernism was a homosexual hero who did as much for the cause of gay freedom as its more celebrated advocates.<sup>123</sup>

Though Diaghilev and his male dancers led the way for ballet to become an artform that celebrated male gender fluidity, his penchant for lean, androgynous female ballet dancers overshadowed any possibility of women with curves, hips, or breasts to reign as ballerina onstage.

The Ballets Russes spent much of their time performing in France. French fashion in the 1920s considered the *Garçonne* look – the lean, androgynous flapper girl – to be en vogue. Though it was not uncommon for the ballerina to personify the era's ideal beauty onstage, the Ballets Russes exaggerated the masculinization of the new female beauty standard. Diaghilev's preference "demanded a body as hipless and flat-chested as a boy's.... If... Diaghilev had feminized the male body, now he set about to make the female body masculine... 'She is too fat for us' Diaghilev remarked about Lydia Lopokova [one of The Ballets Russes ballerinas] in

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123. Garafola, "Reconfiguring the Sexes," 246.



1924.”<sup>124</sup> The preference for the androgynous appearance of the ballerina began with the Ballets Russes.



*Figure 2. Image of Lydia Lopokova. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.*<sup>125</sup>

These androgynous physical requirements plague aspiring and professional female ballet dancers to this day. These androgynous physical requirements are outlined in Gretchen Warren’s book, *Classical Ballet Technique* (1996).<sup>126</sup> The page entitled the “Ideal Ballet Body” pictures a woman’s body (tellingly, she provides no context for an ideal man’s body) that models these requirements. The requirements are as follows:

- Height: 5 feet 2 inches – 5 feet 8 inches

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124. Garafola, “Reconfiguring the Sexes,” 215.

125. Bassano Ltd., *image of Lydia Lopokova*, 1922, photograph, National Portrait Gallery, London, <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw112040/Lydia-Lopokova>.

126. Gretchen Warren, *Classical Ballet Technique* (University of South Florida Press, 1989), 64.

- Weight: 85-115 pounds (Note that a woman who is 5 feet 8 inches tall and 115 pounds would have a BMI of 17.5, which is considered underweight and placed at increased risk for health issues, according to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute.<sup>127</sup>)
- Long neck in proportion to rest of body
- Small head
- Narrow hips
- Small posterior
- Slim thighs that appear to be about the same width as the calves
- Thin ankles and long feet
- Small bust
- Slightly sloping shoulders that are wider than hips
- Straight back and slim waistline, with torso neither too short nor too long in proportion to the rest of the body
- Long arms and hands
- Long, straight legs with slight hyperextension and minimal visible muscular bulk
- Well-arched foot with toes approximately the same length<sup>128</sup>

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127. National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. *Calculate your Body Mass Index*. [https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/lose\\_wt/BMI/bmicalc.htm](https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/lose_wt/BMI/bmicalc.htm).

128. Warren, *Classical Ballet Technique*, 64.



*Figure 3. Ballerina Svetlana Zakharova.<sup>129</sup>*

Indeed, the narrow hips, wide shoulders, small posterior, slim thighs, and low body fat required of professional ballet dancers today suggests the shape of a teenage boy, perhaps to indulge a gay male choreographer's fantasy. Ballet history commonly attributes the further exaggeration of the ballerina's androgynous physical appearance to that of choreographer George Balanchine.

Balanchine founded the New York City Ballet (NYCB) in 1948, with the financial support of Lincoln Kirstein, an impresario and philanthropist.<sup>130</sup> Balanchine is largely credited

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129. DanceTabs, *image of Svetlana Zakharova (Princess Aurora) in the Sleeping Beauty*, <https://dancetabs.com/>.

130. The New York City Ballet: About Us. <https://www.nycballet.com/about-us/>.

with ushering ballet into its neoclassical era, and for bringing ballet to the United States. Though the prerequisite for thinness did not begin with Balanchine, he is also credited with aggressively promoting it among the dancers of his company,<sup>131</sup> making his iteration of ballet particularly oppressive.

The great American ballerina Gelsey Kirkland spoke of Balanchine's fixation on women's thinness, recounting that "[Balanchine] thumped me on my sternum and down my rib cage clucking his tongue and saying, 'Must see the bones' ... He did not merely say, 'Eat less', he said repeatedly, 'Eat nothing' ... Mr. B's ideal proportions called for an almost skeletal frame."<sup>132</sup> Kirkland laments that Balanchine's influence permeated throughout companies across the United States, and that women who could not maintain their eating disorders are essentially not employable.<sup>133</sup> (This was my experience at Oklahoma City Ballet, where there was a definite weight loss culture among the female dancers in the company.)

Beyond promoting unhealthy bodily requirements, Balanchine is also responsible for perpetuating the notion of man as master and woman as muse in ballet's typical choreographic relationship. Balanchine revealed his inner philosophies through his musings,<sup>134</sup> particularly about women of ballet. His belief in the female muse and the male master is alluded to here:

Man is a better... composer. Everything is man – sports – everything. Man is stronger, faster. Why? Because we have the muscles, and we're made that way. And woman accepts this. It is her business to accept. She knows what's beautiful. Men are great poets, because they have to write beautiful poetry for women –

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131. Joel Lobenthal *Wilde Times: Patricia Wilde, George Balanchine, and the Rise of New York City Ballet* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2016), x Introduction.

132. Steven P. Wainwright, Clare Williams, and Bryan S. Turner, "Varieties of habitus and the embodiment of ballet," *Qualitative research*, 6, no. 4 (2006): 538. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794106068023>.

133. Steven P. Wainwright, Clare Williams, and Bryan S. Turner, "Varieties of habitus and the embodiment of ballet," 538.

134. Arlene Croce, "Balanchine Said: What was the source of the choreographer's celebrated utterances?" *New Yorker*, January 19, 2009. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/01/26/balanchine-said>.

odes to a beautiful woman. Woman accepts the beautiful poetry. You see, man is the servant – a good servant. In ballet, however, woman is first. Everywhere else man is first. But in ballet, it's the woman. All my life I have dedicated my art to her.<sup>135</sup>

Though his words and actions, Balanchine certainly contributed to the stereotype of the choreographer being the male master and the female being the dancer and muse. Balanchine married four of his favorite dancers, and famously fired his “last muse”, Suzanne Farrell, a dancer forty-years his junior, after she married another man.<sup>136</sup>

### **1.8. Issues of sexual misconduct and abuse in current day ballet culture**

If Balanchine veiled his misogynistic tendencies with chivalry, then his predecessor, Peter Martins, was more overt, enforcing sexist ideology through physical and sexual violence throughout his thirty-year reign at the New York City Ballet (NYCB). Fear of Martins' permeated the entire school and company.

Today, the NYCB and its affiliate school, the School of American Ballet, have been embroiled in abuse and assault allegations by former and current company dancers. Peter Martins retired in 2018, shortly after the company began investigating sexual abuse allegations made by company members, prompted by “an anonymous letter making ... general, nonspecific allegations of sexual harassment in the past by Peter Martins at both NYCB and the school [School of American Ballet, NYCB's feeder school].”<sup>137</sup> NYCB's board members were notified

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135. John Gruen, *The Private World of Ballet* (New York: Penguin Books, 1975), 284.

136. Gia Kourlas and Siobhan Burke, “Two Critics Reflect on Ballet's #MeToo Moment”. *The New York Times*, October 18, 2018) <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/18/arts/dance/new-york-city-ballet-me-too.html?auth=login-email&login=email>.

137. Madeline Schrock, "How the Dance World Is Responding to Sexual Harassment Claims against Peter Martins." *Dance Magazine*, December 5, 2017.

of his decision. The two-month investigation did “not corroborate any allegations of sexual harassment or physical abuse... infuriat[ing] former dancers who had accused Mr. Martins of misconduct.”<sup>138</sup>

The lack of corroboration is astounding, considering that Martins’ known history of violence spanned the course of almost forty years. In 1992, Martins’ wife and then NYCB principal dancer, Darci Kistler, charged her husband with third-degree assault.<sup>139</sup> Police were called when she reported being “pushed, shoved and slapped and thrown into another room, causing her to cut her leg”<sup>140</sup>; she ultimately dropped the charges. In 1993, Jeffrey Edwards, a soloist with NYCB, reported verbal and physical abuse to the general company manager.<sup>141</sup> In 1994, a 12-year-old student named Victor Ostrovsky came forward, saying that Martins “assaulted [him] onstage in front of the whole cast”<sup>142</sup> during a dress rehearsal, presumably for “horsing around.”<sup>143</sup> Ostrovsky described Martins grabbing him by the back of the neck, “yanking me around to the left and to the right, he’s digging his left thumb and his middle finger -- I felt like he was piercing my muscle.”<sup>144</sup> The multiple stories of assault, in addition to the third-degree assault charge by his wife, make it unlikely that Martins was actually innocent.

