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Should University Dance Majors only Focus on Western Dance?

When you grow up seeing fabulous dance all over the world, you start to wonder...

by Daniela Sider

Growing up, I had the world at my fingertips – and I didn't even know it. I thought the fact that I had lived on three continents before the age of six was cool, but pretty normal; six-year-old me thought most people lived like that. Soon enough, I started to realize that wasn't quite the case. I began to notice how unique people thought it was that I had lived in Argentina, Morocco, and Spain in the course just over of half a decade. I also began to realize how many cultural colors my own parents represented (and still do), as Americans who left their hearts in Argentina when they moved to Spain, and do NGO work in North Africa and the Middle East. This cultural fusion of a childhood is what shaped my way of thinking and motivated me to connect with the world cross-culturally. It's from this perspective of cultural diversity that I view and attempt to embody dance.

I started dancing when I was thirteen, considered a late start, but I had done rhythmic gymnastics, which has a lot of similarities. And I had always been surrounded by dance in all the places where I lived. Tango was born on the streets of Buenos Aires; in Morocco, dancing is synonymous with celebration, and Southern Spain is the motherland of Danza Española (which includes Flamenco). These diverse dance forms I grew up around inspired me to pursue dance professionally and interpret movement as a means of cultural expression. Coming to University of California, Irvine turned out to be another cultural experience for me.

When first I arrived in America, “fresh off the boat,” as they say, I knew hardly anything about modern or jazz. Thankfully, ballet was familiar, but modern and jazz? I had to Youtube “jazz dance” before the placement audition, because I did not know how I was supposed to improvise within the jazz genre – whatever that was. In my training in southern Spain, anything that was not ballet, was just “not ballet.” If it was named modern or jazz, I had no clue what the difference was between the two. So UCI taught me these American, cultural movement expressions – and it has been a ride! However, after having been here for a few years, I can't help but notice the Western-centrism of the UCI Dance Department and eventually, I wanted more.

At first, the “monoculturalism” of this place did not bother me because everything was completely new to me, and I felt culturally immersed in a foreign land. But after my second year, I had overcome the biggest obstacles of cultural adaptation and found myself wanting so much more than just Western dances. To be clear, I am so grateful to have grown as much as I have in my Western techniques here at UCI, for this has been the core of my training. Nevertheless, I can't ignore the disappointment I feel at the lack of global dance perspective here, especially considering how increasingly globalized our world is. I think dance should be spearheading globalization and bringing people of diverse cultural backgrounds together through dance, not creating a dichotomized rivalry between Eastern and Western dance forms. Unfortunately, however, the latter is more often the case.

As Nyama McCarthy-Brown discusses in “Decolonizing Dance Curriculum in Higher Education: One Credit at a Time,” limiting and defining dance as a purely Western tradition is a form of imperialism. This is something most American dance programs actually do, which causes the dance community as a whole to perpetuate a Western-dominant dance view. To be more specific, if Western dance forms are treated as intricate, complicated and beautiful, so should non-Western dance forms (McCarthy-Brown, 126). If there is not equality between the two at the university level, then higher education is promoting colonial thinking – in the dance community and consequentially beyond, which is ironic, since the art of dance should and has the power to promote non-violent

social change. So my question is, “If higher education is not putting an end to colonial ideology, what are we doing here?” What kind of dancers and, hopefully, activists are being shaped here?

I think the only way to counter this pattern is to expose ourselves to more kinds of dances from all over the globe, understand their history, and embody them as authentically as possible. This is partly why I am so thankful to have had a global upbringing, because being exposed to many cultures and their expressions has broadened my perspective of people, cultures and, of course, dance, as a tangible expression of these. For instance, when I was twelve, I went to a friend of a friend’s wedding in Morocco. Here, despite the conservative gender roles of the culture, everyone was dancing together – men, women and children alike. It was as if dance provided a moment of freedom through celebration, where the quotidian social and gender pressures could not hold the guests back. People expressed themselves with humorous movements, sexy movements, individual and group movements. There was a lot of torso and neck swaying, and circular wrist movements, not so different from what is done in Spanish Dance. It was very enlightening and entertaining to watch.

