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Is there room for cultural expression in classical dance training?

Dancers come with all kinds of cultural identities, so it makes sense for them to bring who they are to any dance class

by Silvana Ruiz Marquez

Growing up, I identified as two beings, two halves, with two outlooks on life that guided my life's journey. Being Mexican, and being a dancer were always seen as two distinct realms that I consistently transitioned between. My mother tongue was not one that my body recognized, just the same way that my ballet technique was not something my family understood. As time passed, this back-and-forth movement between each world grew lonely, and I felt I was never fully present in either space.

Somewhere along the way I realized that I had been wrong, that my dance ability and purpose were deeply rooted in my culture and ancestry. The traditions and rituals, my parents' sacrifices, my migration experience, all played a role in shaping who I am today, granting me the privilege to dance. As I began to conceptually understand that my worlds could melt into each other, the embodiment of my culture expanded to all the styles I practiced. Ultimately, I came to recognize that I dance for my latinidad, I dance for my ancestors, and for my identity.

Often, dancers are faced with the belittling questions of, "What are you going to do with a dance degree?" or, "The dance major must be so easy, what do you even do?" I have found that the same people that ask these questions have not yet experienced dance as more than a fun night out. They have not wondered about all the reasons why people choose to dance—nor do they see dance as art, as liberation, as freedom, rebellion, worship, as a way to connect. Yet, those of us who have had the opportunity to live in dance understand its power and the cultural significance it has. One point that dance scholar Jane Desmond brings to light is how in the past there was a lack of recognition of dance as a cultural study.

Cultural study applies to dance political and social views as theories or ways to live in society. There are centuries' worth of culture codified into dance styles, shaping the way individuals dance and think about their practice. Dance from a cultural standpoint is deeply embedded everywhere, forming the basis for ritual, celebration, grief, tradition, entertainment, etc. Dance has existed as a main form of expression across the world in indigenous groups and many other societies. In other words, dance is a part of life and a part of our identity.

In a collegiate setting, I haven't felt free to relate my own dance practice to my cultural identity. It's not to say it is not possible or cannot be celebrated, but when it comes to discussing cultural expression in dance, it's often framed in relation to a specific ethnic style, like folklorico, kathak, tango, or kabuki. At university dance departments, it's not common to train in these styles, nor is there the diversity in faculty to do so appropriately. Furthermore, the cultural demographic in the student body tends to be predominantly white, with no mention of cultural roots of ballet and

modern dance, the most common training offered. This may cause difficulties for students of color to feel included or recognized. This has led me to question what it means to demonstrate cultural expression in what are considered “classical” dance styles, like ballet or modern. Is it possible to do so? What would that look like? How can I as a Latina bring my culture into modern/contemporary? Where is the line between this and fusion dance styles?

Because these questions have been in the back of my mind for many years now, I find that every time I step into a dance class I think about it. I see my professors take the time to train us and encourage us to explore new movements, and I wonder how I can bring my latinidad to these spaces, not just as a dancer but as an educator as well. As I move forward, using my Bachelor’s degrees in Dance and in Education Sciences, and as an educator, not just a performer, one of the ways in which I have found that connection is through music. Keeping the same technique as you would in a modern/contemporary class, I like to incorporate Spanish music that keeps the same tempo. I recognize the closeness that my students feel in the space when they realize that the music I play is the same that they hear at home. Small details like this have allowed me to keep my culture as a part of any dance class. Yet I know that music selection is not the only choice I have, so as I continue my dance training, I continue to look for new ways in which cultural identity can be prevalent in dance regardless of the style.

In researching this topic, one that has become so important to me, I have been able to find companies, organizations, scholars, dancers and educators that ask themselves the same questions. Through shared experience, the Latine dance community has implemented ways to share our cultural heritage through dance. One of the most prevalent examples of this is Ballet Hispanico whose aim is to “create intentional processes in dancemaking that support the full spectrum of our intersectional Latinx diaspora stories and histories.” Through their works in the contemporary ballet sphere, they use aspects of Latine culture to celebrate the history and richness of our people.

Beyond this one inspirational company, I question how to bring this cultural aspect into a classroom space. Performances can highlight certain themes, but it is the daily practice that I wanted to focus on because my cultural identity is also a part of my daily practice. Having this in mind, I turned to a group of professionals in the field of dance from various ethnicities that are finding new ways to incorporate cultural identity into their everyday training and classes (Mabingo, et al). One of the ways in which this is possible is by sharing experiences of cultural identity within a group and then forming a class around those experiences. Another way to do so, according to this group, is by diving into different cultural dance styles and sharing that knowledge with others. They stress the importance of reflecting on collaborations that advocate for different marginalized groups as a way to resist against the cultural dispossession, white supremacy, and racial oppression in dance from the past and the traces that are still present.

As dancers, we are often looked at as an instrument, a “dancing body,” one that takes in information and projects it according to the choreographer’s vision. While that is a part of dance, I think it is crucial to first consider dancers as individuals who have distinct backgrounds and experiences that make up identities. It is through these identities that truly great artists are created. Having a safe space in which to bring your culture into dance is important for dancers of

color in all stages. As a collective we cannot continue to exclude cultural identity from classical European dance forms, nor should we ever stop expressing ourselves and our humanity.

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