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138. Michael Cooper and Robin Pobegrin. “City Ballet and Chase Finlay Sued by Woman Who Says Nude Photos of Her Were Shared.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/05/arts/dance/nyc-ballet-alexandra-waterbury.html>

139. Alessandra Stanley. “Martins, Ballet Master, Held On Charge He Beat His Wife.”

140. Alessandra Stanley. “Martins, Ballet Master, Held On Charge He Beat His Wife.”

141. Robin Pobegrin. “Five Dancers Accuse City Ballet’s Peter Martins of Physical Abuse.” *The New York Times*. Published on December 12, 2017. Accessed on June 6, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/12/arts/dance/peter-martins-ballet-new-york-city-physical-abuse.html>

142. Pogrebin, “Five Dancers Accuse City Ballet’s Peter Martins of Physical Abuse.”

143. Pogrebin, “Five Dancers Accuse City Ballet’s Peter Martins of Physical Abuse.”

144. Pogrebin, “Five Dancers Accuse City Ballet’s Peter Martins of Physical Abuse.”

After Martins' resignation, dancers started coming out of the woodwork with their own stories of physical abuse. For instance, Alina Dronova, a 17-year "veteran" of NYCB's corps de ballet, describes how Martins would routinely assault her: "He would grab me by my neck and kick me out of his office... He would do that to almost everyone."<sup>145</sup> John Clifford, a dancer who worked under Balanchine, recalls Martins "slam[ming] his fists into the wall about an inch from my head"<sup>146</sup> In addition, Clifford recalls witnessing physical violence enacted on Heather Watts by Martins. Clifford stated that "I saw him pick her up and slam her into a cement wall."<sup>147</sup> Clearly, Martins' resignation was justified.

The way that many people within the dance community but not affiliated with NYCB shared their lack of surprise<sup>148</sup> contrasted sharply to the way that NYCB ballet dancers spoke vaguely and almost apologetically of rumored consensual sexual relationships that Martins had with his women dancers. The contrast disconcertingly reveals what appears to be a form of self-gaslighting, or at the very least a lack of awareness as to how the unequal power dynamics would implicate the degree of consensual consent.

The same year, shortly after Martins retirement in 2018, Alexandra Waterbury, a young woman and former student of SAB, filed a lawsuit in New York's State Supreme Court against New York City Ballet and their principle dancer, and her ex-boyfriend, Chase Finlay, for "sharing sexually explicit photos and short videos of her that were taken without her knowledge

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145. Pogrebin, "Five Dancers Accuse City Ballet's Peter Martins of Physical Abuse."

146. Pogrebin, "Five Dancers Accuse City Ballet's Peter Martins of Physical Abuse."

147. Pogrebin, "Five Dancers Accuse City Ballet's Peter Martins of Physical Abuse."

148. Madeline Schrock, "How the Dance World Is Responding to Sexual Harassment Claims Against Peter Martins."

or consent with others affiliated with the company [such as donors]”<sup>149</sup> and blamed the company for condoning a “fraternity-like atmosphere that permeates the Ballet and its dancers... embolden[ing] them to disregard the law and violate the basic rights of women.”<sup>150</sup> The *New York Times* articles reported the more lurid details of the case, writing “The suit says a donor wrote to Mr. Finlay about his desire to ‘violate’ dancers at another company.”<sup>151</sup> The male dancers implicated with the case, besides Finlay, were Amar Ramasar and Zachary Catazaro, who shared vulgar texts and sexually explicit photos of other women dancers with Finlay. Finlay resigned, and the other two were fired. Furthermore, *The New Yorker’s* article “What went wrong at New York City Ballet” reported that the suit stated that both NYCB and SAB should have most certainly been aware of this “fraternity-like atmosphere”, considering that they had to foot a \$150,000 bill for a dancers’ “party”:

New York City Ballet and the School of American Ballet knew about this misconduct, or should have. The suit described a party that Finlay and other members of [NYCB] had recently thrown at a hotel room [in Washington D.C.]... inviting underage girls, who they ‘plied with drugs and alcohol.’ The damage to the hotel came to a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. But, according to the lawsuit, the hosts of the party, though they had to pay for the repairs to the hotel property, were not otherwise punished; instead, they were simply advised to confine such behavior to New York City, were ‘it would be easier to control.’<sup>152</sup>

It becomes clear that the “fraternity-like” culture that Waterbury described pervading NYCB was so strong and insidious that “she received threats from random people [in the

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149. Michael Cooper and Robin Pobegrin, “City Ballet and Chase Finlay Sued by Woman Who Says Nude Photos of Her Were Shared. *New York Times*, September 15, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/15/arts/dance/city-ballet-fires-two-male-dancers-accused-of-sharing-photos.html>.

150. Michael Cooper and Robin Pogrebin, “City Ballet and Chase Finlay Sued by Woman Who Says Nude Photos of Her Were Shared.”

151. Cooper and Pogrebin, “City Ballet and Chase Finlay Sued by Woman Who Says Nude Photos of Her Were Shared.”

152. Joan Acocella, “What went wrong at New York City Ballet.” *The New Yorker*, February 11, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/02/18/what-went-wrong-at-new-york-city-ballet>.



company] telling me I had enemies now, and how I am a job-ruiner.”<sup>153</sup> The misogyny that pervaded NYCB was not just cultural, but also shaped institutional policies and decisions: NYCB’s guild stated that incident was a “relate entirely to non-work-related activity and do not rise to the level of ‘just cause’ termination.”<sup>154</sup> This is a clear example of a phenomenon that Kate Manne describes in her book as “himpathy”, or “... the flow of sympathy away from female victims toward their male victimizers.”<sup>155</sup> Thus, misogyny was not only enforced through the act of sexual misconduct, but also through the protection of the men who perpetrated the acts.

Not only did sexist ideology pervade the institution, but *also* the institution’s own union, *and* the arbitrator who ultimately reinstated Ramasar and Catazaro. The American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA), the union under which dancers employed by unionized dance companies are represented, fought Ramasar and Catazaro’s terminations. In AGMA’s words, “suspension was the appropriate punishment for their actions and termination was too severe... it’s important to us that your employer is prevented from taking extreme and potentially career-ending action based on non-criminal activity in your private life.”<sup>156</sup> AGMA’s decision was in direct opposition of protection for NYCB’s women dancers, demonstrating how the women in NYBC were put back into peril by the very union that was meant to protect them: “City Ballet initially moved to suspend Mr. Catazaro and Mr. Ramasar... women in the company... approached management and said that they would be uncomfortable continuing to dance with

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153. Michael Cooper and Robin Pobegrin, “City Ballet and Chase Finlay Sued by Woman Who Says Nude Photos of Her Were Shared.”

154. Gia Kourlas and Siobhan Burke, “Two Critics Reflect on Ballet’s #MeToo Moment”. *The New York Times*, October 18, 2018) <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/18/arts/dance/new-york-city-ballet-me-too.html?auth=login-email&login=email>.

155. Kate Manne. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 23.

156. Cooper, Michael. “City Ballet Ordered to Reinstate Male Dancers Fired Over Inappropriate Texts.”

them -- especially in ballet, an art form where the partnering can be intimate.”<sup>157</sup> Unfortunately, AGMA was more interested in protecting the careers of its men than the safety of its women. It appears that the enforcement of misogyny through physical and sexual assault was not only enforced by Peter Martins, but also by AGMA and the arbitrator who defied NYCB’s firing of Ramasar and Catazaro.

### **1.9. Sexism represented through choreography in contemporary ballet**

Balanchine and his predecessor Martins both also perpetuated misogyny through the content of their choreography. An entire article in the *New York Times* entitled “What Went Wrong at New York City Ballet” is devoted to analyzing the blatant representation of physical violence towards women in Martins’ work.<sup>158</sup> Balanchine’s work *The Four Temperaments* was the subject for one of the first feminist scholar writings to inquire about gender roles in dance. Ann Daly’s 1987 journal article “The Balanchine Woman: Of hummingbirds and channel swimmers” examines Balanchine’s choreographic work *The Four Temperaments*, using the man’s manipulation of his female partner to exemplify how ballet is a “representational form... which denies women their own agency.”<sup>159</sup> In doing so, Daly calls upon ballet’s practitioners, scholars, and historians to recognize how ballet reinforces gendered behavior.<sup>160</sup>

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157. Michael Cooper, “City Ballet Ordered to Reinstate Male Dancers Fired Over Inappropriate Texts.”

158. Joan Acocella, “What Went Wrong at New York City Ballet,” *New York Times*, February 11, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/02/18/what-went-wrong-at-new-york-city-ballet>.

159. Ann Daly, “The Balanchine woman: Of hummingbirds and channel swimmers,” *The drama review: TDR* 31, no. 1 (1987): 17. <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/stable/1145763>.