Similarly, I had a dance-learning moment at 16, when I travelled in Mali, to a village just outside of Bamako (the capital). We were eating in a family’s home one day when suddenly (I am not even sure how it started it was so spontaneous and natural!), a woman started dancing in the center of our circle, and another woman was singing for her. Gradually, some other women joined her until there were about five of them dancing. They were spinning, expertly circling and shaking their hips, and laughing hysterically as they danced and sang. It was such a joyful experience! I wanted so badly to get up and join them, but I was not familiar with their movements, so I just observed, as an intrigued (wannabe) anthropologist.

Having grown up in southern Spain (from age six to eighteen), I witnessed flamenco countless times, both when it happened spontaneously and in staged performances. One time, it was in *Sevilla*, the capital of Andalucía and flamenco, at an underground *tablao*. A *tablao* is defined as a floor or “stage dedicated to flamenco singing and dancing” (English Dictionary). Here, the elegance and ferocity of the *bailaora* (female flamenco dancer), the anguish and passion expressed through her every cell, left all of us in awe. We all cheered, clapped, yelled things like “¡Ole!” and “¡Qué arte chiquilla!” as well as groaning and murmuring throughout her performance. I couldn’t stop thinking how real her dance was, how deeply she was conveying emotion and her very being through her dance. Really, every dance should be equally sincere, with this kind of *duende*, a flamenco term describing true investment, connection, “magnetism and charm” (Merriam Webster).

On a slightly different note, one of the first times I consciously encountered a Westernized non-western dance was when I went to Egypt at age thirteen and saw a solo belly dancer. I was at a hookah lounge bordering the Nile River (yes, a stunning place!) with my dad and our Egyptian friend and host, when a belly dancer came out to entertain the downtown-Cairo lounge guests. Her movements were mesmerizing and intriguing. She danced for us and for herself, it seemed, as she shifted her focus internally and externally. She seemed to twist and churn her insides, shaking and swinging her hips in figure eights. I was very mesmerized, just as the locals around us were, though I remember feeling a little uncomfortable because I could tell that her performance was, at least in part, geared towards entertaining tourists rather than purely showcasing an invaluable art form. I also noticed that she didn’t seem to be fully invested in her dance, as if she was being forced onto the “stage” (a non-elevated floor space) in some way. Don’t get me wrong, she was a beautiful performer and I was very intrigued, but I also felt I was encountering Western influence where I felt I shouldn’t be. This same thing happens with flamenco all the time, when tourists arrive ready to consume Spanish dance, usually not understanding what it is really about.

All of these experiences have automatically made me approach dance from a global perspective and, after being immersed in UCI’s dance program, to question the Western dominance of this art form. Having seen a great variety of cultural dances and fallen in love with the endlessness of movement possibilities, I can’t help but wonder why most of what I see here in the U.S. is just ballet, modern, and jazz. These are beautiful dance genres, complicated, intricate, extremely difficult

to master, but by only seeing these dance forms, the implication is that they are the best, or worse, that they are the only dance forms in the world. Of course it is impossible to master every cultural dance form, as it is impossible for a single institution to offer solid training in every cultural dance form under the sun – but that is not what I am proposing.

What I am suggesting is that it is both possible and critical to take steps towards decolonizing dance curriculum,” in McCarthy-Brown’s phrase. It is possible to place tangible value on non-Western dance forms, like offering a major-restricted class of a non-Western dance form and offering various levels of it (just as is done for ballet, modern, and jazz). Merely throwing in “African Dance” (and what kind of African dance—there are so many?) as a one-quarter, 2-unit elective does not suffice. By opening “African Dance” to all majors and not offering a version for more skilled dancers, the implication is that “African dance” is both secondary to the dance major and is not as complicated, intricate, or technical as modern, ballet, and jazz. Nothing beyond the beginner level is ever offered, as opposed to the five levels of ballet on the schedule every quarter.

This dance Western-centrism has to end. Universities are not only letting colonial thinking get by but they are perpetuating it themselves. So, what kind of future artists, activists, policy makers are being formed here? I understand that the American dance context is reflective of a greater, national ethnocentricity, but this is where the very beauty of dance could be recognized. Dance has the power to change cultural ideology and ethnocentric worldviews! If we want to end this poisonous Eurocentric cycle, then, art seems a logical choice. Dance offers beauty and inspiration, but also has the power to transform ideology and promote social justice. So let’s decolonize our dance context and advance our field, socio-culturally and technically. Dance is not meant to lag behind; rather, it should be spearheading and humanizing innovation, justice, and connecting communities cross-culturally.

Works Cited

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