160. Daly, “The Balanchine woman: Of hummingbirds and channel swimmers,” 19.

After Daly, feminist dance scholars continued their work of revealing sexism in ballet. Cynthia Novack tackled the topic in her 1993 article, "Ballet, Gender and Cultural Power."<sup>161</sup> Novack uses her own early study in ballet, as well as her expertise in her field of anthropology, to analyze her experience as a case study. She notes how ballet "perpetuates representations of women as fragile creatures supported by powerful men [that] are connected to a training system which is extremely technical and rigorous."<sup>162</sup> Novack exemplifies, through a case study of her own experience to show how ballet promotes traditional gender norms.

Considering ballet's history, the way that women are represented in the artform's classical and neoclassical canon, and the horrific situations coming out of New York City Ballet, it is no surprise that, "there is a strong scholarly consensus that ballet is demeaning to women and promotes dependency on the male sex."<sup>163</sup> This scholarly work, which started in the 1980s, is the groundwork for current academic writings about ballet, which collectively tend to disrupt and challenge the general acceptance of male-dominated leadership in ballet.

Through studying the history of feminist ballet artists and recounting the experiences of embodying ballet from myself and others, I question Foster's stance that ballet is too deeply entrenched under the weight of its problematic past to be re-signified. I claim that ballet as a movement idiom - specifically, a movement idiom that enables the body to defy gravity - has the capacity to be reclaimed and re-signified through measures such as encouraging body-positivity, equalizing ballet's movement vocabulary, and using ballet as a platform to engage in social

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161. Cynthia Novack, "Ballet, Gender and Cultural Power," *Dance, gender, and culture* (1993): 34-38.

162. Novack, "Ballet, Gender and Cultural Power," 39.

163. Alexandra Kolb and Sophia Kalogeropoulou, "In Defence of Ballet: Women, Agency, and the Philosophy of Pleasure," *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, 30, no. 2 (2012), 108.

change. In the next chapter, I review artists throughout history and today who succeed in implementing these measures, wielding ballet for a tool of empowerment rather than oppression.

### **Chapter Three: Ballet's capacity to be reimagined for a new generation of women**

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which ballet is rooted in sexist ideology and continues to perpetuate traditional gender norms into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Additionally, I propose that ballet as a movement idiom - specifically, a movement idiom that enables the body to defy gravity - has the propensity to be recreated without losing the main objective of flight. There is nothing about the pursuit of a high jump that is antithetical to concepts such as enforcing diversity, inclusivity, and financial accessibility, encouraging body-positivity, equalizing ballet's movement vocabulary, and using ballet as a platform to engage in social change. These internal structural changes have the capacity to challenge perception of what ballet is supposed to represent, not only from the embodied perspective of the ballet dancer, but from the audiences' expectations as well, and are not at odds with ballet's aesthetic pursuit to defy gravity.

#### **1.10. Pedagogical reform**

To begin, pedagogical reform is a necessary component to reimagining ballet for a more egalitarian, feminist society. It is possible to teach ballet in a way that prioritizes the dancer's experience of the movement over the representational aesthetic preferences of the instructor. Gretchen Alterowitz applied the feminist pedagogical principles outlined by Lynne M. Webb et al.'s 2002 work *Feminist Pedagogy: Identifying Basic Principles*<sup>164</sup> to her ballet pedagogical philosophy by engaging her students in "experimentation and collaboration."<sup>165</sup> Alterowitz then analyzed her students' response in her 2014 thesis *Towards a Feminist Ballet Pedagogy*:

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164. Lynn Webb, Myria Allen and Kandi Walker, "Feminist Pedagogy: Identifying Basic Principles," *Academic Exchange Quarterly* 6, (2002), 1.

165. Gretchen Alterowitz, "Toward a Feminist Ballet Pedagogy: Teaching Strategies for Ballet Technique Classes in the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of Dance Education*, 14:1, 8-17, (2014), 1.  
Doi:10.1080/15290824.2013.824579

*Teaching Strategies for Ballet Technique Classes in the Twenty-First Century*. Alterowitz is an example of a pedagogue seeking to dismantle patriarchy from within her own ballet studio. Other feminist pedagogical principles outlined in Webb et al.'s work include "reformation of the relationship between professor [or ballet instructor] and student, empowerment, building community, privileging voice, respecting the diversity of personal experience, and challenging traditional pedagogical notions."<sup>166</sup> Looking back on a personal level, I recognize the uniquely feminist and egalitarian nature that my first ballet teacher fostered at her ballet studio. I analyze my first teacher's pedagogical ballet philosophy and compare it with the feminist pedagogical principles outlined by Webb et al.

My own first ballet teacher, Carolyn Glasgow, taught in a way that made me feel empowered and confident. In an interview with Carolyn, I asked about her pedagogical philosophy, and what influences informed her teaching. "A good teacher... tries to protect students from over-pressing... their bodies into doing things that they cannot do safely."<sup>167</sup> She credits her own teacher, Yvonne Chouteau, who "never forced... insisted or pressed"<sup>168</sup> as a source of inspiration to teach in this gentle manner, prioritizing the physical and mental health of the dancer over the expectation of what her movements or positions should look like.

Carolyn's gentle method challenges traditional pedagogical notions in ballet that prioritize the attainment of the perfect position over individual's physical safety or comfort. For example, I remember Carolyn explaining to me that I was allowed to open my fourth position (both feet turned out and one leg placed directly in front of the other, about a foot and half apart)

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166. Lynn Webb, Myria Allen and Kandi Walker, "Feminist Pedagogy: Identifying Basic Principles," 67.

167. Carolyn Glasgow (ballet pedagogue), interview by Laura Pratt, July 20, 2020.

168. Carolyn Glasgow interview.

sideways. Though this was not technically correct, she explained that, because of the limited external rotation of my hips that this placement would actually be healthier for my knee and hip joints. In this example Carolyn shows her desire to accommodate the classical ballet technique with individual's physical differences.

In the interview, Carolyn also expressed her feelings about the students who loved being in the studio but did not necessarily possess the physical attributes required of a professional ballet dancer. She commented, "I would have hated to say, 'you know, this is just not for you,' because in certain ways it was [for them] because they recognized the things that we were talking about... there was just a certain real pleasure in the doing and the studying, and I guess that's the point, that there is a whole lot to be gained from studying. You don't have to perform to have had it be worthwhile."<sup>169</sup> Here, she validates a student's passion for the artform over a student's physical attributes as what makes them worthy students in her eyes as an instructor, thus encouraging body-positivity. She satisfies the feminist pedagogical principles again by demonstrating her desire to empower her students, respect their "diversity of personal experience,"<sup>170</sup> and challenge traditional pedagogical notions of trying to make dancers who go on to become professionals.

### **1.11. Embodied Perspective of Ballet**

We also discussed the intersection of pleasure and effort in ballet. Carolyn said, "that's part of the fun to me. If your body will do it and your mind will do it, it's the intensity part... you can't have another worry in the world. You simply cannot, while you're concentrating on the

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169. Carolyn Glasgow, interview.

170. Lynn Webb, Myria Allen and Kandi Walker, "Feminist Pedagogy: Identifying Basic Principles," 1.

principles that you're working with... It takes all the conscious participation you can summon to do the work... There is no better way to just shut the world out."<sup>171</sup> Carolyn notes how intensity and pleasure are related in the practice of ballet. Clearly, the joy or flow of the work is achievable without the external pressures of performing.

Carolyn's words concur with my personal sentiment that being on the edge of movement that is just beyond my technical capacity is stimulating. This also resonates with a sentiment described by Diana Matla, a dancer from the Netherlands Dance Theatre, who elucidated that "a specific exercise will be too difficult, but then you discover that if you practice real hard it becomes easier. That is really stimulating. To discover that the things that you could not do yesterday are suddenly possible today."<sup>172</sup> This general flow state of concentration and stimulation is noted upon by people who find great pleasure out of any particular activity.

We talked, too, about that ways that the performance of ballet can actually detract from the study of ballet in the studio. Carolyn said, "Once you get into the business of competing with others and pressing yourself, some of the original joy is set aside."<sup>173</sup> Carolyn validates the experience of dancing ballet simply for the pleasure of practicing, and notes how the performance aspect of the artform can, in instances, actually detract from the pleasure of practicing.

For others, like Lindsy Dec, former principal dancer with Pacific Northwest Ballet (PNB), she notes feeling fueled by the performance aspect of ballet. In my interview with her, she expressed overwhelmingly positive experiences of her time on stage. She said in our interview:

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171. Carolyn Glasgow, interview.

172. Anna Aalten, "'The Moment When it All Comes Together' Embodied Experiences in Ballet," *European Journal of Women's Studies* (2004), 272. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506804044462>.

173. Carolyn Glasgow, interview.



When our new director came, Peter Boal, he started changing up our rep a little bit, and so in one rep we would have classical ballet, we were doing a full length, and then you know, you're doing a completely contemporary barefoot ballet, and then... I remember one rep I was doing a Balanchine ballet, *In the Upper Room* by Twyla Tharp where we were wearing tennis shoes, which was so exhausting, and then we did another completely different piece from a different genre. And that [diversity of rep] just fuels me. It was just so satisfying to have your body be able to do all of this. At the end of shows, even at the end of rehearsals, I always just felt so empowered and so strong. I absolutely loved that.<sup>174</sup>

Clearly, Lindsy loved performing and felt empowered by the artform. This is important to note, so that there is no false assumption that performing is a necessarily a negative experience, or that the external pressures are always detract from the pleasure of dancing.

Carolyn ended our interview by saying that “for anyone who has ever done [ballet], for any length of time, for whom it was *important*, and you didn't have to explain to anyone why... you know that [the practice of] ballet just centers you. When class is over you feel collected.” Carolyn, who is now seventy-seven years old, tells me that she still “does pliés in the bathroom holding onto the counter, and the other [barre] stuff, I still do it, I do it every night. And I don't at this moment have any aches or pains.” In this, Carolyn notes the mental and physical benefits to practicing ballet throughout one's life, thus validating the importance of the artform even without the performance aspect.

I propose that one way that ballet can circumvent the sexist ideology is by approaching the technique as a personal practice that prioritizes pleasure over attaining virtuosity. In doing so, the teacher and student turn ballet on its head, so to speak, allowing for a reimagination of the artform through a feminist pedagogical philosophy. When an instructor and student engage with each other through ballet as a personal practice for the student, the student's experience of

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174. Lindsy Dec (former principal dancer with Pacific Northwest Ballet), interview by Laura Pratt, July 21, 2020.

pleasure and enjoyment is prioritized over her physical accomplishments. When traditional performance expectations are questioned, ballet's feminisms become tangible.

The pleasure of practicing ballet recreationally has recently become a topic of study in feminist dance scholarship. Alexandra Kolb and Sophia Kalogeropoulou confirm that “research on ballet has overlooked an essential feature which explains its importance in many women’s lives: the notion of pleasure.”<sup>175</sup> These researchers seek to flesh out academia’s conversations about ballet, which currently seems to “deny women’s own agency and the pleasure they take from dancing [ballet].”<sup>176</sup> Thus, Kolb and Kalagerpoulou’s research simultaneously adds to feminist dance scholarship while also challenging the marginalization of pleasure in academia.

### **1.12. Bronislava Nijinska**

Bronislava Nijinska (1891-1972) is one of the twentieth century’s most prolific choreographers.<sup>177</sup> She utilized ballet in order to create works that are feminist in nature, that challenge sexist ideology, and give an early glimpse towards presenting non-heteronormative romantic relationships onstage. In particular, she accomplished this through her works, *Les Noces* (1923) and *Les Biches* (1924).<sup>178</sup> She recalled, “... I was part of the Diaghilev troupe, but though still young, I felt myself capable of composing a ballet. Unfortunately, I was only a

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175. Alexandra Kolb and Sophia Kalogeropoulou, “In Defence of Ballet: Women, Agency, and the Philosophy of Pleasure,” 108.

176. Alexandra Kolb and Sophia Kalogeropoulou, “In Defence of Ballet: Women, Agency, and the Philosophy of Pleasure,” 109.

177. Library of Congress: Bronislava Nijinska. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/bronislava-nijinska/about-this-collection/>.

178. Malcolm McCormick and Nancy Reynolds, *No Fixed Pointes: Dance in the Twentieth Century*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 243.

woman.”<sup>179</sup> Nijinska’s international choreographic career was launched in spite of her sex, in spite of Sergei Diaghilev (the Ballets Russes impresario, the company in which she danced and choreographed), and in spite of her brother Vaslav Nijinsky’s legend.

None of the women of the company were invited into Diaghilev’s inner circle, even if they showed immense artistic talent. This feeling of “exclusion from male networks... [both] as insular homosexual circles and as a patriarchal culture with institutions”<sup>180</sup> is still reported today by women choreographers as a reason for their lack of representation. Nijinska’s perception that she was being held back because of her sex was completely founded, as Diaghilev once said, “What a choreographer Bronia would have been if only she were a man!”<sup>181</sup>

Nijinska’s most enduring work is *Les Noces* (1923).<sup>182</sup> This is possibly one of the first ballets that was feminist in content. It is still performed today at the Paris Opera Ballet, the Mariinsky Theater, and other major stages around the globe. Its plot centers around the arranged marriage of two young peasants. The choreography, blatantly feminist in nature, shows the crushing brutality of the construct of marriage, particularly from the perspective of the bride. Ultimately, the entirety of the piece is a portrayal of a woman’s suffering in a sexist society.

Nijinska’s use of the pointe shoe was revolutionary in *Les Noces*, as she “put the ballerinas on pointe, not as an aerial metaphor, a symbol of femininity and mystique, but to

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179. Lynn Garafola. "An Amazon of the Avant-Garde: Bronislava Nijinska in Revolutionary Russia," *Dance Research* 29 no. 2 (2011), 109. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/41428397>.

180. Jessica Teague, “Where are the female choreographers? A study on the gender imbalance among professional choreographers working in the fields of classical ballet and contemporary dance.” (2016) 17, <http://www.danceicons.org/doc/FemaleChoreographers.pdf>.

181. Lynn Garafola, "Bronislava Nijinska: A legacy uncovered.]," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 3.2 (1987), 80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07407708708571106>.

182. Lawrence Sullivan, “Les Noces: The American Premiere,” *Dance Research Journal*, 1981-1983, 14, no. ½ DOI: 10.2307/1477943 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1477943>.

intimate the violence and pain of the marriage bed: The feet stab the ground like sharp, weighted knives.”<sup>183</sup> This new use of pointework is significant. Nijinska used the pointe shoe in an entirely new way, though it is important to note that her use actually fits into Foster’s phallogocentric concept of the pointe shoe.

Nijinska shows her “unencumbered approach to gender and movement”<sup>184</sup> in *Les Biches* (1924), which premiered the year after *Les Noces*. Nijinska’s plotless one-act ballet to music by Francis Poulenc depicts a group of young, flirtatious people having a weekend party. The word *biches* loosely translates to ‘doe’ in French, but also has a slang meaning of women or men of queer sexual orientation.<sup>185</sup> The ballet was considered “scandalous at its time, because of its depictions of androgynous women, feminine men, and same-sex couples.”<sup>186</sup> This demonstrates an artist’s use of ballet to subvert patriarchal norms almost a century ago.

### 1.13. Katherine Dunham

Katherine Dunham, though better known as a modern dancer and ethnochoreologist, contributed greatly to the field of ballet. Princess La’Toya Jackson contends this in her master’s thesis, *Black Swans Shattering the Glass Ceiling: A Historical Perspective the Evolution of Historically Black Ballet Companies – From Katherine Dunham to Arthur Mitchell* that Dunham’s lack of recognition in the ballet world is problematic:

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183. Lynn Garafola, "Bronislava Nijinska: A legacy uncovered,"(1987), 80.

184. Lisa C. Arkin, “Bronislava Nijinska and the Polish Ballet, 1937-1938: Missing Chapter of the Legacy,” *Dance Research Journal*, (1998), 24, no. 2, 1, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/1478521>.

185. Christopher Moore, “A Perfect Accord: Music and Gesture in Francis Poulenc’s *Les Biches*.” *Les Cahiers de la Société québécoise de recherche en musique*, 98. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1012355a>.

186. The New School, “Excerpt from *LesBi(s)ches* (2016) Katy Pyle,” Youtube, 8:12, February 15, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvqKB1wrUIk&t=117s>.

[Dunham's] work is best understood through her origins as a ballet dancer and her classical training. To ignore Katherine Dunham's contributions to ballet not only places her in the category of "Other" as an "outsider" in ballet history but it also neglects to address the reasons *why* she was rejected from the ballet world and how that rejection led to the creation of her own technique in which one of the foundation components is classical ballet.<sup>187</sup>

Jackson's Afrocentric historical perspective on ballet provides a necessary counter to the European historical perspective's omission and erasure of the work and accomplishments of artists of color like Dunham.

Katherine Dunham was the first Black woman to found a successful ballet company in the United States. Dunham's ballet company, *Ballets Nègres* (1931), shattered racist notions that "black bodies were not fit for ballet."<sup>188</sup> The *Ballets Nègres* sought not to imitate other White ballet companies. Rather, Dunham sought to celebrate Afrocentrism through ballet, as she describes in her own statement:

We are not suggesting that the darker ballerina confine herself to the ballet of Pavlova. We would merely place at her disposal the technique which would enable her to express her own individuality and the genius of her race. After this we leave it to the tom-tom, the jungle, the heat of the sun, the depth of rivers, primal gods, bondage, the cotton fields, and even, if you will, to a recent lynching in Texas, to provide material for a school of ballet, not so much to present a historical panorama of the Negro, as to express the wealth of his heritage in plastic and geometric design. Thus, we can create a genuine choreography, a dance form symbolic of a self-conscious race.<sup>189</sup>

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187. Princess La'Toya Jackson, *Black Swans Shattering the Glass Ceiling: A Historical Perspective the Evolution of Historically Black Ballet Companies: From Katherine Dunham to Arthur Mitchell*, master's thesis, 7. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:42004127>.

188. Princess La'Toya Jackson, *Black Swan Shattering the Glass Ceiling: A Historical Perspective. The Evolution of Historically Black Ballet Companies – From Katherine Dunham to Arthur Mitchell*, 23.

189. Mark Turbyfill, "Shall We Present To The World A New Ballet?" *Abbott's Monthly* (Chicago: Robert S. Abbott, 1970), 64.

Just shy of a century ago, ballet was being utilized as a movement vocabulary to produce and present works that not only subverted the artform's own European roots, but also challenged white audiences' expectations of who ought to be a ballerina.

#### 1.14. Dance Theatre of Harlem

Today, artistic directors, choreographers and dancers continue in Dunham's bold footsteps to continue presenting people of color excelling in the classical ballet technique. Dance Theater of Harlem (DTH) is a company committed to presenting classical ballet with dancers of color and Black cultural themes as well as contemporary works. DTH was established by Arthur Mitchell in 1968 at the height of the civil rights movement.<sup>190</sup> It is noted that the school of DTH prepared students with the skills necessary to excel in careers beyond dance, with alumni going on to "medicine, social work, and teaching – as well as entertainment."<sup>191</sup> This demonstrates the positive impact of arts on a community. Mitchell contributed to the civil rights movement by founding this company, which continues to celebrate the excellence of dance artists of color.

Before founding DTH, Mitchell broke ground through his own performance career. He was the first African American dancer with Balanchine's New York City Ballet when he joined in 1955.<sup>192</sup> He rose through the ranks and became principal dancer, dancing in major roles until 1966.<sup>193</sup> When Balanchine choreographed *Agnon* on Arthur Mitchell and Diana Adams, a white

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190. Djassi DaCosta Johnson, "Dance Theater of Harlem: Our History," <https://www.dancetheatreofharlem.org/our-history/>.

191. Henry Weil, "Dance Theater of Harlem: Inspiring the Deprived," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.1976.10568990>.

192. Dance Theatre of Harlem: Our History. <https://www.dancetheatreofharlem.org/our-history/>.

193. Henry Weil, "Dance Theater of Harlem: Inspiring the Deprived," 14.

ballerina, many audience members were appalled by a Black man and White woman dancing together. Thus, Mitchell challenged stereotypes of Black males as being unfit for the ballet stage.

Balanchine is often incorrectly credited with melding syncopation, jazz and ballet together. Though he did indeed incorporate Africanist influences like “Charleston steps, flat feet, acrobatics, turned-in legs, and jazzy elements drawn from black dance (particularly the thrust-forward pelvis that became a Balanchine trademark) with pure [Russian] classicism,”<sup>194</sup> he was not the first choreographer to do so. He was introduced to African diasporic movement working with Katherine Dunham when they co-choreographed the major Broadway musical, *Cabin in the Sky*.<sup>195</sup> In fact, it was not until recently that the George Balanchine Foundation granted Katherine Dunham credit as co-choreographer.<sup>196</sup> This dubiously assumes that the “historical record has come down to us [as] an accurate reflection of reality. In terms of women [or artists of color] this is tantamount to saying that the only ones who choreographed are those we know about.”<sup>197</sup> Balanchine’s appropriation of Africanist aesthetic goes largely unnoted today in the ballet world.<sup>198</sup> The Eurocentric historical perspective naturally gives credit to Balanchine for incorporating African diaspora into ballet, when the credit should have rightfully gone to his co-choreographer, Dunham, a Black woman, and all of the dancers of color who likely contributed to their own choreography as well.

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194. Jonathan David Jackson, “African-American Dance: Researching a Complex History,” *Dance Research Journal* (1996), 14. <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/stable/1478602>.

195. Princess La’Toya Jackson, *Black Swans Shattering the Glass Ceiling: A Historical Perspective the Evolution of Historically Black Ballet Companies: From Katherine Dunham to Arthur Mitchell*, 71.

196. Brian Seibert, “‘Cabin in the Sky’: Translating a Dated Body Language,” *New York Times*. February 7, 2016.

197. Lynn Garafola, “Where Are Ballet’s Women Choreographers?” 215.

198. Carrie Gaiser, “Caught Dancing: Hybridity, Stability and Subversion in Dance Theatre of Harlem’s Creole *Giselle*,” *Theatre Journal*, 58, no. 2 (2006), 273.

In 1984, DTH undertook the full-length classical ballet, *Giselle*. Mitchell traded the original version's setting, loosely based off of a peasant village in the German Rhineland, for the Creole "farms and plantations of 1841 Louisiana's free people...where the class-conflict tragedy... translated effortlessly: Giselle Lanaux, a free black peasant girl, goes mad and dies when she is betrayed by an aristocratic lover (Albert, a wealthy plantation owner and a free man of color) who poses as a poor farmer to woo her."<sup>199</sup> Though the dancers are essentially performing all of the same steps from the original version, the change of setting completely reimagines the entire work, which now introduces the subject of "sexual subjugation that literally gave birth to the free black society as a class of mixed-blood persons."<sup>200</sup> Here, Mitchell takes *Giselle*, a ballet with European patriarchal and elitist roots, deals with classism in its own narrative, and attaches it with the free Black people of antebellum Louisiana and their own issues of classism.

Dance scholar Carrie Gaiser analyzes the "paradoxes (and problems with) hybridity"<sup>201</sup> of Mitchell's Creole *Giselle* in her article, "Caught Dancing: Hybridity, Stability and Subversion in Dance Theatre of Harlem's Creole *Giselle*." First, the concept of hybridity is described as a concept in art which is "associated with the effects of multiple cultural attachments on identity or the process of cultural mixture..."<sup>202</sup> She shows how Mitchell's *Giselle* and the logic of hybridity allowed for him to transcend critics' essentializing of his work while also reifying the notion of

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199. Carrie Gaiser, "Caught Dancing: Hybridity, Stability and Subversion in Dance Theatre of Harlem's Creole *Giselle*," 270.

200. Carrie Gaiser, "Caught Dancing: Hybridity, Stability and Subversion in Dance Theatre of Harlem's Creole *Giselle*," 270.

201. Carrie Gaiser, "Caught Dancing: Hybridity, Stability and Subversion in Dance Theatre of Harlem's Creole *Giselle*," 275.

202. Nikos Papastergiadis, "Hybridity and Ambivalence: Places and Flows in Contemporary Art and Culture," *Theory, Culture and Society*, 23.



ballet as inherently White.<sup>203</sup> Gaiser shows how DTH's use of hybridity in *Giselle* both stabilizes and subverts Eurocentric, classist and sexist ideals.

On the one hand, the performances of the Creole *Giselle* definitely disproved critics who thought that ballet technique would look any different on Black bodies because of racist ideas about the differences in their "musculatures."<sup>204</sup> This discredited any essentialist notions about the differences between Black dancing bodies and White dancing bodies. On the other hand, Gaiser points out the deleterious effects of the logic of hybridity that the Creole *Giselle* experienced:

...the same way that the hybridized Balanchine technique when performed by white bodies was often read as white and classical – in essence covering over African American contributions – the strictly classical choreography of *Giselle*, when performed by African Americans, read contrary to fact as new choreography – as though African American ballet dancing could be viewed only through the lens of hybridity, a hybridity that also re-entrenched the opposition between black body and classical ballet.<sup>205</sup>

Gaiser suggests that DTH's *Giselle* enforced the idea that Black bodies could only dance ballet if the setting of the work is decidedly Afrocentric.

Similarly, Christy Adair notes that "Mitchell is then confined by a setting which does not lend itself to progressive representations for black people or women."<sup>206</sup> I debate that though this may have been the case at the time, Creole *Giselle* also forever changed global perception of ballet as an artform that only White people should or could do, and opened doors for future

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203. Carrie Gaiser, "Caught Dancing: Hybridity, Stability and Subversion in Dance Theatre of Harlem's Creole *Giselle*," 275.

204. Carrie Gaiser, "Caught Dancing: Hybridity, Stability and Subversion in Dance Theatre of Harlem's Creole *Giselle*," 275.

205. Carrie Gaiser, "Caught Dancing: Hybridity, Stability and Subversion in Dance Theatre of Harlem's Creole *Giselle*," 275.

206. Christy Adair, *Women and Dance: Sylphs and Sirens* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 103.

artists. The international perception of DTH's *Giselle* was overwhelmingly positive, and the ballet "won three Laurence Olivier Awards (the English equivalent of the Tony): Outstanding New Dance Production of the Year, Best New Dance Show of the Year, and, significantly, Best Choreographer of the Year."<sup>207</sup> DTH's Creole *Giselle* decidedly proved to the world that classical ballet was not exclusive to White culture. Though it is unfortunate that the racist notion of dancing being essentially different on Black versus White bodies had to be the first boundary to be broken, it was the reality of the time. It was necessary to dispel such obtuse notions before more nuanced notions of race in ballet could be challenged.

Today, DTH is artistically directed by Virginia Johnson, the only Black woman artistic director of a major ballet company in the U.S.<sup>208</sup> Chrystyn Mariah Fentroy, now a soloist at Boston Ballet, recalls her time at DTH as critical to her career in classical ballet in an article she wrote for *Pointe Magazine*. Fentroy says, "I went on to become a principal dancer with Dance Theatre of Harlem for several years, where I found my voice as a Black ballerina. I embody their message proudly."<sup>209</sup> Fentroy's quote exemplifies a phenomenological perspective on how ballet is being perceived as a source of pride for a dance. DTH continues to provide a place for dancers of color to feel empowered in their identities within the art of classical ballet, thus re-signifying for audiences who is supposed to be dancing ballet.

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207. Carrie Gaiser, "Caught Dancing: Hybridity, Stability and Subversion in Dance Theatre of Harlem's Creole *Giselle*," 276.

208. Dance Data Project, "Artistic and Executive Leadership Report," March 2020.

209. Chrystyn Mariah Fentroy, "My Experience as a Black Ballerina in a World of Implicit Bias," *Pointe Magazine*, June 5, 2020. <https://www.pointemagazine.com/chrystyn-fentroy-2646155391.html>.

### **1.15. Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's *Nube Blanco* and *Frida***

Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, of Columbian-Belgian heritage, is one of the most highly sought-after, internationally renowned choreographers today.<sup>210</sup> She works primarily with ballet companies and has created sixty-four works that have been performed around the globe.<sup>211</sup> Ochoa draws inspiration from her heritage, and strong Latina women are often the heroines in her work, including in *Nube Blanco* (2009), *Frida* (2020), and *Vendetta – Storie de Mafia* (2018), which she recently set on *Tulsa Ballet*.<sup>212</sup> I analyze *Nube Blanco* to understand how Ochoa navigates identity, gender, and the use of ballet in her choreography, and compare the relative lack of ballet vocabulary of *Nube Blanco* to that of the ballet-heavy *Frida*.

### **1.16. *Nube Blanco***

In *Nube Blanco*,<sup>213</sup>(Spanish for “white cloud”) men and women dancers enter onstage walking, one foot bare, the other in a flamenco heel. The men wear black shorts, the women wear black shorts and a bra. They walk past each other with a limp and stop collectively in a dejected forward hang of their head and shoulders. At first glance, knowing Ochoa’s heritage, having one foot bare and the other foot in a flamenco heel seems to be the choreographer’s autobiographical nod. A woman in a giant, fluffy dress that looks like the tulle under a flamenco skirt *cháinés* (traveling turns) out from upstage right.

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210. Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, Biography.  
<http://www.annabellelopezchoa.com/www.annabellelopezchoa.com/Welcome.html>

211. Annabelle Lopez Ochoa. Choreography 2020.  
<http://www.annabellelopezchoa.com/www.annabellelopezchoa.com/Choreography.html>.

212. Annabelle Lopez Ochoa. Choreography 2020.  
<http://www.annabellelopezchoa.com/www.annabellelopezchoa.com/Choreography.html>.

213. Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, *Nube Blanco*, Youtube, 2:16. August 31, 2011.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DmhYvy11w8>.

As the movement proceeds, the group of women and men continue to perform a frustratingly heavy dance, using the flamenco shoe with a percussive force with each step. As they get heavier, the dancer in tulle gets lighter, more spontaneous in their movement, and starts weaving through the groups of dancers. Finally, the tulle dancer climbs upon the back of one of the groups dancers. Briefly, they are perched. Then, in the next instant, they are thrown off without any acknowledgement.

The scene cuts to the beginning of a pas de deux, from a later part of the work. Here, the protagonist appears. A man and woman face each other in the middle of a yelling crowd. At once, the yelling stops, and a classical guitar begins to play. The woman lays the first hand on the man, somewhat aggressively, right in the center of his chest. Then another hand on his left upper arm. Then on the top of his head. Finally, the man grabs her hand to take it off her head. She immediately antagonizes, going back to the shoulder. Quickly, a sort of slap-fight ensues. They both end with each other's hands holding the other's chins from below, as if about to kiss. The crowd disperses.

He spins her, she bowls backwards onto him, and he throws her into the air, upon which the slightest hint of ballet appears in her pointed toes. A throwing, stomping, reckless pas de deux ensues. Brianna Lynn Figueroa elucidates on the nuances of Ochoa's use of gender in *Nube Blanco* in her work, *Dancing Latina Identity: A Rendering of Contemporary Latina Self-Representation in American Concert Dance*. Figueroa describes Ochoa's work as, "a comical rendering of her own childhood using Spanish flamenco as a fluid medium with which to paint a commentary on masculinity... Ochoa's piece stars a female protagonist whose sharp tongue is employed like a steely defense against the encroachments of the masculine *zapateado* [a group of

dance styles of Mexico that utilize the shoe for percussion, akin to tap dance] <sup>214</sup>.<sup>215</sup> Thus, Ochoa draws attention to the traditional gender types and machismo.

Figueroa notes in her work that flamenco is a “particularly changed icon when staged as representations of a Latina experience”<sup>216</sup> because it has been historically used to exoticize the performing Latina body. Figueroa sees Ochoa’s use of flamenco in *Nube Blanco* as “an opportunity to dislodge the distinct gender roles that the dance form traditionally maintains, thereby calling into question the other traditions that the form intones such as its colonial privilege within the Latino dance repertoire.”<sup>217</sup> Because of ballet’s close proximity with enforcing colonial privilege, it is difficult to imagine how Ochoa would be able to successfully use any ballet in *Nube Blanco*.

### **1.17. Frida**

Ochoa’s *Frida*<sup>218</sup> explores the life of Frida Kahlo (1907-1954), the famous surrealist painter and icon for Chicanos, feminist, and the LGBTQ community.<sup>219</sup> In this work, Ochoa employs facets of surrealism in both the narrative plot as well as the aesthetic choices on stage. In this work, particularly compared to *Nube Blanco*, the use of ballet’s vocabulary is much more obvious. The women are en pointe. In an opening scene, Frida appears in a balletic lift, with one leg in a attitude devant (bent knee with leg forward) and one leg in attitude derrière. Holding on

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214. S. Echegoyen, “Zapateado technique as an injury risk in Mexican folkloric and Spanish dance: an analysis of execution, ground reaction force, and muscle strength,” *Medical problems of performing artists* (2013).

215. Brianna Lynn Figueroa, *Dancing Latina Identity: A Rendering of Contemporary Latina Self-Representation in American Concert Dance*, master’s, (2013), 35.

216. Figueroa, 30.

217. Figueroa, 35.

218. English National Ballet, “Broken Wings: Frida and Diego (extract). Youtube. 1:06. July 15, 2019.

219. Hayden Herrere and Victor Zamudio-Taylor, *Frida Kahlo*. (2005).

to her male partner, they proceed to perform a playful duet, sharing their weight with each other more equally than in classical pas de deux work. They slide past each other, seamlessly gliding through balletic and more contemporary movement. Tamara Rojo, the principal ballerina of the English National Ballet as well as the artistic director, shows obvious displays of her ballet training throughout the pas de deux.

The scene cuts to men dressed in skirts with flower headpieces, are seen performing sauté entournant, a classical traveling jump. There is a woman with deer antlers, a black and brown tight-fitting costume, and black pointe shoes on. She runs delicately en pointe. The scene cuts again to men with Dia de las Muertos face paint and dressed in customary Mariachi garb, their heads poked through the steps of a ladder that they are all carrying horizontally. They too move through obvious ballet steps, performing a pas de bourrée (a grapevine step) step.

*Frida* appears to be a much more colorful, surrealist, and grandiose work than *Nube Blanco*, obviously nodding to Frida Kahlos' own art. Ochoa says of Frida, the artist, in an interview that "Frida was a survivor. She had a very painful life, and she converted pain and sorrows and drama, she had a very tragic life, into her art... Yet my goal is to include her art into the ballet. I'm wondering if it's going to be possible to go from narrative into abstract/ surrealist, go back to narrative and not have the audience lost, although sometimes it's good for them to be lost."<sup>220</sup> Clearly, Ochoa is expert in using ballet's vocabulary in her choreography, though, as demonstrated by *Nube Blanco*, she is not reliant on it.

It appears that, atleast from reviewing *Frida*, that in Ochoa's use of ballet, many of the original steps and structures remain constant. A key way that she does use ballet differently,

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220. English National Ballet, "She Persisted: Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's Broken Wings – [excerpt from Frida] English National Ballet." February 15, 2019. Youtube. 1:39. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBIRugRuXdc&t=2s>.

though, is through her pas de deux work, as the male and female share weight much more equally- though there is no major lifting done by the woman, there is still pulling and pushing that happen throughout, as the weight is shared more horizontally. *Frida* seems to be more made for a huge venue, whereas *Nube Blanco* seems more intimate. Perhaps, Ochoa uses ballet on the larger stages in order to help her project her choreography, as she uses large sweeping jumps and turns to cross the floor.

Ochoa's voice as a Latina artist in the field of ballet is a rare one, and she is positioned as an internationally acclaimed artist to push the boundaries of what is acceptable on the world's largest stage. Her works, which handle themes of Latina identity, allow for re-articulation of her heritage, as was the case in which she utilized flamenco dance, a charged icon, in her contemporary choreographic work *Nube Blanco*. Her work also allows for the celebration of the life and art of Frida Kahlo, an icon of advocacy, with the incorporation of the ballet vocabulary in her work, *Frida*.

### **1.18. Katy Pyle's *The Firebird, a Ballez***

Other artists, too, utilize ballet's technique to reimagine and re-signify ballet by equalizing the traditionally gendered movement vocabulary and creating works that challenge social norms such as who can dance together and in what such ways. Katy Pyle's *The Firebird, a Ballez* (2013)<sup>221</sup> utilizes ballet to challenge patriarchal expectations by presenting women's queer perspective. She does not stray too far from the classical movement vocabulary to succeed in her

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221. Ballez: Shows: The Firebird. <http://www.ballez.org/shows/shows-the-firebird/>.

endeavor, either, using “quick petit allegro steps... an adagio duet... and a couple of fouettés.”<sup>222</sup> By presenting female, lesbian, and queer bodies and homonormative romantic relationships, Pyle not only challenges ballet’s patriarchal roots, but re-signifies ballet by rejecting the male gaze.

Pyle’s trailer for *The Firebird, a Ballez* on her Kickstarter page<sup>223</sup> begins with the scene of the Princess longing for love, using classical ballet pantomime to signify that she is looking for a female. (The ballet pantomime for female is drawing an hourglass shape in the air with the hands.) She performs a lilting pirouette en dedans in attitude derrière (bent leg to the back.) The scene changes. The Firebird appears wearing a red leather jacket with fringe, alluding to the red feathered tutu of Mikhail Fokine’s version from 1910. The Firebird runs to the Princess to be caught by the shoulders as she perches onto a piqué arabesque en relevé. In the next scene, the corps de ballet appears, dancers dressed in black tights and white T-shirts, alluding to the traditional attire of a male ballet student.

A particularly powerful image occurs: The Firebird lifts the Princess into the air and promenades her in an attitude devant (bent leg to the front.) In classical ballet, this type of lift would usually be done with the male and female facing the same direction. In Pyle’s choreography, the lifted dancer’s attitude devant leg drapes over the shoulder of the Firebird below her. Rather than a representation of desire turned outward and presented for the audience, the two dancers face each other intimately. This also defies the notion that women are physically incapable of lifting each other.

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222. Gia Kourlas, “Trimming Stravinsky in Purple and Red,” *New York Times*, May 17, 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/18/arts/dance/katy-pyles-firebird-a-ballez-at-danspace-project.html>.

223. Katy Pyle, “The Firebird, a Ballez,” Kickstarter, May 25, 2013. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/katypyle/the-firebird-a-ballez>.



The trailer then cuts to Katy Pyle describing her work as creator of *The Firebird, a Ballez*:

We have created a new kind of dance performance we call *Ballez*. It is exactly what it sounds like, it is lesbians doing ballet. And, it's also transgender people, gender queer people, bi-gender people and cis-gendered straight people. Everyone involved has failed to meet the expectations of classical ballet. But we are coming together to show how magical and beautiful the alternative of those expectations can be. We've created an alternate storyline to the classical ballet, *The Firebird*, originally created by Mikhail Fokine and Igor Stravinsky for the Ballets Russes in 1910. We have changed the gender and their subsequent expectations in order to tell a story that speaks to an of queer community.<sup>224</sup>

Pyle is creating new works for audiences who want to see themselves represented on the ballet stage, as well as for dancers who feel rejected by classical ballet's hegemony.

According to a dancer interview about being a part of the company, they say, "With *Ballez*, it is like finally the missing link for me to be myself in the [dance]form that I've loved my whole life."<sup>225</sup> This phenomenological account provides another example of the extractability of the movement idiom in the mind of the dancer, and the sense of belonging is felt while dancing ballet. Pyle is succeeding in her endeavor to reimagine ballet, for audiences, for dancers, and particularly for the LGBTQ community.

Pyle has also tackled the reimagining of Nijinska's *Les Biches* in her 2016 work *LesBi(s)ches*. Pyle's latest project "investigates, resurrects, destroys and re-imagines the 1924 satirical queer feminist ballet *Les Biches*... Set in an environment that mirrors Nijinska's sexually permissive 1920s Parisian salon culture, this new work will satirize the present-day queer performing arts and social scenes in New York City."<sup>226</sup> Watching an excerpt of the piece,

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224. Katy Pyle, "The Firebird, a Ballez," Kickstarter, May 25, 2013. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/katypyle/the-firebird-a-ballez>.

225. Salon, "Meet Ballez, a dance company for transgender, lesbian and queer stories," Youtube, 2:55, June 15, 2016. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=15&v=M8coKPRNxx0&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=15&v=M8coKPRNxx0&feature=emb_title).

dancers are seen wearing long tailed black coats, reminiscent of the Ballets Russes' impresario Sergei Diaghilev's standard attire.<sup>227</sup> The work utilizes ballet vocabulary and even hints back at Nijinska's original choreography. Classical ballet geometrical structures are used as well to space the group of twelve dancers. The work ends with the dancers walking out in pairs through an exit door upstage right, signifying how the relationships created through the work onstage carry on in the dancers' lives offstage. Pyle carries on Nijinska's legacy of challenging sexual relationship norms and subverting the patriarchal order through ballet.

Feminist ballet artists, artists of color and queer artists exist throughout the artform's history from the -- century. Unfortunately, the patriarchal narrative of ballet has erased many of these artists' works. Beyond calling on artists to reimagine ballet and re-signify the movement vocabulary for the audience, dance historians and scholars also have a responsibility to champion these artists who have subverted ballet's European, patriarchal and elitist roots. Rather than looking to Balanchine to define what ballet is, there must be an effort in the entire field to deinstitutionalize, turning our attentions to the lesser known artists and companies to define the artform.

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226. Beloit College Theatre & Dance: Katy Pyle Ballez Residency (2016). <https://www.beloit.edu/live/profiles/1819-katy-pyle>.

227. The New School, "Excerpt from LesBi(s)ches (2016) Katy Pyle," Youtube. 8:12, February 15, 2017. 8:12. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvqKB1wrUIk>.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

Ballet is an artform rooted in European patriarchal and elitist ideals. Ballet took shape in the courts of Catherine de' Medici and was masculinized and codified in the courts of Louis XIII and XIV. Ballet became hyper-feminized after the French Revolution when it was associated with the bourgeois in the eyes of the public. Ballet spread across Europe and Russia throughout the courts of royalty. Today, in ballet's highest echelons, the artform maintains its hyper-feminine stereotype, and perpetuates sexism, racism, and elitism through practice, production and performance. Despite ballet's deep symbolic entrenchment, I claim that ballet has the capacity to be reimagined for feminist and egalitarian ideals. I look to artists throughout history who have succeeded in realizing this through restructuring and re-signifying ballet's the movement vocabulary, and well as other performative re-signification more generally.

The restructuring of ballet's movement is one way that ballet can be re-signified for feminist ideals, both for dancer and performer. In performance, ballet movement's restructuring that challenges sexist and heteronormative values include greater sharing of weight between male and female dancers, as in the case in the pas de deux of Ochoa's *Frida*. In Pyle's work, women actually lifted other women, breaking down the sexist idea that women are necessarily too weak to partner because of their gender. In addition, presentation of queer romantic relationships through partnering, as in the case of Pyle's *Firebird, a Balle*, and *LesBi(s)ches* also exemplifies the restructuring of ballet's movement, breaking down the barrier only heteronormative partnerships being represented in ballet. Other restructuring includes novel use of the pointe shoe, as in Nijinska's *Les Noces*.

Examples of ballet movement's restructuring in the studio classroom include reprioritizing a dancer's experience of pleasure over their virtuosic performance through the relaxing of ballet's formalisms in practice. The restructuring of ballet's formalisms allows for greater accommodation of different bodies, as my first ballet teacher Carolyn Glasgow did when she let me open up my fourth position to accommodate my lack of turnout. Though this example is small, this type of restructuring could be magnified into a great restructuring of ballet for even more diverse bodies.

Ballet is then re-signified more generally in the mind of the student through teaching practices that embrace feminist pedagogical principals. Gretchen Alterowitz, and Carolyn both showed efforts to reform ballet teaching techniques with these principals in mind, thus challenging elitist and sexist notions of ballet training. These teaching principles aim to empower students by honoring their own sense of creativity, experimentation and ability to voice their unique perspective from a very young age.

Other re-signification of ballet is seen in the performance and institutional policy reform from artistic directors such as Katherine Dunham and Arthur Mitchell, who challenge racism through creating institutions and works that celebrate Black excellence in ballet. Specifically, ballet on Black bodies challenged racist notions about essential differences between races, thus dismantling the social construct of race more generally. Today, Dance Theater of Harlem, the company that Mitchell founded, continues to provide a space for dancers of color to feel empowered within their identity in the field of ballet.

In a more contemporary example, Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, who is of Columbian-Belgian descent, uses her platform as an internationally acclaimed choreographer to re-signify Latina representation on the concert stage. She achieves this through her work *Frida*, in which she uses

the life of feminist, Chicano and LGBTQ icon Frida Kahlo as a plot for her narrative/surrealist ballet in her work. Rather than eschewing ballet, Ochoa utilizes ballet in a fantastical way that is reminiscent of classical narrative ballets.

In an interview with my colleague, Daniela Magalhaes, I learn that the term ballet is used semantically to signify most concert dance performances, and does not differentiate between classical ballet, modern, contemporary, or any other form of concert dance.<sup>228</sup> In the United States, however, the term ballet is used to signify a classical ballet performance, whereas the word dance denotes other concert dance genres.<sup>229</sup>

Throughout U.S. history, though ballet was an artform commonly seen in music halls and other small, less prestigious venues at the turn of the twentieth century, it came to be positioned as a “high” art by Lincoln Kirstein in order to validate George Balanchine as the rightful heir to the legacy as the man who brought ballet to the United States. During this time, the hardening of the line between ballet and other forms of dance led to the erasure of women performers who had fluidly crossed genres, as in the case of Anna Pavlova.<sup>230</sup> Today, there exists a “purity” to the classical ballet canon in the United States. The ways in which ballet has been wielded politically has become conflated with ballet’s inability to be reimagined. Upon excavating radical use of ballet from the past, and by reviewing contemporary work that challenges norms today, we see that reimagination of ballet has occurred all throughout history.

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228. Daniela Magalhaes, interview by Laura Pratt.

229. It would be odd in the U.S., for example, if someone were to go see a Martha Graham performance and say that they were seeing a ballet.

230. Casey, “The Ballet Corporealities of Anna Pavlova and Albertina Rasch,” 16.

From a semiotic standpoint, ballet's movement vocabulary is defined as the two-hundred or so codified steps that are attached to French terms. What is meant by ballet's codification is the polishing of natural movement so that it becomes artificial.<sup>231</sup> Ballet's ideals of symmetry, virtuosity, defiance of gravity, and emphasis on line and form derive from European aristocracy's cultural, political, social and religious hegemonic ideals. Though ballet holds dim symbolic meaning, the movement gets has the opportunity for re-signification with every new choreographic work that it is used.<sup>232</sup> Therefore, from a theoretical perspective, ballet's plastic nature as a form of human communication lends itself to evolution and re-symbolism. The uniqueness and identifiability of ballet's finite movement vocabulary of two-hundred or so steps are attributable to its strict adherence to tradition regarding the techniques of movement throughout history.

Though formalism is a defining feature of ballet, I argue that the level or degree of formality enforced in the dancing of ballet is up to the artist, instructor, and culture of an institution, and that the tightening or laxity around what is deemed permissible, technically speaking, need not be thought of as rigid. Ballet's codes (arabesque, grand jeté or big leap, or pirouettes) are fluid enough so as to be reimaged in choreography. Furthermore, the perceived rigidity of ballet's formalistic nature (i.e., the perception that if ballet is melded with other dance genres that it is no longer ballet), is a symptom of historical racisms and sexism that contributed to the narrative of ballet as a "pure" artform.

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231. Nicolete Popa Blanariu, "Paradigms of Communication in Performance and Dance Studies," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 1.

232. Nicolete Popa Blanariu, "Towards a Framework of a Semiotics of Dance," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, abstract, 2.

The artists who I have analyzed are but a few of countless examples, both known and unknown to history. Many of the women artists who challenged ballet norms have been erased from history, yet today, feminist historians are excavating their stories. Today, there are undoubtedly artists who are actively challenging ballet norms within their communities who may never receive wide recognition.

Of course, internal pedagogical and artistic changes can only go so far in dismantling sexism, racism and classism in ballet. This thesis notes, too, the ways that external oppressive systems, as well as neoliberalism, are all implicated in the perpetuation of oppression in ballet. Ballet is but one small niche community in the greater landscape of culture and is as susceptible to these oppressive influences as any other field.

In today's U.S. ballet economy, for the dancer herself, breaking into professional ballet requires working one's way up the ladder, from student to apprentice, to varying rankings within the corps de ballet, and rarely to the level of principal dancer. These positions, even at the top, are underpaid with respect to the years and intensity of required training in most companies, and women more than men dancers bear this cost. The high cost of success, in terms of time and money, makes it virtually impossible for women without means to pursue a dance career, regardless of their potential. The financially prohibitive nature of ballet further limits diversity in the field.

Addressing the factors that perpetuate misogyny in ballet that do not occur in the studio give a more holistic representation of the overall issue of sexism in ballet. Analysis of the "glass ceiling," "glass escalator," and "glass cliff," illuminate how the element of discrimination against women attempting to rise within the profession. These factors are external to the misogyny found in the practice or performance of ballet, as board members are often responsible for the hiring

process for administrative leadership positions. These limitations are certainly not unique to ballet, but are symptoms from a more systemically sexist, racist, classic and heteronormative culture that is thankfully evolving in a more egalitarian direction, albeit rather slowly.

Sexual misconduct within the ballet culture have at times led to workplace discrimination, assault or violence. Using the case of Alexandra Waterbury vs New York City Ballet demonstrates how the unions were even enforcing misogyny in that they protected men's careers over women's safety. The female dancer is particularly vulnerable to the artistic director, regardless of gender, due to the power discrepancy in their relationship.

In future work on this topic, I point to the need for the ballet world to realize collectively that nothing is apolitical, and that it is the responsibility of dance institutions to their students, particularly in higher education, to provide curriculum concerning the politics and economics of dance in the U.S. and worldwide. In order to dismantle sexism, racism and classism, the arts must survive beyond this neoliberal era in our nation's history. Artists need to be equipped with the knowledge to enact political and policy change, or ballet will remain entrenched in perpetuating hegemonic ideals. Gender, racial and socio-economic disparities will prevail until artists are aware of their own oppression (whether financial, sexist, classist or racist), and are able to join the fight against neoliberalism to protect and expand funding of the arts. This ensures that companies are not placating donors' tastes over that of the artists' imaginations. This is usually negotiated at the administrative level within an institution and within government, and increased diversity in leadership will more effectively take on the cause of inequity within the arts.

In addition, more research is needed on how dance can best provide underserved communities and populations. Intersectional analysis can constructively inform the pedagogical



philosophies in communities that may be culturally or socio-economically different from the pedagogue's own experience. This brings into question how to best avoid perpetuating colonization in communities of color in our "post-colonial" world. Intersectional analysis provides a framework for understanding how to teach young people in a way that does not imprint heteronormative expectations on them. Ballet institutions have a responsibility to provide affordable classes, and to make performances more accessible through creative measures, such as employing the concept of site-specific work from postmodern dance.

A topic that I did not cover in my thesis, though worth mentioning, is the issue of ableism in ballet. Ballet, a physical artform, is currently being used in wonderful and therapeutic ways to help people with physical differences. Local examples include ballet classes through University of Oklahoma's School of Dance program for individuals with Parkinson's disease, and University of Central Oklahoma's program for young children with Down syndrome, led by Robyn Pasternack and geared towards movement and self-celebration through ballet. Leaders in the field of dance, particularly at the university level, should call for more research on the topic of artistic therapies. Ideally, ballet companies could take the lead from professional physically integrated contemporary dance companies (such as AXIS based in Oakland, California) to be more inclusive to those with disabilities.

Ballet education and performance can break free of past prejudices, and thereby become more relevant and challenging to a new generation of dancers and audiences. In studying and disseminating the works of artists who have already successfully challenged the traditional expectations of ballet, I hope to contribute to the effort of ultimately dismantling the patriarchal view of ballet in U.S. contemporary society. Also, by presenting these artists' accomplishments alongside dance scholars' consensus that ballet cannot be re-signified, I challenge the more

common consensus of dance scholars. I assert that ballet has the capacity to move out from under the weight of its patriarchal heritage to be recreated for the next generation of women with egalitarian and feminist ideals in mind. My conclusion of whether ballet can be reimagined and re-signified is an optimistic one. Artists who have already contributed to this goal show that it is possible for the field of ballet to experience increased liberation from past prejudices and norms. This sense of reinvigoration benefits the dancer as well as the audience and the entire artistic community. It is my hope that studios and companies across the U.S. become more inclusive and politically active, and that ballet continues to be reimagined and better funded, so that more people can experience the joy of ballet as a truly beautiful artform.

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